

AKRF-120
DOMENICK PICCOLO
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ITALY, 1923
AGE 9

RICHARD: This is Jill Richard and I'm speaking with Domenick Piccolo on Wednesday, January 15, 1986. We are beginning this interview at 1:15. We are about to interview Mr. Piccolo about his immigration experience from Italy in 1923. This is side one of tape one of Interview Number 120. Let's start from the beginning. Where and when were you born?

PICCOLO: At that time it was Radicena, Italy.

RICHARD: Radicena.

PICCOLO: Radicena. R-A-D-I-C-E-N-A.

RICHARD: Can you describe what Radicena was like at that time?

PICCOLO: It was a small town in the suburbs. Very few people, no industry. The only industry there was olive oil and farming.

RICHARD: It was in the suburbs of a larger city?

PICCOLO: Suburbs of a larger city.

RICHARD: Which city was that?

PICCOLO: Uh, Tauro Nuova.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. And was this an inland city or--

PICCOLO: Inland.

RICHARD: Inland. Uh-huh. And you said that there were olive oil.

PICCOLO: Olive trees. People made oil from the olives.

RICHARD: Is that what your family did there?

PICCOLO: My family did. My father used to be a truckman with the cows, with the bulls.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. Until he decided to come to the United States.

PICCOLO: Precisely. Right. To the United States.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. How did life there compare with what you had heard about life in the United States?

PICCOLO: No comparison.

RICHARD: No.

PICCOLO: No comparison.

RICHARD: (She laughs.) Why is that?

PICCOLO: Well, they had no facilities. They had no hot water. You had no steam heat, which, it was a warm climate to begin with.

RICHARD: Life was slower.

PICCOLO: And, uh, there wasn't enough food for everybody. Meat was very expensive. Coffee was extremely high.

RICHARD: Would you say that life was--

PICCOLO: I would say the poorest family here, the poorest family here, is better than the middle class there at the time.

RICHARD: At the time. Uh-huh. So when was it that your father decided to come to the United States?

PICCOLO: About 1921.

RICHARD: 1921. And for what reasons did he decide to leave the country?

PICCOLO: Come here to make a better living, more money and, uh, my uncles were here. They sent for him. And my father accumulated money, he sent for us.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. So you decided to go with your, or your mother

decided to go and join her husband?

PICCOLO: Right. Right.

RICHARD: And you were traveling with--

PICCOLO: My mother, my sister and my brother.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. Can you describe your, your journey?

PICCOLO: Well, we left the town in a horse and buggy. In those days there was no automobiles. Horse and buggy. We had to go to the nearest big town.

RICHARD: Which was that?

PICCOLO: Joya.

RICHARD: Uh-huh.

PICCOLO: And there we took the railroad to Naples. When we got to Naples, we all had to wind up in the shower, public shower.

RICHARD: Public shower. Was this a common thing for people who were traveling?

PICCOLO: It was a very, it was a must.

RICHARD: Why is that?

PICCOLO: Personal hygiene. All immigrations had to take a, personal hygiene. Take a bath, go for examinations, and whatnot.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. Was this in preparation for getting on the boat?

PICCOLO: That's right. Preparation, getting on the boat. So I got lost in the shower.

RICHARD: Oh, no. How did that happen?

PICCOLO: Well, I was nine years old, nine. I went in one way, then I didn't know which way to go out, and I started crying. And this man that was coming with us, another man from the same town, he saw me crying. He said, "Why are you crying?" "My mother, my mother." He says, "All right, I'll take you." So he took me to my mother. Then we went board

ship. We board ship, there was a young kid there, about my age. From the minute we left Naples, to the minute we landed, that guy didn't get up out of his bunk once.

RICHARD: Why was that?

PICCOLO: He kept saying, "Oh, my head." Seasick.

RICHARD: Were you seasick yourself?

PICCOLO: No. I was not seasick.

RICHARD: Was anyone else in your family sick?

PICCOLO: No. During the voyage, we had a storm at sea, a big storm. Lightening, thunder, the waves, like mountains. The boat was rocking. I happened to be on the toilet bowl. And I fell off the toilet bowl. I fell on my nose. I start bleeding. And then, I had one experience on the boat. A woman, some woman, her husband was sick. And during the night he died.

RICHARD: Do you know why he died, or what he was sick from?

PICCOLO: He was sick. He died.

RICHARD: It wasn't seasick, then.

PICCOLO: No. He died, and they threw him overboard. They gave him the prayers, you know, last rites, they threw him overboard. His wife was screaming, "My husband, my husband."

RICHARD: Were you a witness to this burial at sea?

PICCOLO: No, no. I heard it.

RICHARD: You heard about it.

PICCOLO: You know, not I heard about it, I heard the screaming.

RICHARD: Oh, I see.

PICCOLO: See, there was no refrigeration, no morgues, no freezers in those days, and there was no ice.

RICHARD: What sort of ship was it? Was it a large steamer?

PICCOLO: A vessel, yeah, a steamer ship.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. And what class were you traveling?

PICCOLO: Third class.

RICHARD: Third class. So you had a room?

PICCOLO: No. We had no room. We had a mess hall. Everybody slept in bunks.

RICHARD: In bunks. So you were quite a large group of people.
Uh-huh.

PICCOLO: That's right. Then, when we got to the New York bay, or I don't know exactly where it was, my father and my uncle, they came and met the boat with a tugboat.

RICHARD: Had they rented that, or were they just--

PICCOLO: Well, they chartered it. A tugboat. A lot of people. And my mother knew that my father was coming. We lowered a rope. I'll never forget this. My uncle worked

in the Washington Market here. Used to be a fruit market, fruit and vegetable market. Now it's Hunt's Point. Big, big basket of fruit, all kinds of fruit. We lowered a rope, and we raised that basket on the ship. And while we're--

RICHARD: This was a welcome present for you?

PICCOLO: Yeah. A welcoming. Then as the boat was coming to shores, I saw hundreds of sharks, because they were following the ship, you know, they were hungry.

RICHARD: And these were sharks?

PICCOLO: The reason why I know they were sharks, now I know, I didn't know what they were at the time, on account of the fins, you know, the fins stick out of the water.

RICHARD: I've heard that dolphins or porpoises follow ships.

PICCOLO: Yeah, but you don't get them over here. You probably get them down in Florida.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. Did you see these when you were in the ship?

PICCOLO: When I was in the ship.

RICHARD: And what sort of, it was a very large ship. Were you able to move freely through the ship?

PICCOLO: It was a big ship. Oh, yeah. You could move. Then, uh, on the ship, you had to get your own food.

RICHARD: You did?

PICCOLO: You had to form a line, you know, with the tray, and they give you your own food. Second class you were served, but third class was the poor class.

RICHARD: Was there a class lower than that, still?

PICCOLO: No. No class lower. First class was for the rich people. Second class, the middle class people. Third class was for the poor people.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. How was the food?

PICCOLO: My mother didn't like the food.

RICHARD: On the boat?

PICCOLO: No. That's the first time I drank beer.

RICHARD: On the boat. At nine years old?

PICCOLO: But it wasn't real beer, though. It was near-beer. Non, non-alcoholic.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. How did you like it?

PICCOLO: Not bad. When I was a young kid I used to eat anything.

RICHARD: I suppose in Italy they were pretty much used to drinking wine.

PICCOLO: Wine, right. So when we landed at Ellis Island that's the first moving picture I saw. A silent movie. I never saw a moving picture before in my life. Then my mother didn't like the food because she was so used to

eating Italian food with the heavy Italian oil, olive oil.

RICHARD: I suppose you liked that kind of food, too.

PICCOLO: Yeah, but, just like I said before, I was a kid, I was hungry, I'd eat anything. My mother wouldn't eat the food. So the waiter came around, it was a mess hall. Big, lot of tables. So you want to order something special you got to pay yourself, from your own pocket. So my mother ordered fried eggs. I'll never forget it. So she gave the man a bill. So the guy never came back with the change. He finally came. I tell my mother, "Why are you worrying about the change? That wasn't much money you gave him." So sure enough the guy came with a lot of singles. That time it was big money, though. A dollar bill was about that big. So then we had to go for inspection. Very fussy about inspection.

RICHARD: This was the first thing that happened?

PICCOLO: Yeah. We went for inspection. So they noticed my sister had a swollen gland on her head. So they held us back.

RICHARD: She had a swollen gland on her neck.

PICCOLO: On her neck.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. Did you know what was causing this? Had you noticed this before?

PICCOLO: No, no. They wouldn't let us, they wouldn't let us come ashore. And my father--

RICHARD: When did they notice it? Was this on the boat that they examined you, or--

PICCOLO: Ellis Island.

RICHARD: At Ellis Island. Uh-huh.

PICCOLO: So then they noticed the swollen gland, so my father put up bond, because they kept her 'till they released us. They operated on her there. They removed the gland. It might have been a cyst. Who knows. But I think it was a gland, an infected gland. And she comes out about a week later. And that was it.

RICHARD: That was it. When you were undergoing the examination,

was this the only exam that you had, or did you have to answer other questions for the authorities there?

PICCOLO: The first thing they do was look through your head.

RICHARD: They looked at your head.

PICCOLO: If they found one louse you went right back, no two ways about it.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. And this was the reason for all the hygiene in, in Naples, before you left?

PICCOLO: That's why you had to take a shower. Antoinette, give me the envelope, please. Yeah. Thank you. See, my mother was all prepared for this, to make sure nothing went wrong. Here's my picture when I came over. My sailor suit and my bald head.

RICHARD: Why did you have a bald head?

PICCOLO: They wanted to make sure, a precaution, so I wouldn't get no lice in my head. Because those things, they jump, you know. You could have a person next to you with

lice, they jump on your hair. It happened to my wife once.

RICHARD: So with a bald head you were--

PICCOLO: With a bald head I was precaut-- The Lice won't go unless there's hair.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. Now, getting back to Naples, before you left, can you tell us what, how you felt when you were leaving the country? Were you excited to be leaving?

PICCOLO: I was excited. I was coming to America. Because everybody thought, when they come here, they'd find money on the streets.

RICHARD: Is this what you father had said to you, or--

PICCOLO: No. It's what everybody said out there. They all had the same impression. They think they're coming to America, they find, they'd sweep money, in the streets., America's got a big name for money, food. While in Italy, poorest man couldn't eat meat. A middle class man, he only could eat meat maybe once or twice a week. Very expensive. And the industry didn't call for that kind of white money.

RICHARD: So you were looking forward to coming to America?

PICCOLO: That's right.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. And it was worth the long trip on the boat.

PICCOLO: It was well worth it here, because anybody came--

RICHARD: How long was the trip?

PICCOLO: It was about nine or ten days.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. And it was all calm except for the few days of the storm.

PICCOLO: Except for the storm we had at sea.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. And when you docked at Ellis Island, uh, how did you get to the island? Were you ferried across the harbor, or--

PICCOLO: Well, we got to the island by a boat. They used to have

quarantine. In fact, what they call a, no, what's that boat, it's in the museum now? Ambrose Light. There's a boat by the name of Ambrose Light. That was quarantine light. All boats that came from Europe had to stop right there and get, the doctor say, "Jump aboard," and they examine you before you enter. From there on, and you landed on Ellis Island. You get off the ship. But quarantine, the boat, as I said, what's the name I just mentioned? Ambrose Light. The boat, they have it in South Street Seaport, you'll see that boat there. That was a quarantine line. We all had to stop there at the time.

RICHARD: So when you got to Ellis Island, you immediately went to have your physical examination?

PICCOLO: Physical examination.

RICHARD: And then, exactly, what happened? They found the--

PICCOLO: My sister had a swollen gland, had a lump on her neck.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. And she had to be operated on?

PICCOLO: She had to be--

RICHARD: But this didn't happen immediately, did it?

PICCOLO: No. The thing must have been coming on.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. No, I mean, her operation. Was she--

PICCOLO: They operated, within a week she was out of there.

RICHARD: Within a week. Uh-huh.

PICCOLO: She still has a scar. She lives in Brooklyn.

RICHARD: How long were you, were you detained at Ellis Island?

PICCOLO: We were there about two days.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. And could you tell us about where you slept, and the physical layout?

PICCOLO: We slept in the mess hall.

RICHARD: In the mess hall?

PICCOLO: In the mess hall.

RICHARD: And were you on the floor, or in cots?

PICCOLO: No. In bunks.

RICHARD: In bunks. And, uh, was this a separate dormitory for men and women?

PICCOLO: All separate. Men on one side--

RICHARD: Uh-huh. So you were separated from your mother at that time.

PICCOLO: Right.

RICHARD: Was this frightening to you at all?

PICCOLO: No.

RICHARD: How did you feel about that?

PICCOLO: We weren't too far apart. It was just a separation.

RICHARD: And what language were you speaking at that time?

PICCOLO: Italian.

RICHARD: And who were you speaking Italian to? Were the people that were at Ellis Island able to--

PICCOLO: There were other people. There was interpreters.

RICHARD: There were interpreters.

PICCOLO: Interpreters. There was one guy. I'll never forget this, in Naples. A cinder went in his eye, a cinder from the railroad station. They mad a big fuss over it. One doctor called the other doctor. "Look, look." They were making a big issue over a cinder. That's how fussy they were.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. Was this man sent back?

PICCOLO: No.

RICHARD: Do you recall seeing any other immigrants who were sent

back?

PICCOLO: No.

RICHARD: When you arrived in the harbor, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

PICCOLO: We arrived in the night. You know, the boats, all different colored lights, red lights, blue lights. It was like an amusement park. The next day I saw the Statue of Liberty from the window of Ellis Island.

RICHARD: How did you feel about that? Had you heard about it?

PICCOLO: Oh, it felt good. Everybody, by name, Statue Liberta.
Statue Liberta.

RICHARD: So you had been prepared for seeing that?

PICCOLO: Right.

RICHARD: You were excited.

PICCOLO: Right.

RICHARD: Um, now, you say your father posted bond for you to leave, and you left island. Was your father there to meet you?

PICCOLO: My father was there and my uncle was there to meet us.

RICHARD: And your uncle.

PICCOLO: He took us back by tugboat.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. And where did you go from there?

PICCOLO: We went to 56 James Street. James. It was a street, no longer exists. The projects built over.

RICHARD: Was this an Italian neighborhood?

PICCOLO: Yeah. Over here, yeah. About five blocks from here, Italian neighborhood.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. So you had quite a few Italian friends to start

out with.

PICCOLO: We congregated. Italians congregated together. There were some Greeks that congregated in their own neighborhood. That's where we used, that's how the foreigners used to live years back. They all congregated with their own type. And, uh, after three years my brother died.

RICHARD: Your-- He was a child at the time.

PICCOLO: The one that came over, Yeah, he was a child. He was six years old. And that was it. Then my mother got another baby. He was very sick when he was born. My mother got that one in late years.

RICHARD: So when you, you arrived you were about nine.

PICCOLO: Nine, nine, nine and a few months, as I said.

RICHARD: So you went immediately to school?

PICCOLO: I went to this school. The school was still there, P.S. 114. I went to school, I got lost in school, too.

RICHARD: You did. You were good at getting lost.

PICCOLO: They put me in the front office. And when I come out, at twelve o'clock, to go home for lunch, I come out a different entrance, and I lost the sense of direction. And somebody saw me and recognized me, he brought me home. And once I knew that, there was no problem after that.

RICHARD: Did you like school?

PICCOLO: Oh, yeah. I graduated in 1929.

RICHARD: Is that where you learned English?

PICCOLO: Well, I learned English from mingling, school, working. I congregated with fellows my own age. See, some of the Italian people, and most of other nationalities, when they came here, they congregated where they spoke their native language. And they never picked up English. You follow me?

RICHARD: Uh-huh.

PICCOLO: Whereas if you congregated within the Jewish, spoke to the English or Irish, you'll pick up English faster.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. But since you were living in an Italian neighborhood it was, it was easy for you to do this.

PICCOLO: I mingled with Italian boys. They were born here, like my wife. Her parents, as she said before, her parents spoke English, because they congregated between other people that spoke English. Like her father, one year old, once one would say was born here. (Wife speaks off microphone.)

RICHARD: Um, besides the Italian language, what other customs did your family bring with you from Italy?

PICCOLO: Made their own bread.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. Do you still do that?

PICCOLO: No. My mother used to do it. Bake their own bread, make their own homemade macaroni. Then she couldn't take the oil. She didn't like the oil.

RICHARD: No. She used to like the oil, and that was why she didn't like--

PICCOLO: Right. So we used to send Italy some money for them to send like ten gallons of oil here and the carrier was, they stole it. What they did, they kept it in a warehouse. But then, after a while, she got used to it. And that's how it goes. My father was in the construction line. In those days it was a very hard line to make a living because it isn't like today, a day like today, construction, they keep working. In those days cement used to freeze, so you couldn't work. But today they got chemicals in cement that won't dry up, won't freeze.

RICHARD: Um, did your father find it easy to find, um, other people to work with here? Was this an easy thing for him?

PICCOLO: Well, the only reason it was a little easy for him because there was people from our town, in this country, that were in the same line of business, construction. And they used to give him work, as little as it was. But, you know, you live from day to day.

RICHARD: Was he working with your uncle at that time?

PICCOLO: No. My uncle was a painter. My father was a

construction, cement worker.

RICHARD: And eventually you started working.

PICCOLO: Eventually, when I graduated the school in August, June, 1929, I graduated elementary school. I was going to go to high school in September, and I got myself a job for the summer. It was in a printing house, and I liked it there. So I didn't go back to high school. I went to vocational school, printing school. I went five years at night. And I stuck to that job fifty-two years.

RICHARD: Amazing. That's wonderful. Terrific.

PICCOLO: I started 1929, as I told you, when I graduated. I retired in 1981.

RICHARD: Congratulations.

PICCOLO: Thank you.

RICHARD: That's great. And you're married.

PICCOLO: Here's my wife. (They laugh.) I'm married.

RICHARD: Children?

PICCOLO: I've got four children. One is forty-four. One is forty-- (wife speaks.) Forty-six. What difference does it make? Forty-two, forty and thirty-four. I have five grandchildren. That's the youngest.

RICHARD: When did you become an American citizen?

PICCOLO: About thirteen years ago.

RICHARD: Was this through a, um, what sort of process--

PICCOLO: No. I was a citizen. I automatically was a citizen, derivative citizen, through my father's papers. But every time I had to go somewhere I had to prove it, you follow me? So I got tired of that. So I got my own papers out.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. I see. And how do you feel about your life as an American?

PICCOLO: Wonderful. I say this, one thing, once more. No country, no matter where you go, is better than this country. In every way. Opportunities, food, and liberty. No country. I can't understand-- So--

RICHARD: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

PICCOLO: Yeah. One more thing. In those days, when we came here, there were a lot of private banks. There was no insurance in banks like there is today. They were privately owned. So my father used to serve himself with some bank. He used to be out on Mulberry Street, near Liberty and he used to get his mail there before we got here. All the correspondence was done from the bank to us.

RICHARD: His mail from Italy, or--

PICCOLO: Yeah. And, uh, and all of a sudden, two, three banks went under, which he didn't go under, because he didn't have the money in the other banks. All the Italian people on a Sunday, most of them had their families in Europe, like my father had us in Europe. And then they came here. During the week they used to work and on a Saturday and Sunday used to come down to the banks. That's the only time they had. And they all

congregated in the same spots. But that's all done away with.

RICHARD: That's not the way it's done any more.

PICCOLO: No more, no more. Another habit that the Italian people had. I think today Puerto Ricans have the same habit, but they're considered Americans. Used to come here, make money, and send their money back to Italy and buy property out there, which I was always against.

RICHARD: Do you think they had plans to go back to Italy?

PICCOLO: They had plans to go back. That was the idea.

RICHARD: How many of them do you think actually made it back?

PICCOLO: Well, that I know of right now, about five people, that I know.

RICHARD: Is this in their older age that they went back?

PICCOLO: In their older age.

RICHARD: Uh-huh. Do you think that they're glad that they went

back, or is this something that--

PICCOLO: Well, you see, Italy years back, if you went there with a five dollar bill, you could have went out to eat, get drunk and still have money left over. But today, just, it's dearer than here. That's not the case. Anybody's that's got money it's old money, and that's the best place in the world to live, because the whole world changed. The whole world changed. I knew a family not too far from here. She was born here. Her husband was a European, from Italy. Her father was an ice man here. After a while he didn't like it here, so he went back, he wanted to live in Italy because the father-in-law left him money. He left fifty thousand dollars. You could live pretty good there for fifty thousand dollars. See, living ancestor. But what gets me is this. You can't take money out of Italy, but you can take money out of this country. You follow me?

RICHARD: Not really.

PICCOLO: Well, I'll explain it to you. Let's say you got a hundred thousand dollars, and you want to go back to your native land. You

could take it with you. But if you got a hundred thousand dollars in Italy you can't, you're only allowed "X" amount of dollars to come here. You can't take the money out of the country. Spain the same way. I don't know about any other country.

PICCOLO: (Wife speaks.) Greece I heard you're only allowed to take a thousand dollars out, I heard.

RICHARD: So you, on the whole you think that you're glad that you stayed in America?

PICCOLO: Guaranteed. Guaranteed.

RICHARD: And you don't have any plans to go back to Italy.

PICCOLO: I never give it a thought.

RICHARD: Great.

PICCOLO: I never give it a thought.

RICHARD: Well, I'd like to thank you for this interview.

PICCOLO: Any time.

RICHARD: Thank you.

PICCOLO: You're welcome.

RICHARD: This is the end of Interview Number 120 with Mr. Domenick Piccolo.