

NPS-7/TRUPIA

NPS-7

DICK (DIEGO) TRUPIA

BIRTH DATE:

INTERVIEW DATE: 8/27/1973

RUNNING TIME: 32:00

INTERVIEWER: MARGO NASH

RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW LOCATION: UNKNOWN

TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: CHARLENE KEYLOR, 5/1979

TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: PETER HOM, 1/1995

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: DAVID H. CASSELLS, 3/1995

ITALY, 1913

AGE AT IMMIGRATION: 2

PASSAGE ON: *RED ITALIA*

U.S. RESIDENCE: NYC LOWER EAST SIDE

NASH: ...Baenoff Flower Shop, and I am sitting with Mr. Dick Trupia who is the owner of Barndorfs. He started, how many years ago?

TRUPIA: Fifty years ago.

NASH: He started fifty years ago as a helper and today he is the owner of the store. We are going to talk about Mr. Trupia's earliest memories as an immigrant and what it was like adjusting to life in the United States as a young boy and later as a young man. Today is August 27, 1973. Mr. Trupia, what year did you and your family first come to this country?

TRUPIA: We arrived in June, 1913, in New York, Ellis Island.

NASH: And what made your parents come?

TRUPIA: Well, of course, it was very hard living then and my

father heard of the opportunities in America, that he could
work, so we came here on the quota basis and he took me along,
of course, and my mother, and we arrived here June, 1913.

NASH: Did you have any family here before you came?

TRUPIA: No. Oh, just on my mother's side. She had a brother.
No children on his side, but he already had been here a
couple of years before us, so they met us at the boat.

NASH: And tell me something about your trip. What was the name of the boat?

TRUPIA: The name of the boat was called the "Reddei Italia."
That means "King of Italy." It was a small boat compared to the
ocean liners of today and it took us twenty-one days to come
across.

NASH: What year was that?

TRUPIA: 1913 and, of course, we had cows and goats and sheep on board
which served as the food and being there were a lot of mothers
nursing babies and some babies were born on the ship, they used
the cow and the goat and the sheep for milk purposes. A lot of
people got seasick and therefore, the babies were being nursed by
their mothers, the babies got sick also.

NASH: You mentioned that they boiled the milk.

TRUPIA: Well, of course, there was no pasteurization then.

NASH: Who boiled it?

TRUPIA: The stewards.

NASH: Oh, they would take it to the kitchen.

TRUPIA: They would take it to the kitchen and boil the milk.

NASH: And then conditions were not too bad on the ship?

TRUPIA: No, conditions were not too bad. The food, I mean my mother and father told me the food wasn't too bad. It was eatable. And they vaccinated all the babies. I mean they vaccinated everybody, mothers, fathers, and the babies, mostly on the top of the knee, right about here on this leg, to prevent other diseases.

NASH: When did they do that, on the ship?

TRUPIA: On the ship or point of embarkation. This, I don't remember. My father didn't seem to tell me that part. And we were met by my aunt and uncle at the Immigration because somebody had to sponsor, and we lived with

them for several weeks until my father was employed, and this is 1913.

NASH: Did your parents tell you anything about your experience at
 Ellis Island? How long did they actually stay there?

TRUPIA: I really don't know. They never spoke about it. I don't think,
whatever the requirement was, I don't think we had much trouble there because
we were met by my aunt and uncle and they sort of sponsored us and I don't
think we had any difficulty at all. I don't remember any difficulty and my
father never spoke about any difficulty so I wouldn't consider that at all.
We then went to where my aunt and uncle lived. We lived with them. They
lived on Allen and Rivington, in the Lower East Side, which was a ghetto of
various nationalities. And we got along very nicely. Of course, we didn't
didn't have no modern conveniences. We had no bathroom, we had no radio and
no TV, but we got along great.

NASH: You say you had a bathroom in the hall?

TRUPIA: Bathroom in the hall, right.

NASH: Do you remember what it was like to share a bathroom in the hall with
 everyone?

TRUPIA: Yes, well I am talking about six or seven families now.

NASH: Did you ever have arguments over using the bathroom?

TRUPIA: No, no, no, no. And it was kept clean. I think

everybody took turns keeping it clean. It was wooden, was a wooden seat, you know. Of course, the babies like myself, we had potties, so to speak, and to take a bath they put us in the-- my mother used to bathe us in the washtub, these old, what they used to call agate washtubs, yes, I think they were agate, and you had no Camay then, just the regular octagon soap. So, of course, as I talk to you about it and I have talked to other people about it, everything seems to come to a clearer picture. Now, my father started to work, and he was working with a cement concrete worker and made sidewalks. At that time New York City was being developed and they were developing the Bronx first and my father's contractor had the contract to make the sidewalks on University Avenue, Jerome Avenue, and Grand Concourse.

NASH: At that time, they had no sidewalks?

TRUPIA: No sidewalks. They put sidewalks in so people could buy lots and so forth and so on. One incident I remember my father telling me, that he was standing on a corner with several of his friends and his brother-in-law, which is my uncle, and a little Jewish man come along--this about two or three weeks after they landed in Riverton and Allen--and in his Jewish accent and as pleasant as he was, my father didn't know whether he was Jewish, Polish, it didn't come across his mind his nationality at that time. And this gentleman was talking and he said, "Mister" and he said, "Mister", and

he was referring to all the men at that time, and he said, "Would you like to buy some lots?" So, of course, my father didn't know the meaning of the word lots and couldn't care less. So my uncle had been here prior year before, he understood the word, so he said, "Where are the lots located?" He said, "In the Bronx." Now the Bronx at that time could have been California. Of course, the subway didn't go very far and he hadn't started to work yet so he didn't know where the Bronx was. And he wanted to buy lots for ten dollars a lot. Of course, ten dollars in them days was like ten thousand today. My father didn't have ten dollars, much less ten cents. So we managed though. My mother took in sewing.

NASH: Did he buy the lot?

TRUPIA: No. With what? My mother started working by sewing buttons on men's trousers for suspenders. Of course, they had no belts and these had suspenders.

NASH: Did she do that at home?

TRUPIA: At home. At home, they called it "home work." I think she got a nickel a pair, a nickel a pair of pants. I don't know which, I don't remember that. And we managed. Of course, food was very reasonable in those days, and a lot of food here. And so we managed. We had milk, we could buy a can of milk for a nickel which was very good. Then I think my middle sister was born downtown and we moved.

NASH: Was she born at home or in a hospital?

TRUPIA: No, my sister was born at home. Both of my sisters were born at home.

NASH: Who helped? Did your mother have a midwife?

TRUPIA: Midwife and a doctor. Mostly midwives in them days. There was a lot in New York at that time, a lot in New York at that time.

NASH: Do you know how they got the midwife, how they arranged to get them?

TRUPIA: I couldn't answer you. I couldn't answer you. Then we moved to 29th Street. I think it was 205 East 29th Street on the fifth floor. No elevators. And I grew up on 29th Street and I went to school at PS 116 on East 32nd Street. That was a sort of an elementary school only to the sixth grade.

NASH: Did your parents become citizens?

TRUPIA: I'll come to that. You see, at that time you had to wait. You had to wait I think five or seven years, as the case maybe, and he didn't become a citizen right away. He didn't become a citizen until later on in years.

NASH: You were saying that the school you went to.

TRUPIA: The school I went to was PS 116 on East 32nd Street. That was up to the sixth grade, and then I was promoted to the eighth grade, which was a junior high school on East 20th Street called Windgate Junior High School. And my sister, in due course, followed. Of course, they went to a girl's high school. I don't know which one. They went to the same elementary school, but I don't know what high school they went to. Around the time I was around eight years old my mother became very ill. This was March of 1919 when the war was over in Europe and my mother was about seven months pregnant with the fourth child, and at that time the soldiers were bringing a dreaded disease called Spanish Influenza and she contracted that disease. Of course, no antibiotics and being that she was already weak by her pregnancy, she couldn't fight both things, so she had a miscarriage in the home and she died at the same time. Of course, this was a great blow to all of us. I mean my younger sister who happened to be only two, she never knew her. And I knew my mother. Of course, the more I talk about her, the more I know her. Now we are alone, we have no mother. My father, well, my father had to work. He sent us to Saint Joseph's Camp, Saint Joseph's Home, not a camp.

NASH: I live on the same street with Saint Joseph' Church.

TRUPIA: Where?

NASH: On 87th Street.

TRUPIA: Oh yes. And we stayed there from April until starting school in September, but it proved a little too much money for my father to keep up because it was kind of costly as far as his income was concerned. And it was very nice up there. They treated us very nice. We were getting an education even though it was summertime. We still were going to school and we were very much adjusted to that kind of life. But we had to come out because my father could not afford it. So anyhow, we came back, and we moved from 205 to 216 East 29th Street and there we stayed until I was fifteen years old. This is a street consisting of pushcarts, both in the street and off the buildings. On Saturdays, I used to work for the banana man, had a banana pushcart. I worked from six o'clock in the morning to twelve o'clock at night, two dollars and a bag of bananas.

NASH: (Laughter) This was when you were how old?

TRUPIA: About nine or ten years old. My father had a charge account with a grocery and a butcher and told them whatever the kids want, give them, and sandwiches, and I will reimburse you, which he did, my father being a very honorable man. After that, I got a job with the grocer where my father had the account. She had a grocery store and a butcher store, plus two, four, six pushcarts on the street. I used to work for her after school and Saturday. I got an income of maybe five or six dollars a week plus all the food I wanted, plus on Saturday, she fed all her help with meat, wine, food, fruit anything you wanted was on the table for you to take. She was a very

good woman and I still today talk about her to myself, what a good woman she was to her employees. She was a good woman. And her husband died and she sold one of the businesses because her children were all married and she couldn't run them all by herself, and we had moved then. We had moved since then. Now, also we were older boys, say from ten, twelve, thirteen, on Saturday night about twelve o'clock, according to the laws in the city of New York, the pushcarts could no remain in the street over Sunday, so the pushcart people hired a horse stable on 30th Street for such amount, I don't know what the price was, and they gave us a dollar to bring the pushcarts to the horse stable over the weekend.

NASH: Where was the horse stable?

TRUPIA: On 30th Street, just a block and a half away. Also, we were very fortunate, we middle-aged boys that we were at the time, we used to help them clean the sidewalks, wash down the sidewalk. This was part of the sanitation code. Then we used to have a group of boys, five, six boys, started at one end of Second Avenue, we were on Third Avenue, and we used to put our hands along the curb where the sidewalk ends and the curb on the street, there is a curb there and during the course of the day people used to drop coins, giving change, a nickel, just wasted away, didn't make no difference. Well, we used to collect anywhere from ten to twenty-five dollars in coins between us. Fantastic, half-dollars, quarters, pennies.

NASH: Where was the money?

TRUPIA: In the curb of the street, where the street and the sidewalk met like this, see. This curb here. Fantastic. You never knew how much money was there.

NASH: It might still be there, right?

TRUPIA: Yes, it might still be there. Well, the pushcarts have moved since. My father married when I was the age of fifteen. My middle sister was thirteen and my youngest sister was eleven. Married a nice woman. Happened to be a woman from not quite the same town where we come from, near the same town. Of course, it was recommended. Very nice woman. She didn't have no children with my father, but she was a good woman. She took care of us, kept us clean and she lived with my father for a good forty years. And of course, we all grew up, we all married. And from the point after my father married, we moved to 44th in the Kip's Bay area. We were getting rich by degrees. Then one of my sisters married and we moved to 81st Street.

NASH: 81st and where?

TRUPIA: Between Second and Third Avenue. This was a beautiful street, cosmopolitan. I think six different nationalities and one was cleaner than the other, fantastic. Even the garbage cans didn't

smell! At that time, I think the people took pride. There was a lot of pride. You would leave your door open, "Hey, lady, your door is open." He isn't going to kill you. Your door is open, so. We moved to 81st Street and we had a nice Italian neighbor. He was in the coal and ice business. She had several children. She had about eight or nine children, in fact and you could hardly hear a whisper. Never an argument with those eight kids. Alright, "he hit me," but that was about all, but no arguments. And we stayed on 81st Street until I married and then my father, no, I moved to Astoria when I married. I married in 1937, an American girl of Italian parents, both mother and father born here. I started to work in the flower business at the age of thirteen as an errand boy (Pause) Easter. And the employer, Henry Durks, at the time asked me if I wanted to work steady and I said I would, but I have to speak to my mother and father first. This was my step-mother, but I called her mother and got paid fifty cents an hour. I worked three hours a day and I worked Saturdays and Sundays. About two years later, I met a young lady--now I am speaking about sixteen years old--I met a young lady who lived around the corner from where I was on 44th Street and she suggested I should go to night school, which I did. And I took up bookkeeping, I took stenography, I took typing and I took English, of course--that comes along with it, and I liked the course, I enjoyed the course and I learned a lot. I went about two years and I graduated from the--first I went to high school for two years and then I went to business school for

two years.

NASH: What high school did you go to?

TRUPIA: Commercial.

NASH: Commercial Trade?

TRUPIA: Commercial Trade. And then I went to Merchants and Bankers Business School on East 42nd Street for two years. Then, of course, we have that nasty word, "depression," and that stopped me from continuing my education because I had to support the family. So here we are now, I am making fifty cents an hour and I am supporting four people. Of course, my father had a little money saved.

NASH: Your father wasn't working? He lost his job during the Depression?

TRUPIA: No, the Depression, right. So anyhow, this is the Depression I am talking about now, about '27, '28, '29. In the interim of this, I saw an ad--I wanted to get out of the delivery boy business, I could see that was getting nowhere--so somebody told me about a job of office and mail clerk in a plumbing concern. So I went up there, I was interviewed by the treasurer, I think, at that time and he gave me the job. I worked there nine months and everybody seemed to like me and I liked everybody. The job was very nice. I got promoted both in position and I got promoted in both salary. About six

months later after I was employed there, the same treasurer that interviewed me asked what education I had and I told him, and he said to me, "Would you like to go to Peter Cooper Union?" I said, "Well, it sounds very nice, but for what reason?" Well, he said, "I want you to become an engineer because we can use young people." I said, "Well, that is very nice." I said, "Let me think it over." In the meantime, the florist shop called me back again, the manager called me back, and asked me if I wanted to come back, but at a higher degree in salary and a job as a salesman. I said, "Alright, I'll think about it." So after the New Years of that next year, I don't remember the year, I went back to the flower business. And I'm still in the flower business. My former employer was retiring and I bought his half of the business. Now I am a partner in this concern called "A. Warendolf." About ten years later, I bought my partner out and I became sole owner. In the meantime, my wife bore two children, a boy and a girl, and the boy married. He has a nice wife and he has four children. And my daughter has two children. So now we have six grandchildren.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

NASH: I wanted to ask you about what you remember of the Depression.

TRUPIA: Well, the Depression, of course, there was a lot of people out of work and my father wouldn't take, not that he was proud or we were all hungry, but we were not to that degree of hungry. My father went down, I think it was around Thanksgiving time, and they went in the streets and they asked if one of them wanted a basket of fruit and the goodies to go to the Armory, which we did. My father went to the Armory. At the same time, he asked the Armory people if he could get a job, and he came in on Monday morning for a job and they paid him five dollars a day, that's a speak up. So I say if you want to work, you work. If you want to work, you can work. Now to get back to the flower business, of course, it is touch and go. Being a small businessman, it is difficult and, of course, today with high taxes and high this and this, it is very hard to make a living, but I manage, manage to keep the wolf from the door. I married two children, I have a home and wouldn't say I am a rich man. I am not poor, either, but I say that maybe I am fortunate and I thank the good Lord for my good health and my good fortunate which I am grateful from the start. But this I did all on my own. I had no help from anybody and outside of financial help or friendship help, which I had. After all, so many years in business, you do meet a lot of people and I have met a lot of people, both male and female, who have helped me, not financially, helped me to get started by give me, extended credit, by being nice, and this is all part of it. About three or four years ago, I happened to discuss this with my wife and I wanted to try something else because I was getting close to a retirement age and I didn't want to retire working for someone in the flower business because I wanted to get away from the flower business. So I wanted to try the hotel, motel management and I figured what experience I had as managing, as buying and selling, and

merchandising, I could do a nice job in the hotel business. So I took a corresponding course with a school in Portland, Oregon. This was all by mail, this was all done by mail. You read, you send back your exam papers in, they mark you, and then they send it back to you. This happens every month and they send back the papers and the letters of encouragement to keep on going and so forth and so on. January, three years ago, I happened to meet a fellow in the hotel I knew for such a long time and he asked me to come to a meeting, which I did. Being I was learning the hotel, motel business, I thought this meeting would be very beneficial to me. I went and it was a very nice evening. I met the master of the school who teaches here in New York. So I took that course. It cost forty dollars for twelve weeks, including books and two nights a week. And it was very nice. It was very brushing. What I learned from the corresponding course, I put the two together and it was very more interesting because you have someone teaching you by voice and on a blackboard and I could picture what I was learning in the books at the same time, see? So I took that course and this gentleman who I met, he happened to be the engineer in this particular hotel called the "Statler Hilton." And we talked and we had a glass of beer and coffee and we discussed the school. And about a month later after I met him, he said to me, "Dick, would you like a job?" I said, "A job, what kind of job? He said, "It is just the manager in the Hotel Statler." I said, "No, they wouldn't give me a job." He said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I'm telling you." I said, "Well, that sounds very interesting." This was in December, so a week before Christmas I called for an interview with a Mr. Jack McConnen who is the Executive Assistant Manager, and we met in his office and gave him my name and my experience in the flower business, merchandising and stuff

like that, and he said, "Well, it sound very nice." He said, "Let's see what upstairs," meaning the management upstairs. At that time I met a Mr. Arshoff who was the manager of the hotel and a Mr. McNamara who was the general manager, resident manager of the hotel, and they liked my talk, they like my experience, and they said, "Okay, we'll let you know." About two days later I get a call, a week before Christmas, about two days after my interview, Mr. McConnen called me on the telephone, He said, "Do you want to start January 1st?" I said, "Yes, that will be very nice." So I started. Now, of course, I still have my flower business and this is my problem. Of course, I had a good assistant, and the hours that they gave me in the hotel were very nice. It was eight to four in the afternoon, which suited me perfect. I got up at five o'clock in the morning and did my buying, got the help started, got here in the hotel about a quarter to eight and did my duties here. I learned a lot. I learned more about people than I did before because before I learned about people over the telephone, but when you are in the hotel business, it is a different kind of feeling. Well, selling the rooms, like selling flowers; the charges are the same, the taxes are the same, but, of course, people always, being an assistant manager to me is like a glorified office boy. They need a light bulb, they need a towel, or this, this or this, that. Instead of calling to each department--they have a list of telephones--they call the assistant manager. This proved very aggravating. I worked as assistant manager for three months. I worked January, February, and March. And in the middle of March the hotels in New York were having a little recession and they were laying people off. Of course, me being on the bottom of the totem pole, I was laid off first. Well, I was none too sorry, nor was I happy about it because I was beginning to enjoy it and in a way I was happy

because Easter was a couple a weeks away and I had Easter on my mind in the flower business. I was laid off with the due respect from Mr. Arshoff that any time I needed any assistance, he would gladly give me that. So a year passed by and my leases were being expired, where my premises and I didn't want to work anymore in the flower business because I had had enough, being fifty years, I had enough. So I spread the word around that my lease expires in October, this is '70, October, '70, and that I would be looking for another job as a manager or whatever the case may be. That year my wife and I went to Italy. We went to Rome, Venice, Naples, Capri, Florence, and I wanted to go back to my hometown where I was born, but I didn't have the time, and they wanted too much money to fly there for one day and back. So I let it go until next time. We were in Italy about twenty days and, of course, being of Italian heritage, I lost some of my Italian, but I met Elizabeth Wermer and she happened to be very linguist. She taught me a lot of Italian. Of course, as I talked, the more I recollected how to speak it. And I got along very well, very well in Italy. Come back to New York, that was November, and my lease was expiring, my lease was expiring in '71. In January of '71, I met a Mr. Fotterman, whom I have known for a long time, in a luncheonette and he asked me if I wanted to buy his place, meaning the flower shop in the Statler Hilton Hotel. And I said, "Well, that sounds interesting." He said, "Well, it should be good for you because you know the caterers, you know the hotel, and you have lots of friends in the hotel. This should be very good for you." Well, in my mind, what I said before, I didn't want to stay in the flower business, but, however, this was a good opportunity for me because this gave me a better asset for my equity in case I wanted to retire in two, three years. I had something more equitable to

sell than my previous place. So we negotiated and I bought this place and I took ownership April 1 of 1971. I borrowed money from the bank, I took a mortgage on my house and here I am. The flower business in the Statler Hilton Hotel is a different concept of business because you are dealing with caterers, you are dealing with people, large weddings, you are dealing with people, all calibers. We have convention and we have, in the hotel here, men, women, school girls, school boys. I mean we have all kinds of people and this is a broader scope of humanity and you have deal with it. Of course, some are nice, some are bad, some are indifferent, but you learn to cope with it. Now this is what? This is August '73. this is two years and five months I am here. I have met more people, nice people. My lease expires '74, June '74 and probably the next couple of months we are going to negotiate a new lease. And in the meantime, I have a couple of other things on the fire, which is coming up to picture. I should know better in another couple of years. Now I owe a lot to the flower business. It was a lot of hard work and I still work hard. I work seven days a week. I put in ten to twelve hours a day. Of course, my wife doesn't like the idea, but I have to do it. Of course, right now we have this recession, call it what you may. We small businessmen are going through hell. Price is increasing but our salaries are not increasing and the taxes are this and this and this and that, and before you know, we go home without any money. I am not crying. I am grateful that I have this business, but the circumstances as it was today and fifty years ago-- fifty years ago we had no cash register, taxes started at twenty-five thousand a year. That is quite a difference. Then I bought a pail of milk, for a nickel, that same milk, a quart, today cost thirty-two cents. The cow still munches on the same grass. Right? That's it. Here I

am. I thank the good Lord for my good health and my good fortune. I hope that he continues to shower me with His grace. I am a young man. As a matter of fact, my birthday is Friday. I will be sixty-two years old, thank the good Lord. And I feel good, I feel well, and I hope I can stay on this earth a long, long time because life is beautiful.

NASH: Thank you very much, Mr Trupia.