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MICHAEL PESCA

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NASH: Today is October 19, 1973. I am visiting with Michael Pesca who is an Assemblyman of the 52nd Assembly District which consists of South Brooklyn, Brooklyn Heights and Park Slope. Mr. Pesca came to the United States when he was twelve years old. He came from Mola Di Bari in Italy, in Southern Italy in 1955. And now Mr. Pesca is going to tell us the story of his family's trip to this country and something of what came later. Okay, Mr. Pesca would you like to begin?

PESCA: Sure. Out coming to this country originated in 1954 when one of my uncles, a brother of my mother, petitioned for my family and my father to obtain a visa to come to the United States. At that time my father had lands and some fishing boats that operated in the home town. They were doing quite well, but my father's ultimate ambition was to return to the United States, when I say return I mean, when he was a single person back in the '20s and '30s, he had been in

New York City, and in America via of Argentina. And his ultimate ambition was always to return. And just before Second World War II he went back to Italy and was not able to return until the quota was opened for immediate relatives. And since my mother had an immediate relative of this country, who was my uncles, a visa petition was made. We left Italy in February of '55 on the S.S. Independence, and American boat. I remember the departure quite vividly when we packed just about all our belongings and everyone in our family, some of whom had already been in this country, came over to wish us good-bye and wish us the best of luck. I was only eleven or twelve at the time and I thought it was great fun leaving and looked forward to going on a big boat and cross the Atlantic, which I have always seen from geographic maps. At that time in my life I had been attending second year of high school in Italy and was looking forward to get into the American educational system which had been described to me as being the best in the world. One of the most exciting things about coming to this country to me was the fact that I would have had the opportunity to enroll in the American educational system. The trip, the crossing over to America was an incredible experience from the point of view for the first time introduced to American food. The voyage was somewhat very rough and difficult because of the choppy seas, and many people were seasick. I don't particularly recall being seasick, but I do recall that the odor and the flavor of the American food was not at all appealing to me. The only exciting thing about coming over was the fact that we were able to eat bananas on the boat, when bananas in Italy cost as much as \$1.00 each when I had left in 1955, \$1.00 or six hundred liras was quite a high price to pay for one banana. So that to me indicated all the good things that this country had in store. The great treasures that I was always told about insofar as money, and food, and housing, were proven to me by the luxury of the boat and by the fact that we were able to obtain bananas just by asking. As I said, the crossing was quite rough. And I recall the last day before we arrived when the boat began entering the Port of New York from the tip of Long Island, as the boat slowly made its way up to Manhattan, looking at Long Island, it appeared to me to be a huge Christmas setting of little lights all over the place and moving lights and little houses and little huts and trees and mountains. And it seemed like, with the snows, to be a Christmas setting. Then I recall also very vividly my first sighting of the Statue of Liberty. I was awed by the Statue of Liberty more than I was awed by anything else that I saw entering the port or subsequent to that. It wasn't just the size of the Statue of Liberty, but of the symbol behind it. I had taken a history course in Italy and the meaning of the Statue of Liberty had been discussed, you know, in almost the duration of a whole week. And looking at the

Statue brightly lit at night was a sight that was imprinted in my mind, and it probably will never leave for as long as I live. Everything after that I must say, was anticlimactic. Getting into the Port of New York itself on the boat and docking and getting off the boat was really all going downhill insofar as excitement. The highest point of excitement of the trip was the sighting of the Statue of Liberty. I recall when we docked some delays in getting off the boat, we were probably some of the last people off. And we were advised at the time that because we were newly arrived immigrants that we were always the last to leave and that everyone else gets off first. I'm somewhat taken aback by it as if, I felt we were already imprinted with being second-class or third-class citizens. By the time we did get off the boat my uncle, who had petitioned the government to call us over, met us and drove us over to an apartment that had already been furnished and stocked with a frigidaire and full of food, including parsley. I remember that point being made when my sister opened the frigidaire and said, "Isn't this fantastic. They even gave us parsley." This of course were friends and relatives who made sure that when we arrived we would have all necessities. I recall arriving and going directly to bed because it was late and waking the next day and not seeing my father around and learning that my father had already gone to work. And he had gone to work as a scraper of ships, ships' hull, that's the bottom of the boats where are rusty and put on dry dock and then are scraped by scrapers. And I remember seeing my father coming back the first day, his face, and his hands, and body completely blackened by the dust and the rust. That's also a sight that frightened me almost, and made me wonder how long my father would last since he was already, well he was sixty years of age at that time when we arrived. I remember the very next day my going to school for the first time and being very lost and not knowing the language. I felt I was at a loss. I remember at least not understanding procedures, I remember leaving at midday for lunch, going home not wanting go back to school, and my mother pressuring me to go back. And all my dreams of looking forward to the American educational system just vanished. I remember going back and hoping to find my way to a classroom. I went through the same entrance that I had come out of, and it so happens that people didn't go back through the same entrance that they were dismissed at lunch time. And I got lost and didn't find my classroom for about an hour and I refused to speak to anyone, or avoided speaking to anyone because I didn't know how to speak English nor did I understand it. I also recall going to math class and seeing on the blackboard additions I had taken in my, oh, fifth grade elementary school in Italy, and also being very disillusioned about the American educational system until I found out, of course,

that I had been placed in an elementary school in the seventh grade of elementary school. Well, I thought that would be able to go directly to high school and I was dismayed when I saw that it wasn't a high school, it was an elementary school. My sister who was twenty-one at the time, went to work immediately in a factory, the week after we arrived. And my brother and I, my brother was fourteen, I was twelve, we both attended the elementary school. I recall living in this very small apartment, four small room apartment with heat that had to be, hot water and heat, had to be lit every morning in a charcoal boiler in the cellar. And we and the other tenants would take turns each morning at five o'clock, one of the tenants would be responsible to go down and light the fire and light the charcoal for hot water and heat. It was a very old house that still stands in now what is becoming a dilapidated section of what is now the 52nd Assembly District. I remember nine months afterwards moving to another location of five rooms, larger and much better building with gas heat, which made a whole difference, which was the beginning of my realizing that there were better things in America and more like what I had heard back in Italy than what I had experienced in the first, well, about nine months after we first arrived. In the spring of '56, I was about thirteen at the time, I began working myself part time. I began working in a factory that made bottled soda, small company that bottled soda and made home deliveries. And I remember first manning a washing machine for bottles which was the most menial chore you could do. And sweeping the place and keeping the place neat and clean. And then I slowly, in the period of almost fourteen years, moved from being the washer to being the assistant manager and doing everything in between from delivering sodas to homes, which was a very hard and tough work, especially at wintertime, to working in the lab, mixing the flavors that actually make the soda which was a very exciting thing. And then, of course, when I graduated from college I left that position as the assistant manager and went out and looked for a job. After elementary school, which lasted for a year and a half, I went on to high school. At that time I was still not well-versed in English. To my dismay I had hoped to go on to an academic high school so that I could continue on to college, but the problem was that at the elementary school level there were no advisors who really advised me as to where to go. And I was at a loss when I learned that I was in a commercial high school. It was William O'Grady High School, William O'Grady Vocational High School that I was sent to. And it took me about two months to finally be transferred to Boy's High School. When I finished elementary school my father had changed jobs from scraper to longshoreman, and he was about sixty-two at that time, and he continued working until he was sixty-six, hoping to earn enough

working hours so he could qualify for longshoreman pension. He failed to do that when he had a small accident on the pier, actually it wasn't on the pier, I blamed the pier, but it wasn't. He worked late one night and was very tired and came home and took a shower and fell in the bathtub and after that he couldn't go back to work. I always thought that because of the hard life that he had lead he would not have too many years left and I was very happy when he retired so that he could enjoy at least his senior years. Well, he has survived and is seventy-eight years old and he looks sixty. I recall being in college at the time that my father retired and my father telling me that he would support whatever efforts I would make in continuing my education, despite the fact that he had stopped working, that sacrifices would be made to see that I would go wherever I wanted to in education. As I said, I always looked forward to joining the American educational system and I probably took great advantage of it. After Boy's High School where, in my first year at least, I had experienced some difficulty in especially the English courses, and I remember very vividly receiving a midterm paper back. And the English teacher who had taken a liking for me because I was trying so hard to do well in the course added the various sections of that examination, and adding the sections actually came out to about 61, and 65 was passing and he made a mistake, but it was intentional. I think it was intentional. He added the various numbers so I had 63 and then crossed the 63 and made it a 65 which made me barely pass and I was grateful that he did that. And I passed that English course which was the most difficult course I took in my four years in high school, my English 1 course. I passed that with a 75 and I thought I had achieved my greatest goal so far at that stage. I proceeded with hard school work while working at the soda manufacturing plant so that I could get at least pocket money for car fare and lunch. And after Boy's High I applied at City College. I was accepted to City College though I didn't expect to be. And that's when my father told me that if there were any sacrifices to be made he would do them and I told him that I would do my best not to impose upon our financial burden and that I would continue working, though he was always opposed to my working while attending school. I continued working through City College and after City College I went out looking for a job. Up until I went out looking for a job, my first impression of immigrants being second class citizens had just about vanished. It didn't recur until I went out looking for a job, and it didn't really recur until while working, there were a number of college graduates who were hired at the same time, and I was one of them, and when it came to promotions or moving from, you know, the training of the menial chores to better things, I was the last. And I thought in my own way, being accustomed to working hard at things, I worked

much harder than the others. And when I was passed over, my immediate supervisor called me in his office and he said, "I'm sorry, I did not make the decision. If it were up to me I would promote you before anybody else, but they are higher ups." And I tried to find out from him why, and he just kept looking at me and wouldn't answer, he said, "I'm sorry, I don't know why." But, I looked into his eyes and I thought that he knew why and he just wouldn't tell me. And it wasn't until later that I realized the reason why, when I saw that everyone else who had been hired were Irish and that the firm was all Irish. And that is when I saw the reason why. But, I had been attending graduate school full time while working full time, graduate school for a Master in Economics. To backtrack a bit, in 1960 when I first started college, I formed a young immigrant club of about fifteen or sixteen men of, well I was the youngest, ranging from seventeen to about twenty-five, we formed a club that had intentions of helping fellows or individuals who came from the same home town, Mola di Bari. We had a large segment of our community here in Brooklyn in New York City. We had anywhere from four to six thousand people from our home town. It is said that there are more people from Mola di Bari living outside of Mola than there are living in Mola, and it is probably true if you consider that in New York City alone there are four to six thousand of them. And the town itself only has about twenty-eight thousand in population. So we formed a club to help the more recent arrivals with everything from finding jobs, finding the right school, and we were active in community activities also. Back in 1962 we began contacting other organizations in the area and working together on projects. That was the beginning of community activity, community organizations which is now in vogue and which everyone is getting into. We started that back in 1962. I was in college, I was the only college student in that group of about twenty individuals by that time. And I always took the lead in doing things in the community though I was never an officer of the organization. We also published a bilingual newspaper at the time. We published it for two years and the bilingual newspaper was circulated to members of our own community. By this time my sister was married to another Italian, of course, and my brother finished high school decided that he wasn't cut out for the student's role and he went into printing. My father was retired and my mother was, you know, what she always was, a housewife. With the group that we formed in '60, we were able to have for the first time a voice for the immigrants in South Brooklyn. South Brooklyn is at least in nineteen, the early 1960's was heavily Italian community. It is now changing to some extent with a lot of, the brownstone movement is taking part of South Brooklyn, a lot of non-Italians are moving in and Italians are moving out. To immigrants, coming into South

Brooklyn is only a first step. The next step is to save enough money and purchase a home in Staten Island or Flushing or Bay Ridge, and that is a step up the ladder for them. We began in '62 to '65 to try to assert ourselves in South Brooklyn. The Italo-American community which is first, second, and third generation of Italo-Americans who were born in this country, were active in church groups and social groups and all other activities. And the Italian immigrant, who is the first arrival from Italy, who spoke little English and had menial jobs and were not American citizens even though they had been here for twenty years, and certainly did not vote, and certainly didn't know, and to some extent didn't care about what was happening in the community, were completely neglected by the Italo-American sector, I mean, you know, the immigrants were fine as neighbors and friends, but, you know, when it comes to other things that's where it stops. And our club, this club that I helped form was mainly responsible for getting the immigrants' voice asserted in the area. My father and mother in the typical Italian tradition would oppose to my being an activist as you call it now, at that time, in the early '60s. They were concerned of my doing so much for so many other people and saying that no one will ever appreciate it and that you're wasting your time and what difference will your involvement make, and these are all typical Italian arguments that you find from Southern Italy. It was difficult to move the immigrants to become active just as it was difficult for me to convince to my own parents that what I was doing was something beneficial and something that would help. They didn't see it that way, they see it as each person with his family and with his own arms or his own will power can achieve whatever it needs to achieve in life in America. That the opportunities out here and all you have to do is not to be lazy and just go out and take advantage of the opportunities that are presented to you. And I tried to convince them as I try to convince the other immigrants that the America is not the America that they were told about twenty, thirty years ago. They were told about in Italy that America by virtue of its modernization of coming into the real 20th century which is highly technical and highly mechanized, if not computerized, that the opportunities that were not going to arise as they have arisen in the past. I have been proven correct at least in one way, in that now while ten years ago whenever immigrants came from Italy there were two ways in which they could look for work if they were unskilled. One of them would be longshoremen and the other one would be construction. And now in both instances there just aren't the opportunities that you had. You cannot just come in and join the longshoremen union and go to work as a longshoremen because the books have closed and it is difficult to open them because jobs on the piers are decreasing. Construction also has

become very tight and immigrants cannot just come in and go to work on construction. So we have many immigrants coming in and not being able to find jobs. And that has proven the point that we were trying to make years ago. Despite my parents' opposition to my community involvement which took more time than anything else, they kept prodding me and encouraging me to attend school. Fortunately, I did not have to impose upon my parents for any financial burdens for my education. While during college I always worked and after college. In graduate school I worked during the day full time and I paid for all my graduate education. And I also was able to save up enough money so that after graduate school I had a choice to continue on for a Ph.D. or try something else. And being fascinated by the American educational system, I decided to continue at length and decided to try law school. In my own community which was the community again of immigrants of Mola di Bari, there were no professionals with the exception of a doctor and an engineer or a few engineers, two or three engineers, and I was the first one from our own community to decide to go to law school. After law school, being in 1969, I attended law school in Detroit, Michigan in 1969, having finished law school I had to decide whether to come back to South Brooklyn or as a professional move on to the professional world and move away from my original beginnings so to call in South Brooklyn. Many immigrants have a tendency of moving on after obtaining their education and sort of lose contacts with their fellow immigrants or friends or relatives of the earlier years then they come to this country. Some of them even change their names and move on to California and become blonde and blue-eyed, or wish they did. And I sort of a choice, that choice in '69. I decided to come back to South Brooklyn and I loved it. I started working for a legal aid society which surprised my parents because they felt that when I finished law school, which again I did with my own savings and working while attending law school as a part time teacher and a social worker in the summers, having finished law school with some degree of sacrifice, my parents felt that I would now go out and make money, and make a million dollars as the true American dream come true. And instead I decided to go to work for legal aid society and refuse a job from a private company for \$13,000 a year to work for legal aid at \$8,500 a year. And I worked for legal aid up in the Bronx, Hunt's Point, a heavily Puerto Rican area. And leaving work every day at five o'clock to me would be the beginning of another day, another day's work which was back in the community. And work with all the organizations in all the activities that I had originally been involved with before I left for law school, which I maintained some contacts during summers and vacations. Out of my community involvement and activities came the

opportunity to run for public office. My purpose to run for public office was not so much to win so much as to awake those who were in power, in political power here in South Brooklyn that they had to do a little more than taking of their own friends and close relations and families and do things on an issue basis. The attitude of the leadership during these years which were mainly Italians, and old, was that, you know, you leave things as they are—and everything is fine. We don't need anything, this area doesn't need any intervention or help anybody. The people take care of themselves.

NASH: True. What happened when people go older? Did people take care of them?

PESCA: No, what happens when people, especially the immigrants, when the immigrants got older, mainly the children that moved out, married and moved out, then you find that many immigrants are here all alone. And they are old and they still haven't learned English. My mother has been here, well, we have been here eighteen years and my mother still doesn't speak a word of English. My father barely. And he probably remembers more from when he was here in the '20s and '30s then he does from having learned in these past eighteen years because you can do everything you want here in South Brooklyn by speaking Italian. You don't need to speak English in order to get along or get by rather well in South Brooklyn. Whether at work or not you always can get away with speaking Italian so there is no incentive and there is no force on you to learn English, you can do it in other ways. And especially when these elderly do reach the age of being senior citizens they can even fill out a senior citizens exemption form. And their children don't know anything about it and don't want to be bothered. And if they need medical assistance they don't even know about Medicare or Medicaid and it was very slowly to show them that these benefits existed. Just bringing a community service program in the area was difficult. We weren't able to do so, which we still haven't been able to do so. So we are forced to do a lot of that here in my office as an elected official. But the attitude of the immigrants towards politics was also one of very negative, you know, the experience from Italy carries over to America. And politics in Italy is a farce, and it is just a game. The politics here in this country was alien to them as much as a lot of other things in the American system were alien to them. Politics was something that, you know, just didn't involve them. And my decision to run for elective office got many of them involved in political activities for the first time, and start realizing that what happens at the political level affects every day of their lives, whatever they do in their lives. As I

said, we did not expect to win, but we did and we did because we were able to obtain a lot of help from the immigrants in the area, who as I said, were involved for the very first time. My parents were deathly afraid of my involvement in politics. One of my main concerns was that my parents would be much too upset to tolerate my running for office and they may suffer some coronary and die because of that, but they held up quite well and so did the rest of the immigrants who were learning and having fun while learning politics. And we were able to win. My winning in that particular race for the New York State Assembly, all of the credit goes to the immigrants who contributed about seventy or eighty percent of my campaign funds to the race. Though the area itself that I represent, which has a population of nearly one hundred and fifty thousand, is perhaps at most forty percent Italian. And of the forty percent Italian, oh, maybe fifteen or twenty percent of that forty percent is immigrants. We were able to bring into the area to help us work, immigrants from all over Brooklyn, all over New York City, especially those who were born in my home town. Again, I was the first from our home town to get involved in politics. The Sicilians and the Neapolitans have been in, most of the Italian politicians and the Italian elected officials come either from the general area of Sicily or the general vicinity of Naples. Very few come from the general vicinity of Bari. And the only one from my home town to get involved in politics was myself. And that was our first time and it made a lot of the immigrants from my home town very happy and moved them to work very hard in the campaign. It seemed like some of them had been here for fifty years and never registered to vote and some of them might not even become citizens. They felt for the first time, wow, they are really part of the American system. We can elect even an elected official. We can get one of our own elected, so we are really part of it now. On the other had, I feel like I'm serving two constituencies. I'm serving the really constituency that actually votes to a large extent and it's the American constituency. And then I have this little separate constituency which is the, you know, the people from my home town and like their total different approach with them, a total different problem handling with them. And it is fun, it is a lot of fun. I went back to my home town for the first time this summer, after eighteen years, and it was a great thing going back. The town having changed tremendously, especially because of the influx o the American dollar of many immigrants who have saved money and reinvested the money back in the home town in real estate and apartment buildings. But, the old town still remains and it is a beautiful little seaport which is famous for it sea food. And it is a great experience going back, especially since word had gone back there, of course, that I had won and that they were all looking forward to

seeing me again and hoping that someday I will go higher and higher in American politics, and hope to open doors for other immigrants from my home town to get into the political field. But, one thing that we were able to do in the past, oh, twelve, thirteen years, since we formed this Italian club that I spoke to you earlier about, is to encourage more and more immigrants when arriving from Italy to go to school. They are getting the message that America is becoming a very well-educated and sophisticated society. Unless you have a college degree or professional training you are not going anywhere. The amount of unskilled jobs are getting fewer and fewer. And word of this is going back to Italy. And Southern Italians know that there are probably opportunities for them in Northern Europe then there is in America for unskilled jobs. But those that do come, we try to help and find a place either in the skilled profession or training or push them to go to college, and many of them are doing so. And that makes me very, very happy.

NASH: Well, thank you very much Mr. Pesca.

