April 1978

Mary Italiano oral history interview by Gary Mormino, April 20, 1978

Mary Italiano (Interviewee)

Gary Ross Mormino (Interviewer)

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/flstud_oh

Part of the American Studies Commons, and the Community-based Research Commons

Scholar Commons Citation

http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/flstud_oh/7

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Digital Collection - Florida Studies Center at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Collection - Florida Studies Center Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
Gary Mormino: My name is Gary Mormino, and today it's my pleasure to be talking to Mary Italiano in her lovely home on Oakeller Avenue in Tampa [Florida] near Gandy Boulevard. Mrs. Italiano, could you tell me something about your family's background? What did the Italianos do in the old country?

Mary Italiano: Well, I can't tell you too much about the Italianos anymore. I know they came here from—they came over from Santo Stefano, and I think they all came from there. But as far as I can tell you—I never, you know, had the—I've asked him, my grandfather who was—there were three brothers. There was Calogio Pitisci, Luigi Pitisci, and Salvatori Pitisci.

GM: How do you spell Pitisci?

MI: P-i-t-i-s-c-i, Pitisci.

GM: That was your maiden name, then, Pitisci?

MI: That was my maiden name, uh-huh.

GM: Tell me about the Pitiscis.

MI: Huh?

GM: Tell me about them.

MI: Yeah. Well, I'll tell you my grandfather from—when they left Sicily, they went to—way out there where they have mosaic, whatever you call it. They went out there to work, and it was near—what's the name of that side of the country?
GM: Midwest, you mean?

MI: Way down there. Well, it was near—I can't remember the name of that—

GM: Arizona?

MI: No, no, no, this is in Italy.

GM: Oh, uh-huh.

MI: In Italy. In Italy, over there where they worked there with the mosaic, you know.

GM: Mosaic?

MI: Uh-huh.

GM: Oh, you mean mosaic tiles?

MI: Mosaic. Yeah, right. All that stuff there. And they were there for—then they came—when they came over to the United States, why—

GM: Yeah. That's what he did in the old country, he worked in tiles?

MI: In tiles, stuff like that.

GM: Yeah.

MI: And as far as my grandfather, I know one of the brothers—the other one I couldn't tell you too much [about], 'cause he's been dead a long time. They were very interesting fellows. They said as I—that the Pitisci brothers were almost, you know, one of the family. The older one that came down here, they—because I know McKay, Phoebe McKay, had a write-up about him in the editorial one day about them. You know about the Pitisci brothers—

GM: Yeah.

MI: —and what they did, and they married Tampa girls; they all married Tampa girls. They have a slew of children. They're all grownups now, you know, and everything.

GM: Right.

MI: But, um—

GM: Why did they come to America?
MI: Well, I don't know. I have no idea why they came down here. But I guess over there, there wasn't—nothing doing over there. And you know, they were from Sicily, from Santo Stefano.

GM: Right.

MI: So they all left there, and they went—I wish I could remember the name of it.

GM: Is it in Italy, Mary?

MI: Yeah, in Italy. Yeah.

GM: What did they do there in Italy?

MI: Well, that's what they went, with this mosaic that I was talking about.

GM: Would Florence, or—

MI: Florence. Right near there somewhere. I can't remember where it was. But anyhow, they were there a long time, and then they came down here and they married here.

GM: Why did they come to Tampa? Do you know?

MI: Yeah.

GM: Why did they come to Tampa?

MI: Well, I don't know. Most everybody came to Tampa from New York, then they came to Tampa. A lot of them went to New Orleans. But my grandfather never went. They didn't go to New Orleans, but they came direct, I guess, from over there to here. And they were all in business here. My grandfather used to have a—

GM: What did they do in Tampa? I mean, once they settled here?

MI: Yeah, he in the—my grandfather had a grocery store and a fruit stand, one of the best fruit stands in Tampa.

GM: Where was that?

MI: That was on the corner of Seventh Avenue and Seventeenth Street.

GM: So, right about where the Italian Club is today?

MI: Yeah, about a block this way of the Italian Club, and of course we used to love to go there, because on Saturday night we’d all go there to, you know, be with Grandpa and all
that. And he had a little machine that would roast peanuts and chestnuts. And we used to have a big time there. We enjoyed going there.

GM: Yeah.

MI: And—

GM: Now, if he was in the tile business in Italy, why did he come here and go in the fruit business?

MI: I don't know. I don't know why he went to fruit business here. I don't know. I don't think he had his own business, I think he just worked out there. But actually, I don't think he had a business over there. When they came down here, none of them had anything from the old country, you know. And the other brother—now, the other two brothers I don't know. They've been dead for so long that I don't remember what the other two did.

GM: Yeah. Where did they live in Ybor City? Did they live—

MI: All right, my grand—yeah, they lived at—well, see, my grandfather lived on Eighth Avenue between Seventeenth [Street] and Eighteenth Street.


MI: Right. Right at the corner.

GM: Right.

MI: That's where I tell you about; we used to go there all the time.

GM: Yeah.

MI: That was the little—that was our hangout, you know?

GM: Paul Pizzo, uh-huh.

MI: Paul Pizzo today. His grandfather was there. His name was Pizzalata, si.

GM: Right.

MI: And we had a good time. The Bono kids, you know, used to go from one place to the other. I was one of the oldest. Now, as far as the Italian Club, you have all the write up about that, haven't you?

GM: Yeah. Tell me something: Now, what did your father do? Like, when was your father born?
MI: My daddy was born [1884]—my daddy, when he died, he was—let's see, he was seventy-nine years old.

GM: What year was that?

MI: That was about sixteen, seventeen years ago [1963].

GM: Okay.

MI: Passed away.

GM: Right.

MI: And Daddy could have—

GM: He was born in the United States, your father?

MI: Yeah. Yeah, my father was. And they all were born here. My mother—no, my mother wasn't born here; she was born in Italy. But she came down here to visit. She had a sister who was down here, got married in Tampa. So, she came to visit her; a cousin was Maria Castiliano. And so then while she was here, she met my father and they got married, you know.

GM: What was her maiden name?

MI: Her name was Pitisci. They were cousins.

GM: Oh.

MI: They were cousins, second cousins.

GM: Yeah, right.

MI: And so—

GM: Did she ever go back?

MI: Never went back.

GM: She just stayed here in America?

MI: Oh, yes. She was married, and it just about broke her heart because she wanted to go back. And we never realized—she has about six in the family, and we never realized that she wanted to go back. But you know how you do? So think about it, but I know she used to pray one day to go back. Then we realized that we should let her go, you know. Then it was too late, 'cause she had heart trouble and there was no way that she could.
GM: Must not have been much of a courtship, huh?

MI: No, it wasn't. It was so fast, I'll tell you.

GM: Did she ever tell you whether she came specifically to meet someone to marry?

MI: No, no. No, no, she was young. She came to—I would say she must have been not more than fifteen or sixteen years old. She married. She just came to visit and was gonna go back to Italy. She never went back. Now, my aunt went back, but she stayed with my father. But she—

GM: What did your mother's family do in the old country?

MI: In the old country? I don't know. They had their own land. They had—I don't know, they had an olive, uh—what do you call it? Grove? And then they had another grove that would grow all kind of vegetables and stuff.

GM: Yeah. Have you ever been back to Santo Stefano?

MI: Who?

GM: You.

MI: Yes, oh yes. I was there in sixty-nine [1969]; I went again in seventy-two [1972].

GM: What'd you think of it?

MI: Oh, I loved it. You have no idea. When I got there, I didn't—I knew the name Pitisci and Cicarello, so I said, “My heaven, what am I gonna do?” I had the address, but I had never met them. So, when I got there, I told them, I said, "Well—" I went to—and I was staying in Palermo at Villa (inaudible) restaurant, which is a beautiful—I mean hotel, beautiful hotel out on the Bay of Naples. And so, when I said, "Well, I've got to go to Santo Stefano, but I don't have the address. All I have is the name." Luckily enough, when we get to Santo Stefano, the cab driver said (inaudible). Who do we meet, but the mailman. So, he stops, and I said, "Do you know where the Pitisci family is?" He said, "Oh, yeah, that house right over there."

GM: (laughs)

MI: And so, when we got there, the cab stopped. And they all came out in the windows, came out and kept saying, “American, American, American”—I mean, from the States. So when they came out, I said, "Well—" All around like you see in the movies, you know, all around the car. They came over, and I said, "I'm Maria Antonio’s daughter." You have never heard such screaming and carrying on, hugging and crying and kissing. Well, that day was a holiday. Nobody worked that day.
GM: (laughs)

MI: They went to get dressed. This brother was on this side and the other this side. And we had a holiday. So I just stayed two days. Now, when I went back in seventy-nine [1979]—seventy-two [1972]—I stayed about a week. Santo Stefano is a lovely little town, it's small; and while I was there they had the feast of Santa Rosalia, which is a big, big holiday there. And everybody, you know—lot of people walked many miles with the saint. My cousin was one of the one of the leaders of that feast. It took them almost three hours to get where we—we walked to the place where we would have this big picnic there.

GM: Where is it held?

MI: In Santo Stefano.

GM: I mean, but do you know where?

MI: Yeah. The name of the place—they call—what'd they call that place? Oh, I can't think. I have written it down before you came. But anyways, they have a beautiful church there. You know, small church. And you could see the people coming, walking way up the mountains, walking this way. And so, everybody came—


MI: And everybody had brought their own food. And there were crowds, just the size because that was a big holiday. And so I enjoyed it a lot, and then, you know—of course, then they'd bring the [statue of the] patroness, which is Santa Rosalia. And then they'd bring her all over the streets and everybody of course comes out and pins money on Santa Rosalia.

GM: Right.

MI: And that was a big thrill for me, 'cause I had never seen that. Many years ago they used to have it down here, but they don't do it anymore. They used to have that Santa Rosalia feast here, at the little church in Ybor City on Eighth Avenue.

GM: Well, what did people ask you about Tampa there? What kind of questions did they have?

MI: Well, they all wanted to come to Tampa. You know, they thought money grew on the trees here. They all want to come to Tampa. My cousin kept telling me, “Please, Mary, send for me, send for me.” But there's so many of them, you know. They all wanted to come to the United States. But everybody—you feel really like—if you notice, mostly everybody from here [was] born in Santo Stefano, more than Alessandria della Rocca.
Some of them are from there, too, but mostly Santo Stefano. It’s a pretty town, small, very pretty. The church is lovely. So, I enjoyed my week there the second time.

GM: Right, right. Now, when were you born, if I may ask you?

MI: I was born in 1903.

GM: Nineteen aught-three, uh-huh. Where were you born?

MI: Here in Tampa.

GM: Yeah. Were you born in a home?

MI: Yes, I think I was. Yes, it was.

GM: That would've been on Eighth Avenue and Seventeenth Street?

MI: Yes, it would be there. And of course, then I—you know, I was raised there. Then, of course, I was married at Sacred Heart Church in town.

GM: Right.

MI: And I was baptized there.

GM: Tell me about your first memories of what Ybor City was like as a young girl.

MI: Well, when I was a young girl, you—there was no way to describe what it was then. Seventh Avenue was not paved. It was all sand. And the sidewalks were made of boards, you know. To see the road today, how beautiful it is, but then. And everybody—what they used to do then, they would—our holiday—our pastime was then was on Saturday night. We used to go—everybody used to go up Seventh Avenue to see those people walking up and down, up and down. That was there—there, you know. So, I think that we were happy. I don't know if we were happier then. I guess today we got too much trouble going on, but then I think it was really lovely. And, like I say now—

GM: Where did you go to school?

MI: I went to school—they have the Academy on Eleventh Avenue. I went there, to a Catholic school.

GM: In front of the church? In front of the church there?

MI: Yeah, right in front of the church, right there.

GM: Right.
MI: And that was pretty. It was beautiful there. It was small, it had beautiful trees, and [was] not like it is today.

GM: What'd your father think of you getting an education?

MI: Well, they—you know, then it wasn't like today. Now, I know I wanted to—Dr. Matori at the time, who passed away quite a bit back, he wanted me to—I used to work for him at the office, and he wanted me to take nursing, you know. Of course, that was out of the question for a single girl to think of, nothing like that. So, I went to school not till—I think I went as far as maybe the fourth or fifth grade, and then they got a professor for me, Professor Webber, who is part—he must've been from the Bahamas; he was dark. Professor Webber, he'd come three times a week and give me lessons at home, 'cause at that time we weren't permitted to go out. We were too old to be out in the streets.

GM: Why didn't you stay in school?

MI: 'Cause my father thought I was too old. I couldn't be out in the streets.

GM: Right.

MI: They were—you know, that's a no-no. So, they got this man, who was a lovely person. Professor Webber was very, very nice, and he came two or three times a week. Gave me lessons, you know. But I didn't ever graduate, because like I say, I couldn't go back. I went as high as I could. I would've loved to have gone to college, but at that time it was not like today, you know.

GM: Did you get a job?

MI: Yeah. I worked at—my first job, I worked for Dr. Klingsdale. He was a dentist on Nineteenth Street and Seventh Avenue, right upstairs there. I worked for Dr. Klingsdale till I met my husband.

GM: Did you ever think about working in a cigar factory?

MI: No, no.

GM: Why not?

MI: Well, I don't know. I never did, because like I say, when I was very young, I was married. I was just not quite seventeen.

GM: Right. Do you remember the Ybor City fire—was it 1912?

MI: Yeah, that was a big fire, my heavenly days.

GM: Tell me about it.
MI: They had a terrific—I thought the whole town, the whole Ybor City, was gonna go. Then they had a big one, too, in West Tampa, you know. I can't remember when that was exactly.

GM: Nineteen eighteen, 1919.

MI: That's when it was, around that time. But the one in Ybor City was—

GM: Do you remember specific incidents?

MI: No, not in—

GM: Now you’re—

MI: No, not that. We just were scared to death. With that thing, you never—they couldn't put it out.

GM: Was your home burned up?

MI: No, our home wasn't burnt up, but most of Ybor City was gone.

GM: Do you remember the 1910 cigar strike? It would've been—

MI: Yes. Well, that strike was supposed to last a couple of weeks, and it lasted seven months. They had the—the central—the cigar—what do you call it? They had their own building there on Seventh Avenue.

GM: Labor Temple?

MI: Yes, right, between Sixteenth and Seventeenth Street. And that strike really about cleaned everybody up, because it was—like I say, it was supposed to last only a week or two, and it went on and on and on. I'm pretty sure it lasted seven months.

GM: What did you think of it as a little girl?

MI: What?

GM: What were your reactions as a little girl witnessing the strike?

MI: Oh, I thought it was wonderful. Isn't that awful? (laughs) But they had parades. We had marches up and down, and they—it's funny. We used to enjoy—we used to have our little umbrellas with the names of the cigar factory that was supposed to be sponsoring it. But in all, I remember that very, very well, and like I say, everybody said, “Oh, it'll be over in no time.” And a lot of the businessmen—you know, you get these dairies, these big wholesale [stores] that deliver a load of food to these dairies. My God, it's five, six
hundred dollars each load. So, when you figure it'll be over in two weeks, before you
know it, a lot of places went bankrupt.

GM: Yeah. What did your father think of the strike?

MI: Huh?

GM: Your father?

MI: My daddy, he—when we first came here, young, he was a cigar maker. That's what
he was too, see. But then after all that, then he bought his own business.

GM: Does he ever tell you why he left the cigar work?

MI: Well, because it was so bad. They wouldn't pay nothing. If you made $14, $15 and
$12, you made a lot. Some of these strippers were making only about four or five dollars
a week. So, my daddy was a pretty good cigar maker. They used to roll it by hand then.
And my father was one of the better cigar makers here. But after a while—after that, he
drove the—he worked at the grocery store at the corner of Eighth Avenue and
Seventeenth Street. Now, my uncle had a saloon across the street. His name was
Francesco Puglise.

GM: How do you spell that?

MI: P-u-g-l-i-s-e. Francesco. And he was really—he was a man that—all these farmer
(inaudible)—you know, the crackers, we called them.

GM: Right.

MI: They would come with their wares every Saturday morning and every Monday
morning. And they would all go over to my uncle's bar at that corner, the big bar down on
that corner. And they would all go there and sell their wares. And you get eggs there, and
they were ten cents a dozen; the vegetables, almost give them away. And whenever there
[was] anybody in trouble, like they needed an interpreter, my uncle was the one that did
it. Took them to court, you know, and do for them. He was very well liked there. He was
—like I say, he was one of the first chief of police in Tampa. That was my uncle.

GM: Right.

MI: My godfather. But he was a wonderful person.

GM: Well, did you ever work in your father's store, the grocery store?

MI: Yeah. Oh, [as a] kid, yeah. We did. I worked there.

GM: Who were most of the patrons, customers?
MI: Well, well like the (inaudible) who worked right across from us, the Ferlitas, the Castilianos.

GM: Did Cubans or Spaniards?

MI: Oh, yeah. Oh yes, yes. There were a lot of Cubans here in Tampa. Mostly, they all lived in Ybor City. Ybor City was not like it is today.

GM: Sure.

MI: Ybor City was nice, many years ago.

GM: Right.

MI: Of course, most everybody was cigar makers with the cigar factory.

GM: Right. Now, did you learn Spanish growing up here?

MI: Yeah, I learned. I can talk all the three languages, you know.

GM: Right.

MI: As a matter of fact, I can read and write Italian and Spanish, too. My uncle (inaudible), he was third president of Italian Club. He was a schoolteacher, and all he taught us was the ABCs in Spanish and Italian. From there, we used to go twice a week at his house.

GM: Yeah.

MI: And yeah, I can write, sit down and write it, but maybe won't write the pure thing, you know.

GM: Sure.

MI: But my cousin understood me, anyhow.

GM: Right. Now, regarding the Italian Club, do you remember when the first Italian Club burned in 1914? It was across the street from the present Italian Club.

MI: Yes.

GM: Can you remember that?

MI: I don't remember that. What year was that?
GM: Nineteen-fourteen.

MI: Nineteen-fourteen, I should remember that. Yeah. I know that they had a golden anniversary, you know. Nineteen aught-eight to 1958.

GM: Nineteen-eighteen.

MI: What? 'Cause it was 1908, you know.

GM: Right. Do you remember them building the present Italian Club when they built that?

MI: Yeah. Yeah.

GM: What do you remember about that?

MI: Oh, I remember growing up we were all so excited, and we were all so thrilled. Most everybody that didn't work, they would go out there and stand around and watch the building go up. It was a beautiful club. And I don't—I remember having that go—and you know, then they used to have a—most every year they had a parade. And my cousin was—they had like United States and Italy, you know, and they had this parade like we do Gasparilla. And my cousin, who is—she died; Uncle Frank's daughter—would've defended America. They had these beautiful costumes on with American flags all wrapped around, and the other girl was—Mrs. Sharo was her name, Amy Sharo; she's dead too. And she was the representative of Italy. It was a lovely affair, I'll tell you. We used to have a lot of fun there.

GM: Did you spend much time at the Italian Club?

MI: Yeah.

GM: Tell me about some of the some of the evenings?

MI: Yeah, well, I belong to the (inaudible), you know—how you say it?—the women's auxiliary, as a matter of fact. And we used to have picnics, Italian Club picnics. We used to have it in—the picnics were held at Palmetto Beach\(^1\) at the time. They had these fireworks at nine o’clock at night. Oh, we had a big time. All kind of good things to eat; and they had a pavilion where they had the dance. And they had different contests for the people there—you know, there from the town.

GM: How many people would turn out for something like that?

MI: Oh, I'd say easy 500 people, maybe more. That place was big, and everybody went to the Italian Club picnic. And then we used to stay for the fireworks. They used to have the

---

\(^1\) Palmetto Beach is a neighborhood within the city limits of Tampa, Florida.
streetcars that would drive in the park, see and everybody around—we’d always go on the streetcars, ’cause nobody had cars then. And we used to sit there where the fireworks were going to be. And that was the end, you know.

GM: Right.

MI: And of course, like I say, my daughter Marian was one of the queens of the Italian Club. Marian Greco; she's Greco now, but she was Italiano.

GM: What kind of things would be at the Italian Club? What kind of things would you go to?

MI: What?

GM: At the club.

MI: At the club. Well—

GM: Like, as a woman, could you have gone there during the day and just walked in?

MI: Oh yes, of course. We didn't go out by ourselves; they wouldn't allow us. But, I mean it wouldn't be no hazard at all to go there in the daytime. They had all the beautiful theatres. They had operas, too, that came down. We used to get this Angelo Musco. I don't know if you remember—you would know about him.

GM: Musco?

MI: Angelo Musco. He was a comedian, one of the best. And he would go there, you know. In fact, we had picnics, we have the theatre, they have dances upstairs. The ballroom had the Mayflower Dance, and we all used to get together and make flowers to decorate our hall. Oh, we had something to do all the time then, at that time. Beautiful. Which I loved, you know.

GM: Right. Do you recall when the Broadway Theatre took it over? Oh, is it the Broadway? Yeah.

MI: Yeah, the Broadway Theatre. Yeah. Yes, I remember that, too, but I never did go back. After I got married, then we moved; West Tampa is where I lived, you see.

GM: Right.

MI: And we didn't go there a lot, but we were disappointed. They did get—they had to tear all that down. And we did have the operas there, you know and different operas would come. And then when they had to choose the—in the movie, they used to bring the operas here, different operas we’ve seen there, which was very, very nice.
GM: [Enrico] Caruso ever come?

MI: Who?

GM: Caruso?

MI: No, he didn't, but I'll tell you who came was (inaudible). He came. And (inaudible), he came. And (inaudible) came, too—and Pasquale (inaudible), he came.

GM: Right.

MI: And as a matter of fact, my husband and that group of Italians—the president there at the time, they brought him down here. And I had a picture I was gonna show you of the banquet that they had then, uptown at the Plaza Hotel.

GM: Yeah I'd like to see it.

MI: Yeah, it's a beautiful picture, and it has a million other people all the way around it.

GM: I’d love to see it.

MI: Yeah, I have it somewhere, but I think I loaned it to someone. I think my Aunt Venile has it, if I'm not mistaken. She wanted to see it.

GM: Right. How did you meet your husband?

MI: Well, I met him at the Italian Club picnic. (laughs)

GM: Is that right?

MI: That's where I met him. Like I say, I was—

GM: How old were you then?

MI: I was about not quite fifteen. I married him. Yeah, I met him at the picnic, and after that, well—he lived in West Tampa, see.

GM: Describe the courtship. What was the courtship like?

MI: Oh the courtship was something else then, 'cause you know, you don't go out. When I had to go out with my husband, my mother—we had to have escorts. We had to have two or three to follow us, which was awful. (laughs) If you even sat on the porch outside, you would have—somebody had to be there, my sister. If she had to go inside, then somebody had to come. Now, what could she—what could happen on the porch with the big lights going on? No, it was a beautiful courtship, and my husband and I—he was
beautiful, and he passed away. But I have beautiful memories. We were married thirty-three years.

GM: How old were you when you married?

MI: I was about fifteen.

GM: Fifteen, uh-huh.

MI: Not quite sixteen yet.

GM: Right.

MI: I had three lovely children, (inaudible), Marian Greco, and Antonietta Valenti.

GM: Now, what did your husband do?

MI: Well, he was in wholesale grocery business, feed. First he had a store over in West Tampa. Then, after Prohibition, they closed it and then they opened this place on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Nineteenth Street, which was in the name of Italiano-Figarotta. And then another strike came, too, and about cleaned us out. It did, too. Cigar strike—a bad one, too.

GM: Which one was that?

MI: Huh? Well, I imagine when it was, it must've been—I think it was the last one that we had. And that was the one that was supposed to last a little bit, too, but they—

GM: Nineteen twenty?

MI: Yeah, around that time. It was supposed to have lasted a little—just carried on and on and on.

(phone rings)

MI: Linda, get the phone. Huh?

GM: Could you describe that strike?

MI: Yeah, that strike was—just a second. You can't hear me. (phone continues ringing)

GM: You were gonna tell me about the 1920 strike, what you can remember.

MI: Yeah. Oh, heavenly days. We lost a lot of money in that strike. Of course, like I was telling you, they used to sell these big dairies, and if you take a load, like I said, 500, 600 dollars each load. So if you're gonna—you say, “Well, it'll be over in no time. And that
thing lasted I think another seven, eight months, too. And a lot of businesses went broke, I tell you. Just about cleaned us out, too.

GM: Right.

MI: But—

GM: Describe West Tampa. How was West Tampa different than Ybor City?

MI: Oh, West Tampa. West Tampa was—well, everything was so—you know, I used to live there in there at the corner right by the Centro Asturiano, you know, all that with the lights on. Palm Avenue. When I moved to West Tampa after I got married, my heaven, it was the wilderness over there, really, and I really cried. You wanna say that I was scared. You know, at night they had no lights in the streets. They had these gaslights, and this colored man used to come over and light those things. And whenever they didn't come to light them, you couldn't go any—you couldn't see nothing outside. No, West Tampa was nothing compared to Ybor City then.

GM: Who lived in West Tampa?

MI: Well the Reyes lived there, the cigar factory people, you know. Cuesta Reye, they lived there, and a lot of the, um—

GM: Any Italians there?

MI: Oh yeah, yeah. Block was mostly all Italians, you know. The Italianos all lived there, and a lot of the Ferlitas were there and a lot of the Desalvos and Salernos, a lot of people. You know, mostly—there were a lot of Italian people there. There still are.

GM: Do you remember the original Alessi Bakery?

MI: Yes. On Howard Avenue.

GM: And Chestnut [Street].

MI: And Chestnut. Oh, that was a beautiful—they really could bake beautiful stuff in that place. And I tell you, you have to get in a line to get that bread, it was so good there.

GM: Really?

MI: Yeah. That's been generations back and back, you know, his father and then the other son.

GM: Yeah.

MI: And Phil taking over now.
GM: Right. What was baking bread like then? Do you remember at your home, or was it —?

MI: Yeah, my home. We used to—every holiday, we’d bake bread. But see, we used to live there were—we all lived near—you know, like there was one, two—there was three hands and the mother, so they would bake bread once a week.

GM: Where would they bake it?

MI: They have an oven outside. Have you seen those—?

GM: Forno?

MI: Huh?

GM: Forno?

MI: Forno. Yeah, forno. Have you ever seen one?

GM: No.

MI: Oh, they were wonderful. So, we'd all get together that day, and then we'd bake bread for that day, okay, on a Friday. Then after the bread was baked, then they used to—they would have maybe half a calf, you know. And maybe a whole one, a little one; who could tell? And when the bread was out, then they cooked it and we all ate together. Talk about a holiday. My uncle and our Italian friends—he had a table that would be from this end to the other end there (indicates dimensions), and we'd all eat there that day. And the bread was really beautiful—oh, beautiful bread. And then usually sometimes they would get a couple of loaves, like they did—I don't know if you've ever had this. Cut it in half, and when it's hot you put a lot of garlic and olive oil and cheese and a lot of black pepper, and then you get all together and we eat four or five of these pieces of bread. Oh, it was beautiful. I don't know if time today we were happy, but we were—to me, I think we were happier then. The families were so close.

GM: Right.

MI: More so than we are today. And today, everybody's busy doing something else. But then, like I said, every Friday [was] the bread day; that was the day to bake bread. And it was a holiday for us, because we would all enjoy the bread and be all together with all our cousins. There were a million of us.

GM: Well, describe a typical Sunday with your family when you were close.

MI: Oh, yeah. Well, Sunday was a big day, too. We all used to get, you know—but a lot of times the ones that were close, we'd have a—at that time now, you—they talking about
this barbeque. We used to barbeque how many years ago? I'd imagine—I'd say sixty years ago, sixty-five, maybe. And we used to have a fornello, we used to call it. A little— have you ever seen one?

GM: No.

MI: The furnace, little bitty, small. They used to put kerosene [in it], you know, put coals and light it. And then we would have—you could smell the veal, with a lot of this olive oil and garlic and a lot of—see, they used to make this juice like. And then, of course, they get together, but Sunday. Talk about a Sunday dinner. Oh, we started with soup. We never had dinner but we have to have soup. Then we have to have our spaghetti, then we have to have our meat, our salad, all kinds of dessert you can think about. Everybody brought something. Now, Sunday was a holiday, which you don't do today. And that was—they call it barbeque today. Well, that's what we used to do at least sixty-five years ago, it must've been, 'cause I'm seventy-five. So, it had to be at least—I know I must've been about ten years old. And it was beautiful. It really was. I really enjoyed it.

GM: Yeah.

MI: And we all did, I think. Like I say, today we have everything under the sun; we didn't have as much then, but to me we were happier, I think. Don't you think?

GM: Yeah.

MI: I mean, as far as what we used to do with the families all together. And Sunday we used to have—we hardly ever ate by ourselves at night, because there were three sisters that lived near, so we practically always used to eat together.

GM: Yeah, right. What about in terms of religion?

MI: Well, the religion was—you know, 'cause we were all Catholics and we were all baptized Catholic. We used to go to OLPH, [that's the] church we used to go to.

GM: Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

GM: Yes, that's it. And I don't know if the religious—a lot of people—we were not—to me, we used to go more then, than they do today. I don't know a lot of—I don't know what's happened today. You get all the children that even went, that were Catholics to start, from school, went on and on, and now some of the kids don't even want to go to church.

GM: Would the men go to church, then?

MI: Not as much. No, not very much. Not the men. You could probably just count the men that went to church then.
GM: Right.

MI: But we did, we all did. I mean, the wives did, and the children.

GM: Right.

MI: I know my family did, because see, I went to Catholic school.

GM: When I mention Prohibition, what do you think of?

MI: Well, I remember at the time Prohibition—see, I was married then and I was living in West Tampa. My husband had a—they had a bar right across from Alessi on—

George Pozzetta: Excuse me a second (inaudible).

MI: Okay. And I remember they had this beautiful big bar at the corner there. And then when Prohibition came, of course they closed it, and that's when they went into a wholesale grocery business—and feed, you know.

GM: Other bars stayed open, though, right? I mean, was West Tampa pretty open? Could you buy a drink if you wanted?

MI: During—before or after Prohibition?

GM: After Prohibition.

MI: Well, I don't know. I don't think you could. They were very strict.

GM: Yeah.

MI: More so than they are today.

GM: Right.

MI: I know we didn't. We closed up, right, just closed the place and sold everything and went over casa, over to Ybor City. That's where they opened their business first.

GM: Right. What about bolita?

MI: Bolita, yeah, they used to have plenty of that.

GM: (laughs)

MI: They really had a lot of bolita, lot of people, you know.

GM: Yeah.
MI: And it was open then. It wasn't that bad. At the time they used to pay—you know, for ten cents they would give you—I think it was nine, and some of them give you ten dollars. And these poor people had nothing. They used to venture and figure, “Well, maybe I can win a little something.” But I don’t think it was so bad, the bolita, because these poor people could just turn ten, twenty cents a day.

MI: Right. Where could you play bolita, like in Ybor City? Which places?

MI: Well, I don't remember in Ybor City.

GM: Or West Tampa?

MI: Well, Ybor City, they used to have a place there on Fourteenth Street and Eighth Avenue—I can't think of the name. Right there, that big—it was that big bar there. And you used to buy there, you know, at the time. And I'm trying to think of the name of the—

GM: There used to be a famous bar across from the Pizzo Castiliano store. Was that Trafficante’s bar? What was the name of that?

MI: Out on that corner?

GM: Yeah. Right across the street where the post office is now.

MI: No, I don't remember that at all. Like I said, then I went to West Tampa to live, so I don't really remember that.

GM: Right. When you were growing up, how did the Cubans and the Italians and Spaniards get along?

MI: Oh, beautiful. We always have. They're all beautiful, Italian people and Spanish people. Always. Really did.

GM: What would your father have said if a Cuban boy would've wanted to date you?

MI: Well, I'll tell you something: it was a no-no at the time. (laughs) I don't know why. Sure, we were close growing up, but they wanted you to marry an Italian.

GM: Right.

MI: They didn't at all, you know, ’cause—and then after that, most of my aunts married Spanish fellows. I have about three or four in my family that married some lovely Spanish men. But at that time, oh, no. My gosh, if you got—they wouldn't allow it at all. There's no way that they would consent to that.

GM: Right.
MI: Thought it was terrible, you know. It's a shame, because they—I say, we got along beautiful. All of our neighbors were Spanish and Cubans. But when they came to marriage, they wanted you to marry an Italian.

GM: Right. When you were bringing up your family, did you speak English at home?

MI: Yeah, mostly speak English all the time, but I talk Italian to the children.

GM: Do your children know Italian?

MI: Yes, the girls talk Italian. Now, Nelson talks not very, very much, but he understands when we talk to him slowly. And the reason for that was ’cause my mother couldn't speak English. When my mama was living, of course she talked to him in Italian. But then after she passed away, been over twenty-some odd years ago. But he still—you know. Well, the girls talk Italian fluently, or talk Sicilian, and they talk Spanish some, too.

GM: Right.

MI: They really do. Yeah, we all did.

GM: Right. Now, Nelson's in politics. What do you remember of the predecessors in politics? Who were the first Latin politicians? Do you remember?

MI: In Tampa, I—Tampa. I know my uncle was a counsel [to] Mr. Reyna, many years ago. And as far as like judges and stuff like that, no.

GM: How about Nick Nuccio?

MI: Nick, he's the mayor of Tampa. Yeah.

GM: What do you remember about him?

MI: Well, he was a nice person. I think he was a good mayor. I really do.

GM: Right.

MI: He did good for the City of Tampa. He really did. And after that, I think—who was it? Then we had [Dick] Greco.

GM: Right.

MI: Dick Greco. He made a nice mayor, too.

GM: Do you think Italians have gotten a fair shake in Tampa?
MI: Well, I don't know. Today, you know—many, many years ago, you know, I did. But today, they—

GM: The newspapers and everything give you fair shake?

MI: Yeah, yeah. Well, today they did, but like I said, wasn't that many politicians at that time. But I feel we're getting it better every day, you know, than we did then. They're getting too—

GM: Right.

MI: 'Cause we have today have a lot of lovely—most everybody today, they all have gone to college and could afford it now. Even had to go to college, wait on tables. I can tell you four or five of the most prominent doctors today that had to work on tables. You got Dr. Adamo, he was the—he was Bataan, that march.²

GM: Right.

MI: And they waited on tables, all the minority boys and Ferlitas, most all those people. I mean—you know.

GM: Right. Why do you think the Italians—the Italians in Tampa seem to have done pretty well: a lot of doctors, lawyers.

MI: It's beautiful, yeah.

GM: Why do you think that is? Why have we done so well?

MI: I don't know. Well, I think that even as the real—the older ones, you know, they didn't. Not that they didn't want to send their kids to school, they had no money. They were all practically cigar makers. But I think that after that, now—like the kids, they wanted to go. Now if they couldn't go, they couldn't afford it, like I tell you. They would work, used to wait on tables. They'd do anything to go to school. Then, you know, you couldn’t; you didn't have the means. But if you wanted to—now, these boys, they all went. I mean, they worked hard. They were barbers, and did everything, wait on tables. And today they are most of our—a lot of our prominent men here in Tampa today.

GM: Right.

MI: Uh-huh. So, I think that—

GM: Yes. Well, listen, I'd like to thank you very much for talking with me.

²MI is referring to the Bataan Death March; the forced transfer of 75,000 American and Pilipino prisoners of war by the Japanese Army to prison camps on the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippine Islands during World War II.
MI: Well, I hope that I have been some help to you. I don't know.

GM: Yes. Oh, you've been most helpful.

MI: I guess I should've brought down some notes.

GM: No, no, it's delightful. Thanks again.

MI: Yeah, okay. Enjoyed you very much.

*End of interview*