

EI-504
DOMINICK (DOMENICO) PROCHILO
BIRTH DATE: MARCH 20, 1912
INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 25, 1994
RUNNING TIME: 1:00:17
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 5/1996
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ITALY, 1921
AGE 9

SHIP: "THE SAN GIOVANNI"
PORT: REGGIO
RESIDENCES:
ITALY: TAURIANOVA (LATRINOLI)
US: ELMIRA, PORT CHESTER, LAURELTON, NY; ATLANTIC CITY, NJ

LEVINE: It's July 25, 1994, and I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Mr. Dominick Prochilo, who came from Italy in 1912 when he was nine years old.

PROCHILO: I'm sorry, 1921.

LEVINE: He was born in 1912.

PROCHILO: That's correct.

LEVINE: Right. (she laughs) And he came in 1921 to the United States when he was nine years old.

PROCHILO: That's correct.

LEVINE: Okay, good. Well, I'm very happy that you were able to come here today.

PROCHILO: Thank you very much.

LEVINE: And I'm looking forward to hearing your account of your story. Let's start at the beginning. If you would say your birth date and where in Italy you were born.

PROCHILO: I was born in Taurianova, Italy.

LEVINE: Could you spell that, please?

PROCHILO: T-A-U-R-I-N-O-V-A. The reason I'm having difficulty remembering how to spell it is the city was originally, hmm, let me think now, Latrinoli. L-A-T-R-I-N-O-L-I. And then, oh, within the last ten

years or so, it was modernized to Taurianova. Taurianova's a very, very small village, approximately eighteen kilometers northwest of Reggio Calabria. At the time that we left in 1921, it hadn't changed in any way for the last eighteen hundred years.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. But now it was re-named?

PROCHILO: Yes, yes. It originally became Taurianova.

LEVINE: I see. Well, what, well, first give your birth date, please.

PROCHILO: My birth date was March the 20th, 1912.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, tell me about the town, when you were a little boy living there. It hadn't changed for hundreds of years. What was it like?

PROCHILO: Well, little winding streets at the base of a mountain. The activities ceased at sundown because there was no lighting, there were -- there was no sanitary facilities. What else can I tell you?

LEVINE: Where would people congregate in the town?

PROCHILO: Generally in churches, and there wasn't too much of a social life whatsoever. They simply gathered each's -- in neighbors' houses and conducted the social life there.

LEVINE: What about, what was your mother's name?

PROCHILO: My mother's name was Grace. In the Italian . . .

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

PROCHILO: . . . it was Grazia.

LEVINE: Grazia.

PROCHILO: Carpientere, which is, translated loosely, carpenter.

LEVINE: How do you spell Carpientere?

PROCHILO: C-A-R-P-I-E-N-T-E-R-E.

LEVINE: And what kind of a woman was your mother? What were her, uh, what was her temperament, her personality?

PROCHILO: Saintly. Small, she was tiny. I had a typical Italian father who ruled with an iron hand.

LEVINE: And his name?

PROCHILO: Paul, Paolo. His wishes were our command, her command, really. She literally lived for him and the family.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, uh, and, do you remember any experiences with your mother or father, things you did together, or memories you have from before you were nine years old?

PROCHILO: The - the only thing that I recall is my relationship with my Dad in Italy, of course. He was a stonecutter, a stone mason, and, uh, occasionally after that -- during the seven months, he would take me with him on some of his trips in the various cities. He - he specialized in fine--shaping these huge stones that milled the olives into oil. --

LEVINE: Oh.

PROCHILO: And it was - the -- the stones were operated by water power, and it was - it was fascinating to watch them circle around. And as they poured the olives into the vat, the stones would crush them, and the oil would run out into vats.

LEVINE: What shape would he make these into?

PROCHILO: Huge round mold, approximately about four or five feet in diameter.

LEVINE: And there would be more than one of those stones?

PROCHILO: It would be two stones.

LEVINE: Two stones.

PROCHILO: Yes. They would be circ--

LEVINE: [superposed]] And would they be rolling?

PROCHILO: They would be rolling around on a, uh, bare platform where the olives were du-- dumped, and there was an opening for the oil to go through. Those were the most vivid things that I recall, one of the few vivid things that I recall.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you went with your father to find the stones, shape the stones?

PROCHILO: No. The - the sh--the stones were already shaped, but every year they had to be re-ground, and he would hammer them into the shape that would most easily crush the st--the olives.

LEVINE: Was he using a hammer?

PROCHILO: Uh, a hammer and, uh, steel, uh, what would you call them? Chisels? Steel chisels? He would hammer away at those until they were shaped the way he wanted it.

LEVINE: Was it a certain kind of stone, do you recall?

PROCHILO: Granite.

LEVINE: It was granite.

PROCHILO: Granite.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PROCHILO: Very durable.

LEVINE: Were there granite quarries anywhere in the vicinity that you remember?

PROCHILO: Uh, yes, there were. Italy, as you know, is famous for its marble. But, of course, they did have stone quarries.

LEVINE: Now, was this an olive-producing region?

PROCHILO: Yes. It was in southern Italy, and southern Italy had no manufacturing whatsoever. It was strictly agricultural -- olive trees and orange groves.

LEVINE: So, um, so you're, so this was your father's occupation?

PROCHILO: That's correct.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PROCHILO: And when he came to the United States, at that time, when we moved to Westchester County, we -- originally we went to Elmira, but when we moved to Westchester County, the state was in the process of building these high - the superhighways, and at that time they were building the Hutchinson River Parkway. Are you familiar with that?

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh.

PROCHILO: Uh, all of those bridges, with the stonework on them, were made by my dad.

LEVINE: Wow. So he was able to use his skills quite . . .

PROCHILO: Yes, he was very, very fortunate.

LEVINE: Right, wonderful. Okay. Well, let's talk all about Italy first, and then we'll talk about this country. But, now, you, the qualities of your father were that he ruled with an iron hand.

PROCHILO: Oh, definitely. Despotic, yes.

LEVINE: And anything else about him that you remember from a little boy?

PROCHILO: I remember that, uh, knowing my -- knowing relationship with my children, that there was really not that affection or familiarity between the children and the parents. There was a strata there that was never really broached by - by the children.

LEVINE: What would you say your parents' attitude was toward children, what theirs was compared with maybe what yours was as a parent?

PROCHILO: That's hard to define. It's really hard to define. There were eight children, so that, uh, not too much time was devoted to any particular one. But, uh . . .

LEVINE: What do you think they wanted for their children? Do you have any sense of that?

PROCHILO: A better life than they had. Primarily a better life than they had, the opportunity to go as far as they were capable of going.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Is there any, uh, are there any attitudes that you had toward your children as a parent that maybe were different from the ones your parents had?

PROCHILO: Uh, yes, yes, definitely. I gave my children a lot more leeway and participated in their activities a lot more than my parents did with us.

LEVINE: What were your activities as a young boy up till nine years old? What did you do?

PROCHILO: Very, very little. There was really not very much to do there - in that -- the small village. You played around with your peers.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything you played, any games you played, or any kind of activities that you engaged in with your friends?

PROCHILO: No, strangely enough. Not -- there were not too many, there were not too many.

LEVINE: Um, well, would you, like, go swimming, or would you, uh, play ball, or anything?

PROCHILO: The only place that we could go -- swimming, there was no ballgames. There were no ballgames. But the, we did find an ancient Roman, um, what would you call it, an aqueduct or an aquarium, but, uh, it was built by the Romans, and filled by rainwater, believe it or not, and that's where we did our swimming. Yeah.

LEVINE: So did you go to school there?

PROCHILO: I went to, let's see. I went as far as the third grade. Then, of course, we came to the United States.

LEVINE: Do you remember the school? Can you contrast it with the school after you came to this country?

PROCHILO: Very, very rigid. The schools were very rigid. And, uh, we had schools the entire year, though. We just had two or three weeks off in the summertime.

LEVINE: And did you go all day long?

PROCHILO: Uh, from about nine o'clock in the morning till three in the afternoon, three or four in the afternoon.

LEVINE: So did you have chores that you had to do after school or before school, do you recall?

PROCHILO: No, not really. I had five sisters. I think the chores were placed upon their shoulders more than mine, or my brothers'.

LEVINE: Was that because they were older, or because they were girls?

PROCHILO: Because they were - because they were older, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember your mother, what washday, or how she did the laundry when you were there?

PROCHILO: There were no such things as a Laundromat then. And, of course, we did not have either washers or driers. The laundry was done by hand and, uh, as a matter of fact, in -- not in my family, but other families. They would take their wash to the rivers and wash them on the flat stones there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Hmm. Did you have to carry water from someplace?

PROCHILO: No, no. We had our own water.

LEVINE: Oh.

PROCHILO: And we were one of the few homes in the entire village that had indoor plumbing.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PROCHILO: Otherwise the, there was a fountain. There were about, oh, I would say four fountains in each area where most of the water was drawn.

LEVINE: Was your father's occupation considered to be one of some status, would you say?

PROCHILO: Yes, as a matter of fact. Anyone who had, uh, any skill whatsoever, did have a certain status.

LEVINE: And how about the town? Did people have horses and buggies, or what did they use to get around?

PROCHILO: They had, uh, horses, and mostly they walked. As a matter of fact, when we left the village to go to the Reggio to embark, we went on a, uh, a, not a wagon. A stagecoach, you might call it, our version of stagecoach, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. But a coach wasn't a typical thing that you . . .

PROCHILO: No, no, no.

LEVINE: . . . would go around in -- in general?

PROCHILO: No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Wow. So, uh, let's see. What else? How about the religious life of your family in Italy?

PROCHILO: Uh, most of Italy is Catholic, as you're aware. And we did have a religious life. We went to church and, of course, the, strangely enough, the schools were public schools, not parochial.

LEVINE: Do you remember celebrations for any religious holidays?

PROCHILO: Yes, yes. They had, uh, as a matter of fact, there was, one day there was one religious holiday of the [not understood] was more important than the others. I can't recall just what it was. But that was the highlight of the social events there in that village. They would, uh, bring in, uh, artists that would create arches illuminated by gas. And, of course, to young children, the greens and the blues and the reds, were absolutely fascinating.

LEVINE: These were painted on the arches?

PROCHILO: No, no. The, uh, they used different gasses to give you different, different lighting. And we would try to find the -- there was a solid gas that was, when mixed with water, would create the actual gas, and, uh, the children would go around the lamp poles to see if they could find these pieces, and then we would mix them and burn them ourselves. And that was a highlight of the year, I think.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PROCHILO: And, of course, there would be stands serving food, and, uh, little gifts, candy.

LEVINE: And was there some religious service connected with it?

PROCHILO: Oh yes, of course. They paraded the saint through the streets from the church and back to the church again. And everyone - they would make their donations, putting the lire on the saints.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Did you have a particular saint that, that, you know, was connected, you felt some connection to, whether because of your name or because of anything else?

PROCHILO: Not really, not really, although I was named for St. Dominick. My name is Dome-- Domenico. But, uh, I was much too young to really appreciate any significance to any saint.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So were your mother and father religious, would you say?

PROCHILO: Yes. They attended church regularly. There -- as a matter of fact, my mother, right up until, oh, two years before her death, would attend services three times a day, morning, afternoon and evening. And, uh, the church was approximately a mile-and-a-half away from our house, and she would walk three times a day. And, at that time, when I, when we came to (?), after I married, uh, we would visit my mother in Port Chester, and occasionally I would see her walking along my street, and I would drive by and offer to drive her to the church. And, no, she wouldn't do it. That was her daily ritual.

LEVINE: Uh, could you name the names of your brothers and sisters in the order, and where you fit in?

PROCHILO: Yes. My older sister was Concetta. She was the oldest of the family. My brother Joseph came next, sister Marie came next. I was the fourth in line, Carmella was the fifth, Sara was the sixth. Uh, Rocco was the seventh and Rose was the eighth.

LEVINE: Uh, is there anything else, how about grandparents? Did you have any grandparents in Italy?

PROCHILO: We had both maternal grandparents. I remember, rather both grandparents on both side, maternal and paternal. I don't recall too much of my paternal grandfather. I do remember my maternal grandfather very, very vividly. As a matter of fact, I think I was named after him. His name is Domenico. And he had, uh, he was quite a very interesting character. He owned a butcher shop, but he also broke horses as a sideline. They would bring in wild horses, and he would break them so that they could be used for commercial purposes.

LEVINE: This was your father's father?

PROCHILO: That's correct. No, my mother's father.

LEVINE: Your mother's father.

PROCHILO: My mother's father.

LEVINE: Did you ever go with him to either break a horse, or . . .

PROCHILO: No. We would visit them occa-- we would visit my grandmother and grandfather occasionally, when they slaughtered the pigs. And the reason for that was that they would drain the blood of the pigs and make a special pudding, blood pudding, which to us was the most delicious thing we had ever tasted, aside from the spumoni and the cannoli and what have you. But, uh, it was, it was a real treat, and that was our one big reward for being good little boys and girls, to be take to grandfather's house to have the blood pudding.

LEVINE: Do you remember more of the process. They drained the blood, and then what else . . .

PROCHILO: They drained the blood. Then they would cook it and stir it and add spices and sugar and pine nuts. And that would gel into something like a chocolate pudding. The color was almost chocolatey, but it was absolutely delicious. But now I couldn't bring myself to eat it.
(he laughs)

LEVINE: So, in other words, even though it was blood, it was a sweet?

PROCHILO: Oh, yes. It was a dessert. Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow. So, um, anything else you remember about any other grandparent? Like when you think back to when you were a little boy, something that, an experience that you remember?

PROCHILO: Well, again, there's my maternal grandparents more than anything else. After my grandfather died and we were here for several years, my grandmother was, we thought that we would bring her to the new world, thinking that she would have a better life here. But whether it was because of the huge change in the atmosphere, or in - in the size of the -- this country, or what -- whatever, she became senile after being here for about two or three months. And every now and then she would have moments of lucidity and she would wonder where she was, and I recall that she lived with my brother-in-law, and she always wanted to fondle children, you know, rock them. So they bought her a rag doll, and my brother-in-law would tease her by taking the rag doll and pretending to smack it, you know, and she would scold him and get after him to have him stop hurting that poor child. But, uh, she was in her late eighties at the time of her death.

LEVINE: And when did she come? She came in her late eighties to this country.

PROCHILO: Oh, yes, yeah, sure.

LEVINE: I see.

PROCHILO: She only lived about three or four years after coming here, yeah. She was in her late eighties when she came here.

LEVINE: So her senility took the form of -- mothering?

PROCHILO: [interposed] It may have been the -- that, right. And we don't know. Today, of course, we are more aware of the fact, she -- no, it couldn't have been Parkinson's or Alzheimer's, because she did not act as if she had either one of those diseases.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, it must be a considerable adjustment in one's eighties to . . .

PROCHILO: Oh, definitely. Absolutely, absolutely, because I think the size of the City of New York when she first saw it must have frightened her to death. She had never been out of her native village. She lived all of her life in that small, tiny town.

LEVINE: Is there anything else that you remember? Do you remember any dishes your mother made when you were a little boy, any food that you particularly liked then?

PROCHILO: Everything that I like now that I hated as a teenager. The pastas, the, uh, the greens that they made, and, uh, nothing really ever went to waste. They would make a dish out of going out in the fields and gathering something, coming back and making a delicious meal. And, of course, as you grow older you began to hate that, and as you passed your manhood and became older still you wished you were eating those same foods again, and I try as often as I can to eat them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, they've now become known as healthy. (she laughs)

PROCHILO: Oh, definitely, absolutely, absolutely. The broccoli rabe that, when we first came to the United States you could get nothing, and now a dollars sixty-nine, a dollar seventy-nine, two eighty a pound. And the eggplants and peppers, and all of those foods that are not considered health foods were our daily staple.

LEVINE: Okay. Was there anything else you can think of about life in Italy before you came to the United States, any other aspects? How about enjoyment, what you did for enjoyment, or your mother and father did? You mentioned the celebration, the religious celebration. Were there any other kinds of . . .

PROCHILO: Well, yes. Uh, every Saturday night they would have concerts, they would have concerts, and the bands would come from Reggio. And there would be almost a semi-fair. They would have their bandstand, and the vendors would set up their, their, whatever they had to sell.

LEVINE: Food?

PROCHILO: Food, candy. You see these little festivals that they have in Little Italy these days, they originated in those little villages there. And we would listen to the music. That was one of our main sources of amusement. And, of course, the music was all classical music. We had no rock n' roll, no country music. It was all operas and concerts and, uh, music of the day, I guess you would call it.

LEVINE: Would it be a big band, or a few pieces, or . . .

PROCHILO: Oh, yes. No, no, no. It would be a big band. It would be twenty- or thirty-piece orche -- bands.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PROCHILO: Yeah. Not orchestras, but bands.

LEVINE: And would people, well, people wouldn't dance if it was a classical kind of . . .

PROCHILO: No, no. This was very classical music. Yeah. That was the one source of entertainment. We had no cinema. I don't recall ever seeing a movie in, in Italy.

LEVINE: So is there, was there anything else, like, how about dancing? Was that something that was familiar to you when you came here?

PROCHILO: No. I was too young for that, but I do recall knowing that the, my older cousins had, when they were dating their swains, they would sit in one corner and the - the would-be husband would sit in the other corner, and they were permitted to dance, but other than that there was no contact until they were married.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Were marriages more or less arranged at that point?

PROCHILO: Yes, yes. Marriages were definitely arranged.

LEVINE: Hmm. Were you ever privy to an arrangement that was being made?

PROCHILO: I learned about it when I was about eighteen or so, that my parents and the parents of my cousins were trying to arrange a marriage between myself and my cousin. And, of course, at that time I was in high school and just getting through with high school. And, of course, I rebelled at the idea of marrying a cousin or marrying anyone through the efforts of my parents. If I was going to marry anyone, it would be of my own choosing. And, uh, once I made my wishes known, all of it ceased -- there was no further effort made to marry me off to someone.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. That seems like a rather typical idea of that time, to marry one's cousin.

PROCHILO: Yes. It was common practice, as a matter of fact. And I often wondered whether there was ever any repercussions for marriages of kin.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PROCHILO: And I understand today that there definitely are repercussions.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, do you remember why it was decided that you and your family would come to America at the time that you did?

PROCHILO: I believe there were two very big factors. One was the fact that we, I had five sisters, and when you marry five chi-- five girls, you had to provide a dote, what we called a dote, for each one of the girls. And, uh, with the economic conditions as they were, that would be a pretty hard chip on my parents. Also we had some terrible earthquakes. When the Mount Aetna erupted way back in 1908, I think it was, a hundred thousand people lost their lives. And that frightened my mother. She wanted to get away from there as soon as she could. So she started working on my dad. As a matter of fact, in order to escape the fury of

the earthquakes and the volcanoes, we hid in back of the main house. We had wooden, small wooden, what would you call them, structures that we slept in during the night. We would not sleep in the main house during the night. We would sleep in these wooden structure.

LEVINE: Why was that?

PROCHILO: Well, because the house was made of stone, and the earthquakes, whenever they, we had a big one, of course, the stone buildings would collapse and kill the people, whereas we felt that all of the wooden structures would collapse, your chances of surviving the earthquake were much greater.

LEVINE: Hmm. Perhaps now that you're talking about it, I should have asked you earlier, could you describe your house?

PROCHILO: It was a stone building. I really don't know. I know it's old. How old, I really don't know. But it's -- it must be at least two or three hundred years old. And there was a two-story building with three, uh, three rooms on the main floor, and two bedrooms on the second floor. We had an oven in back of the house.

LEVINE: Outside?

PROCHILO: No, it was an indoor oven, because in addition to my dad working as a stone mason, my mother had what we call a botega, a little store where they would sell bread. They had an oven where they baked the bread. And, uh, cheeses and small items, not a huge store, but small items.

LEVINE: And this was being sold from the back of the house?

PROCHILO: Yeah, yeah. Well, the store, the little store was in the front of the house. As you entered, you had this little store. And the second room was the oven and the bakery.

LEVINE: Well, your mother must have been very busy.

PROCHILO: She worked twenty-four hours a day. She would knead the dough by hand and then bake it, put it in the shelves in the front, and then sell it during the day.

LEVINE: On the order of how many loaves would she make in a given day?

PROCHILO: That I - I - I couldn't really tell you. I don't know. But, of course, well, there would be at least a hundred - a hundred -- at least a hundred loaves of bread a day.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, we're going to stop here and flip the tape, and then we'll continue.

PROCHILO: Fine.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

[long pause]

LEVINE: We're beginning side two now, or side B, rather. I'm speaking with Dominick Prochilo. You were just saying about your memory, that you, it was a blessing, and also perhaps not.

PROCHILO: That's correct. My sister and I were sent to a school operated by a Presbyterian order. And, uh, we were the, there were about thirty people living in that, thirty children living in there and going to school there. And Marie and I were the outside -- not the outsiders, we were really strangers because the others were all local children. And Marie and I were the only foreigners, and we did not speak a word of English. And the children did not speak a word of Italian, nor did the instructors. But, strangely enough, we managed to get along the first few months, so that by the time that we left eight months later, Marie and I spoke perfect English, without any accent of any kind.

LEVINE: And without instruction of any kind.

PROCHILO: And without any instructions. And, uh, this is where the memory came in. When I began to go to school, I really read everything that I could. And for some strange reason or other, I could retain verbatim word for word almost everything that I read. So that when, in the fifth and sixth, seventh grade in high school, I learned everything through memory, and not by logical process of learning. And it was fine. It served me in every purpose. It served me well in every purpose, except in mathematics. Because in mathematics you had to reason out each step, and you couldn't trust that to memory. I -- I could recite the hundred verses of the Ancient Mariner, and - and had trouble with fractions. And to this day, I have stored in my memory hundreds of poems that I can easily recite.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you by any chance remember poems or, like from Italy? Can you remember things you learned when you were that young?

PROCHILO: No, no, no. The poems that I learned were all in America.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, um, well, let's, well, let's finish talking about, you said you were leaving, or the decision was made because of the earthquakes, and . . .

PROCHILO: The economic factors, really.

LEVINE: The economic.

PROCHILO: That's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was, you had mentioned on the questionnaire the threat of revolution. Could you say something about that?

PROCHILO: Yes, yes. Uh, in 1919, uh, the, uh, communists began to form as a party in Italy. And, at the same time, Mussolini began his movement with the fascist movement. And in 1921 I think that he marched on Rome, and we were afraid that there would be a revolution between the communists and the fascists. So my dad wanted -- my older brother was approaching military age and he wanted to get us out of the country before a revolution began.

LEVINE: So how did you go about it?

PROCHILO: Well, we had a, uh, an aunt living in Elmira, and my mother corresponded with her, and they began the process of getting us here. We had to apply for, uh, passage, of course. We had to get visas. We had to get a sponsor, which she volunteered to do so. And, uh, that was it. We applied and received permission to leave, and we left.

LEVINE: And all of you left together, your mother -

PROCHILO: Oh, we all left --

LEVINE: your father, your brothers and sisters.

PROCHILO: And my Aunt Rose, another one of my mother's sisters. She also came with us.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember packing up to come here?

PROCHILO: Uh, there wasn't too much to pack. We packed only the clothing that we possessed, and nothing else.

LEVINE: What did you do with your house?

PROCHILO: It's still there. When we left, my father's sister moved into the house, and she stayed there for a while, and then she moved away, and she went to another town, as a matter of fact, and rented there, but then decided to go back. So she went back, and then left again. And, uh, my mother, well, not when she died, but before she and my dad died, they willed a house to me. And it's still there, and, oh, four years ago, on one of our trips to Italy, I went by the house, and it hadn't been lived in for years. And, uh, I, one of the neighbors, my aunt, as a matter of fact, came from her village to open the doors, and we entered, and vandals had broken into the place. And, uh, my, my brother was living at that time, and we looked in there, and we were aghast, because there were piles of dirt, plastic bottles, tin cans. It was a mess.

LEVINE: Some vandals had been, like, living in there? Is that what it looked like?

PROCHILO: Vandals had been living in there, yes. And, uh, I had deeded the house to my son, and my brother asked me, "What else did you leave Paul?" I said, "I don't know, but I should have left him two sticks of dynamite to blow up the place." It was heartbreaking. It was really heartbreaking. But I told my aunt that if she wanted to renovate the

place, I would send her some money, but she never did do anything with it. Now, I don't know what she, I did deed it to her, and she just died recently. I assume that she'd pass it onto her son.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Was there anything about the house that struck you in your memory from long ago?

PROCHILO: No, no, not really, because I, it was full of cobwebs. I didn't even go upstairs to see what the rooms looked like upstairs. I was so completely, so disappointed, that I told her to do whatever she wanted to do with it, that it was hers.

LEVINE: I see. So you packed mainly the clothes you were wearing.

PROCHILO: That is all we had.

LEVINE: And then, uh, do you remember saying goodbye? Were there, were there difficulties . . .

PROCHILO: No. As a matter of fact, we left at night.

LEVINE: And how did you leave, by what means?

PROCHILO: By carriage, by carriage. We went to, uh, Reggio, which was our port of embarkation.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then, uh, so, and what was the name of the ship?

PROCHILO: San Giovanni, St. John.

LEVINE: And do you remember boarding the ship? Were there any examinations on that side of the ship?

PROCHILO: There were no examinations. All of our examinations were here at Ellis Island.

LEVINE: What about the passage on the San Giovanni? Do you remember any of that?

PROCHILO: Only that it was long and, at times, tiresome. We were, naturally, in steerage, like all good immigrants. Um, and we were packed in like sardines. But there was a, uh, a family from Sicily that had an accordion and a mandolin that enlivened the trip, kept us awake most of the night. But in some ways it was annoying, and in some ways it was a lot of fun. Everybody learned to sing and join the groups, so that made life tolerable for those fourteen days.

LEVINE: Do you remember the ship coming into the New York Harbor?

PROCHILO: Yes, as a matter of fact, very vividly, because it was a typical late winter storm, and there was a storm that day in the harbor, and the ships were floating about, tugging at their anchors. And, uh, our sailors were busy getting huge balls of twine or rope. I guess they must have been at least eighteen inches in diameter or more, and lining

them up along the side of the ship, so that when the other ships came to us broadside, it was lessen the impact. And that was a little bit frightening, but very, very thrilling.

LEVINE: So that is to say there were other ships . . .

PROCHILO: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Waiting to come into Ellis Island, and . . .

PROCHILO: Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah, we were lined up on the, on the, uh, the entrance where the Verrazano Bridge is now. Ships were lined there -- from there right up to the middle of the Hudson.

LEVINE: Wow. Do you have any sense of, just, roughly, how many ships were waiting?

PROCHILO: No, not really.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PROCHILO: Not really.

LEVINE: Hmm. Okay. So, then, finally, your ship docked, at Battery Park, I assume.

PROCHILO: YES.

LEVINE: And then you were ferried out to Ellis Island.

PROCHILO: That's correct.

LEVINE: What was your impression of Ellis Island?

PROCHILO: Well, we saw the Statue of Liberty first, of course, when coming. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: What was that like, for you and for others?

PROCHILO: That was quite a thrill -- that was quite a thrill, because we had never seen anything. We hadn't even read about it, as a matter of fact, to see such a huge statue right in the middle of the harbor. We were all thrilled by it. And, uh, Ellis Island, of course, we approached it with a lot of awe, a lot of anxiety, a lot of anticipation.

LEVINE: What did you know about Ellis Island, approaching it?

PROCHILO: Nothing, absolutely nothing. We - we really had no idea where we were going or what we were going to do there. Our elders probably did, but we had no idea whatsoever. And once we got there they -- we were escorted, and began our round of all the various doctors that we had to see, hearing rooms, uh, what else? And the, you saw other people with either red or some sort of an identification, which to us didn't - didn't really mean anything, but I learned when I came here that

it was a sign that, uh, they either had illness or something was wrong with them. They had to go back. And, of course, you saw the tears and the heartbreak when families had to break up. You had one choice. You either are broke with the family and sent the person back, or everyone went back.

LEVINE: So, uh, did you stay with your family during the entire Ellis Island examination process?

PROCHILO: As I recall, yes, yes. We were taken as a - as a family and kept together.

LEVINE: And did you stay overnight?

PROCHILO: No, no. Fortunately we were all in good shape, so that we were able to leave after the examinations were over.

LEVINE: Now, did your aunt meet you when you came, when you were at Ellis Island?

PROCHILO: She was here. She was here. She met us and, uh, and she took us back to Elmira, took the Erie Lackawanna Railroad, and we stayed with her for about eighteen months.

LEVINE: Do you remember any firsts? When you left Ellis Island and you were traveling to Elmira, and then your first, say, week there, were there things about this country that you just, I'm sure a lot of things were new, but is there anything that stands out?

PROCHILO: The food was totally different cuisine, although it was still an Italian family, but there was so much of it. In Italy we ate meat perhaps twice a week at most. Here it was a daily part of the meal. Um, the availability of everything. The first store that we went to wasn't a supermarket at that time, but it was immense compared to what we had in our small villages.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah. And, uh, so when you got to Elmira, then did you enroll in school right away?

PROCHILO: Uh, as I had indicated, we went to this school that was operated by the Presbyterian Church, and that was almost, yeah, that was immediate. Within two weeks we were in school. And, uh, the others were also enrolled in school, but public school, of course. Uh, my dad worked for a bakery until he got sick and he went to the hospital, not knowing what was wrong with him, and at the hospital they had no idea what was wrong with him. And they kept him there, oh, I don't know just exactly how long, but they finally told him that there was nothing that they could do for him, and, uh, on my mother's judgment and my aunt's and other family members', we decided that perhaps the climate wasn't good for him.

So we took him, no, we didn't, but the family took him down, they moved to Atlantic City. And, uh, oh, I would say maybe three weeks after we got to Atlantic City he was up and about, and found work there.

And there was absolutely nothing wrong with him except the, uh, the climate. And in desperation at the hospital, St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira, they extracted all of his teeth. Thinking that perhaps the teeth may have had something to do with it, and, of course, they had nothing to do with it. And we remained in Atlantic City for approximately a year or so. And then through the family grapevine we learned that there was work for him in Westchester County in this stone, in his profession, so we moved to Port Chester.

LEVINE: Did he have a job when you moved to Port Chester?

PROCHILO: Yes. As a matter of fact, a job was waiting for him when we moved to Port Chester. We had relatives in Port Chester.

LEVINE: I see.

PROCHILO: And they, they found a job with the -- this construction company that was building the Hutchinson River Parkway.

LEVINE: What were your father's symptoms that caused his teeth to be extracted and then for you to move?

PROCHILO: That I really don't know. I really don't know.

LEVINE: Um, okay. So you went to school in Elmira and that's where you learned, in eight months, you learned English.

PROCHILO: That's correct.

LEVINE: And then did you go to school in Atlantic City?

PROCHILO: Yes. We went to school in Atlantic City, and we were there for just a year-and-a-half, and then we moved to Port Chester, and in Port Chester I was put in the third grade, and after about, oh, about eight weeks of that schooling I was called into the principal's office, and she gave me some sort of an oral test, and I went from the third to the fifth grade.

LEVINE: And, uh, what was it like? Were there a lot of immigrants around in any of those three places where you first lived?

PROCHILO: No. As a matter of fact, the, in Elmira there were no immigrants other than my, my aunt and uncle and his family, their family, and, uh, in Atlantic City, we knew no one there. We knew absolutely no one there. And, uh, in, we must have known someone in Atlantic City. Otherwise I don't know how they went about finding a place for us to live, but apparently they must have known someone there. And from there we went to Port Chester and, of course, in Port Chester we did have relatives, and we remained in Port Chester until 19-- well, my family and my sisters, two sisters, are still in Port Chester, as a matter of fact.

LEVINE: Did your mother and father learn English? What was their attitude about staying here, or wanting to become Americanized?

PROCHILO: They adjusted very, very well, but they never did learn to speak English. They may have known a word or two but, other than that, no, because the -- the neighborhood that we lived in -- in Port Chester was really an Italian neighborhood, so that they never had the necessity to learn English.

LEVINE: Do you remember how you were treated as an immigrant? Did you, were you treated in any particular way because you had immigrated here?

PROCHILO: Uh, only some of the children that, uh, being children and, uh, not really wishing to hurt anyone, but inadvertently, by the treatment, yes, we did have a little of that. But, uh, again, since it was mostly an Italian neighborhood, we didn't really have that much of a problem with the school classmates.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, we have about ten minutes. Just, uh, tell me how you met your wife.

PROCHILO: That is a story in itself.

LEVINE: Oh, good.

PROCHILO: Uh, two friends and I went to Washington for a weekend, and we stayed at a motel -- motel. And, uh, we naturally had neighbors, and we met some young ladies that were coming up from the south to spend a weekend in Washington. And we got -- we met them at luncheon and we asked them for a date and we were turned down. And we didn't appeal to them. But the next morning we saw, Sunday morning we saw them again and they asked us where we were going and what part of the city we were going to, and we told them we were going to, we were going to a church to attend Sunday services. And that took them a little bit by surprise, the fact that three young men were going to Sunday services.

So that when we came back we met again for lunch, and we, they were a little bit friendlier, and we asked them for dates and, sure enough, they thought that if they -- we thought enough about going to church, it was a safe thing to do to go about with strangers. And, uh, we went out and, uh, toward Washington, had dinner. And they were going to New York to, uh, take summer courses at Columbia. So, of course, we showed them the way to New York. We had a car, and they followed us. And, uh, they registered at, uh, one of the places that were recommended to summer students.

And, uh, from there we didn't let them study very long because we had to show them all of New York, Tarrytown and Irving -- Washington Irving's home and New Hyde Park and everything else, so that, uh, they decided that they didn't finish the course because we wouldn't let them finish. And they went back to West Virginia. That's where they were originally from. And we began to correspond. Then finally it was one of those, uh, I really don't know how to term it, but, uh, we finally, I finally proposed in one of my letters, and she accepted. And we met in Fairfax County in Virginia and got married there. She went

back home to teach. I went back home. Neither one of our families knew that we were married. (he laughs)

LEVINE: For how long?

PROCHILO: Six months or so. Then we gradually told them about it. In a way they were upset because they wanted a big wedding, and we were not upset because we wanted a very small wedding. There were only six people in our wedding party. And, uh, that was it.

LEVINE: What was your wife's name?

PROCHILO: Thornberry. Virginia, Frances Virginia Thornberry. And, uh, she came from a German English family, and one year we visited Great Britain and went to Thornberry Castle, in the town of Thornberry. And, uh, we began to trace the lineage, and it was part of the Thornberry family. Her dad was a doctor. Her father was, her brother was a doctor. She had three aunts that were doctors, and two uncles that were doctors.

LEVINE: Well, um, how about your career? What, could you briefly tell what your, what your work life was like in this country?

PROCHILO: Yes. Um, when I became old enough to go to work was the beginning of the Depression, and work was not to be found anywhere. Uh, in desperation, I found a job with a clothing manufacturing company, the S&K Manufacturing Company. And I began working at the princely sum of thirteen dollars a week for sixty hours' work, and I was very, very happy to get it. I was one of the lucky ones.

LEVINE: What were you doing?

PROCHILO: Pressing, pressing men's suits. Uh, in the meantime I was, uh, seeking employment elsewhere, and I was fortunate enough to land a job with the Westchester Lighting Company as a meter reader, and I worked there as a meter reader for about a year-and-a-half. In the meantime, I was going to Columbia University at night, working towards a degree. And, uh, I had to report that to the, to my personnel department. And I was transferred from meter reading to sub-station operation inspection. In other words, our job was to go through each sub-station in the system and test them for safety. And I was called into the service, and went to -- got into the army, served there for two years and came back. And when I returned, I went back to the company. Or I started to go back to the company. But what they offered was too little to live on. And so, uh, I - I went to work with my brother-in-law in a restaurant, and we became partners and operated a restaurant for about thirty years or so.

LEVINE: What was the name of it?

PROCHILO: The Riviera Restaurant in Laurelton. Then, uh, after that I went into the civil service in, uh, Nassau County, and I became the deputy controller of Nassau County until retirement. I retired in -- two-and-a-half years ago.

LEVINE: Oh. What would you say you're most proud of having done in your life, or most grateful for having done?

PROCHILO: What would be the most proud? [pause] I think probably the most proud, the thing that I'm most proud of is the fact that the efforts I had made to give back to this country some of the things that it gave to me, to any organizations that contributed to the welfare of its Uni-- it's citizens. Right now I'm a, the director of a group called FANS, which is a group that is dedicated to raising funds for senior citizens. Last year we raised approximately forty-five thousand dollars towards these senior citizens, and, uh, taking them out to dances and ballgames and trips.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you feel that having come here as an immigrant, as a young boy, do you feel that affected the rest of your life, the fact that you had that experience?

PROCHILO: Yes. I think in my relationship with people who came after me. I had a greater depth of feeling knowing what they were about to face. And I think I had a better understanding of relationship with other people.

LEVINE: And, uh, do you think that you've carried on any traditions or customs or ways of being in the world that, that stem from an Italian, uh, beginning?

PROCHILO: The Italian heritage?

LEVINE: Yeah.

PROCHILO: No, not really, because I was so young when I came here that I really became absorbed by the culture of America. The only thing that probably remained as a reminder of my own heritage was my love of classical music.

LEVINE: And, um, what would you say were some of the things that this country did give you?

PROCHILO: The opportunity to develop myself. To, uh, and, of course, going into the army, also, affected me considerably. It made me appreciate the -- the -- strength of this country, the purpose of this country, the -- the might of this country, really.

LEVINE: Okay. We have one minute left, but I'd like you to say your children's names, please.

PROCHILO: My children?

LEVINE: Yeah.

PROCHILO: My children are Paul and Linda. I just have two children. I have six grandchildren, I believe. And, uh, two great-grandchildren.

LEVINE: Wonderful. And you're going to Alaska.

PROCHILO: We're going to Alaska Thursday.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Is there anything else you'd like to say before we close?

PROCHILO: Thank God for America.

LEVINE: Well, thank you very much. I appreciate your telling your story, and now it will live on in the Ellis Island Oral history collection. I've been speaking with Dominick Prochilo, who came from Italy in 1921 when he was nine years old. It's July 25, 1994, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service here at the Ellis Island studio, and I'm signing off.

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