

FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY
ITALIAN-AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVE

NARRATOR: Vincent Zarrilli	INTERVIEWERS: Vincenza Iadevaia, Viviana Pezzullo, Federico Tiberini
Place: Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton (FL)	Length of registration: 16:55

Date: 2/3/2017

- **Name:** (Vincenzo) Vincent Zarrilli
- **Place and date of birth:** Calitri (Avellino, Italy)
- **Generation:** first
- **Family origin:**
 - **Mother:** Antonietta (from Calitri, Avellino)
 - **Father:** Giovanni Zarrilli (from Calitri, Avellino)
 - **Spoken languages:**
 - Italian (native language)
 - English (near native proficiency)
 - Neapolitan dialect
- **Relocation in Florida:** Boca Raton, 1998

TIMING	TOPIC OF DISCUSSION
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00:01 - 00:19	VZ presents himself in Italian. He arrived to New York in 1963, as young boy, with his parents.
00:20 - 00:27	VZ moved to Florida in 1998
00:33 - 00:50	VZ' s description of his native village in Italy
00:55 - 01:01	It's time to leave Italy
01:02 - 01:10	"America is for young people"
01:20 - 01:54	VZ's life as an Italian-American
02:00 - 02:51	VZ description of his job
02:52 - 03:57	VZ's first impression of Florida was not to memorable
04:12 - 04:26	Life is unpredictable: Florida as a paradise
04:41 - 06:06	VZ' s rediscovering of Italian heritage
06:10 - 08:21	Once upon a time: crossing the Atlantic to follow the American dream
08:23 - 09:21	VZ's arrival to New York
09:34 - 09:40	The immigrants in the lower part of the ship
09:45 - 10:02	The coat...
10:20 - 10:48	VZ's suitcase made by his uncle
10:53 - 12:47	VZ's experience as a young immigrant student in an American school
13:08 - 13:22	The assimilation
13:54 - 14:05	VZ's trip back to his native village after the 1980's earthquake that destroyed his hometown
14:07 - 15:00	VZ's description of artifacts he brought back from his small village: the bottle full of the earth from his vineyard
15:03 - 16:55	VZ' s legacy of his mother's cooking

Key Words:

Florida Atlantic University; Migration; Italian-Americans; Campania; Alta Irpinia, Avellino; Calitri; South Florida; Oral history; Customs; Folklore; Tradition; Ethnic; Microhistory; Memory; Food; Dialect; the American dream; Assimilation; Legacy.

List of the Italian Expressions and Traditions Mentioned in the interview:

- “America is for young people”
- “pick and shovel”
- Wooden suitcase full of notebooks and books
- A bottle full of soil from VZ’s vineyard
- *Cingoli* or *cavatelli* (kinds of dumpling)

Italian-American Oral History Archive

Interviewers: Vincenza Iadevaia, Viviana Pezzullo, Federico Tiberini

Interviewee: Vincent Zarrilli

VZ: Mi chiamo Vincenzo Zarrilli, ma in inglese Vincent Zarrilli. Sono venuto all'età di tredici anni, arrivando a New York il primo gennaio 1963, con tutta la famiglia, ed ho vissuto nella zona di New York per molti anni. Poi sono venuto in Florida nel 1988 per ragioni di lavoro. Oh, I am talking in Italian...

Female Interviewer: It's fine!

VZ: Ahhh!

Female Interviewer: Don't worry.

VZ: Okay, va bene! Oh, I c— ih— wh— I, I came from Italy, ah, the name of the town is called Calitri, and it's in, in, in the Campania region, province of Avellino, and the region is called Alta Irpinia, ah, in the middle of, uh, high hills and mountains. And, uh, I came with my family. My, my father was a barber and a tailor, and at the age of 52 he closed up his business and we packed up and moved to America, much to the dismay and disapproval of all his family and brothers, who said, "You're crazy." "You're an old man." Uh, "America is for young people." And, uh, so we came. Then, uh, many years later, uh, I moved to Florida. I attended uh, ah, schools in, in New York and then, then I, uh, I went to university, um, in Pennsylvania. And then for the first ten years I taught, um, high school and, uh... Actually for a period of time I even taught preschoolers, the Head Start program. And then I entered the world of, uh, business. Um, I entered the, the growing and beginning world of telecommunications. And, uh, I started at the beginning, and by the time I finished and retired I was Vice President of Sales, of [indistinguishable] Sales for a number of companies.

Female Interviewer: [softly] Uh-hmm.

VZ: And that's why I moved to Florida—opportunities that, uh, um, I was working for a company based in Sunrise, Florida, and my, uh, area was in, uh, um, Connecticut. But they needed somebody who understood the international, um, business, because they want to move in that area, and I had spent a year in London, um, in England, working for, uh, an American company there, so I brought a certain level of experience, and I started a whole new department called Multinational, where, um, the whole world was changing, and, and business was going overseas, and they needed the ability t—, the companies, to supply the services for companies like IBM, tele— um, um, banks, uh, airlines, um, to have connected, uh, their networks.

Female Interviewer: [softly] Hmm.

VZ: So that was my job.

When I first came to Florida, I was a young man in my twenties, and I came, uh, down here for a vacation with my now-wife—at that time, girlfriend—and we spent a few days in Orlando. It had just opened, and I wasn't very impressed. Then, my cousin had a house in Boca Raton, Florida, where I currently live, and she said, "You can stay there." Well, we came. It was December, it was cold, and it was absolutely desolate. I hated it. There was no culture, eh, no restaurants to speak of. There's nothing to do. The beach, the sand, and it was cold! So we left two days early and I vowed never to come back. As a matter of fact, when I was in England, all these Brits, British people, were going to Florida! And I said, "You guys are nuts! There's nothing there except for sun and, and, and, and, and, and, and, uh, and, uh, sand." And they said, "But we kinda like it." But I thought it's a barren world. Educationally, uh, culturally, it's, uh, it's an anathema. Well, uh, so that was my feeling about Florida. Ten, fifteen years later, um, my company was based in Sunrise, asked me to move to Florida. I was stunned [emphasized], and I came, and within six months I, I'd found paradise. I love it. Um, I was traveling ex— extensively all over the world, so this gave me opportunity to essentially be on vacation all year round. Um, as a matter of fact, we never took vacation—we stayed home. Except we went to Italy once, uh, ah, ev—, ev— every year for two or three weeks.

Interestingly enough, um, when I first came here there were very few Italians. And, uh, I was so busy traveling. I rediscovered my Italian, interestingly enough, through my business when I was in Argentina, in Brazil, or even Peru. Um, I'd, I learned how to speak Spanish. And I met many of the Italians who had migrated there, so we'd speak. And, and, eh, they, we'd start talking about their [emphasized] Italian heritage, and my Italian heritage. So I, I rediscovered this, uh, this feeling of Italian. There, there was a bunch of telecommunication people from, um, um, Telecom Italia, in Brazil, and they didn't Spanish or English, so we communicated in Italian. And I'd do my presentations in a combination, multilingual experience: English, ah, badly Portuguese—that's Spanish and Portuguese—and, and Italian. So, this was a whole new, n— new way of, uh, of, uh, re-finding the Italian, um, group. Then, a few years later I was introduced to, um, the FAU Italian Department. Um, and they were very active in doing, in, eh, presenting movies, uh, lectures, and, uh, I, uh, been involved with them for, for over ten years now. So that was my new [emphasized] re-emergence in new— into the Italian world, in Florida.

Well, I left, um, December 20th, and I was... I was an altar boy. I was going to be celebrating Mass on Christmas Day. And, uh, we were supposed to arrive on the 28th. Well, as soon as we crossed the, uh, um, eh, into the Atlantic, eh, we, we past Gibraltar, there was a huge storm that lasted three or four days. We have pictures of the ship, totally underwater. Everybody was sick. We thought we were, uh, never going to make it to the Promised Land. And, um, no Christmas Mass, because everybody was sick. Um, ah, the priest was praying the Rosary. We thought we were not going to make it, but, eventually we made it to New York. Two, two days late. Uh, we had stopped first in Halifax, and, um, we had been in, in water for so many days, from seemed like an eternity, so my father and I got off the ship. And my feet weren't quite, um, able to walk. It was eleven o'clock at night, and it was cold, and we went into a little place, and we had—I still remember: Red Rose Tea. They were serving Red Rose Tea, and we asked for a cup of coffee, and they brought this, the, the, the, this huge cup, and I— "What is this?! Do I have to wash my feet? I want a little espresso!" But, no, and the l—, the person said, "No, this is

American coffee.” But it’s like dish water! So that was my first experience of, uh, in Canada. Then we said, “Well, at least we’re close to land now. We’ll be safe.” Well, between Halifax and New York should take maybe a day. It took three days. So we arrived two and a half days late...in New York. And there was a huge storm that prevented us from getting there. And we were c— uh, navigating this very close to the shoreline. So every three minutes there was, like the, the sound of the siren, ‘boo,’ and the fog, and the snow, and... uhh, horrible! And we had arrived in New York City...ah, New Year’s Eve. The coldest [emphasized] day of the year, the beautiful moon and the Statue of Liberty. [makes a sound] Ah, I will never forget it.

So, the next morning, in order to get out they had to come on the boat with pick and shovels to o— open up the doors, and, uh, that was my entrance into the United States. We were standing on the front of the ship, admiring Lady Liberty. Ah, unbelievable... The, the, the, the, the, the, the eyesight, the, the aspirations of, uh, our future, and, and, and the trip represented the, the suffering that many of us have had, uh, both in Italy and even after we came here. But anyway, it was a very positive feeling. And when, uh, ah, DiCaprio made his movie [*Titanic*, Paramount Pictures, 1997] I said, “Wait a minute!! That’s my story! How come I didn’t get credit for it?” That was it, the same feeling, that beautiful scene. Anyway, and, and we were staying just like the, the immigrants in, in the lower part of the ship, in steerage. Yeah.

Female Interviewer: And what did you bring with you?

VZ: Not much. I had forgotten my heavy coat, in, in a taxi. So, when, uh, when I went to, “Oh my God! I left it in, uh, in Canone’s, uh,” that’s his name, “car!” And, years later he migrated to the United States, and he says, “I still have your coat!” [sound of amusement]

Female Interviewer: Awww...

VZ: Um, so I left it there. So the next morning I woke up to go, and I had my little trench coat— those little thin, paper-thin, uh, coats. And it was so cold. I had my little hat with a plume. Um, my l—, my little tie. And with me I had one small suitcase. It wasn’t really a suitcase, it was made of wood, which my uncle built for me, full of my notebooks, and my books from first grade to eighth grade. And I still have them in my house. Um, I still have my first grade, when I was writing my little penmanship, the little s— ah, story, and a little poem to my mother when I was a, a little boy in first grade.

I came here without learning any English, but I was a good student in, uh, in Italy. So my cousin took my, uh, ah, *pagella*, uh, the report card, and, uh, we went to the school, and my uncle says, “Oh, he’s a very good student.” So they decided to put me in older classes—eighth grade. I started eighth grade in Italy, and I finished it here. So they put me in eighth grade, but in the advanced class. They had let’s say: “a,” “b,” “c,” and the “c” was the highest. So they put me in that class. And you travel, wi—, wi—, wi—, from class to class, and I was with this group of young people who was ve—, very, very interested in this new addition in their class. And my first experience in Social Studies, and they put me in the back, and they were studying, you know, civil rights and American history, and I didn’t understand a word. So the guy gave me a puzzle of the United States, the teacher. Um, as a matter of fact, I remember when the day— color television just arrived, and they, they were doing a big deal about color television, and I

barely understood every other word. No? So they gave me the puzzle, I finished the puzzle in ten minutes. And I say, "Okay." The next day I show up, they put me in the back of the room, the same puzzle. I say, "What the hell? Does he think I'm an idiot?" So, um, that was my first experience. So my goal was to learn English—as quickly as possible and as well as possible—so nobody could say, "You're different." You're just like the rest of us.

On the flip side, in the science class and the math class, I was quite good. And so I excelled in math and science. Every time there was a problem I'd raise my hand, I'd go to the board, and to the board, uh, to do the problem. Ah and so, uh, my, my contemporaries kinda appreciated, uh, my talents. And w—, and we stayed friends with that. So, it was a very positive experience from that part. But I had to work very hard to learn English, and there was my goal. So after two or three years, eh, my, my accent was just about disappeared. When I was at college, people, I had to tell them that was, eh, by my last name. "Oh, you must be an I—Italian." I said, "Well, yes. Yeah, I am an I—Italian." Um, but it wasn't the accent, it was the vowel at the end of the name that gave me away. And then one of the reasons I became "Vincent," and in those days, unlike today, um, individuality wasn't, uh, ah, multiculturalism wasn't, uh, as prevalent. So you had to assimilate as quickly as possible. And there was my goal, and I achieved that.

Female Interviewer: You mentioned that you still have in your house your notebooks and the luggage with which you came here, and do you have any other objects that reminds you of Italy or your Italianness?

VZ: Oh, boy! Do we have, uh, do I have objects! I have, um, many, many, um, artifacts that, over the years... Um, I didn't bring them when I came, uh, from Italy because, mmm, we didn't have, uh, the facility, but over the years, going back, I was able to pick up... After my town had an earthquake in 1980, um, m—, most—, m—, a large part of the town was destroyed. And I went to visit my grandmother's, uh, house. And... a total disaster. But I was able to pick up, ah, little things which are important to me. And they're all over the house. A ceramic tile on the wall, the number on the house—the number twenty-three, um, the, the kitchen, the, the... In It—in Italy, it's, it's a built-in kitchen, so you, you have little doors, so I was able to pick up those doors. And, ah, and, uh, the utensil to wash—, the washboard that my grandmother used. So I brought all these things here, and they are throughout the house. As a matter of fact, I even brought in a bottle full of the earth from my little hou—, land—. A vineyard, I still own it...in Italy. I brought a part of the land, to the United States. And it's sitting in a bottle of Giuseppe Garibaldi with the [in Italian; indistinguishable].

My mother...always sang around the house, and, uh, when, when she did activities, um, and when she cooked. And, uh, more than a song, um, it was that her cooking activity that's now become part of my, uh, my, m—, m—, my activity. I didn't pay too much attention, to her cooking, but it was there, and, uh, when we first came here she went to work in a factory, so in the morning she gave me the directions. She says, "Listen, uh, I'm gonna be late. You're coming at home at three o'clock. You start this cooking. You put a little oil, and this, and this, and this, and that." And so I start making the early preparation for the food, so that by the time she came she'd finish up the meal. And, uh, one of the dishes from my hometown, eh, here they call them

different things. We call them *cingoli* in our dialect, which is, a, a version of, uh, ah, cavatelli, Italian, ah, cavatellis. It's a dumpling with, uh, oh, oh, with, oh, dough, and sometime she would ricotta in to make them nice and light. So I make that quite, um, regularly. But I have my little twist [emphasized] to it. She would make it traditional, with a little red sauce, and, aw, I make it with shrimp, and with rapini, and with ah, ahm, aragosta, ahm, ahm, and a— all the things we never had in our home town. I mean, I never had shrimps when I was in Italy, back in, in the 50s, in my mountain town. They didn't come, you know? Um, so cooking has become an important part of my retired life. Play tennis in the morning, plan my meal [laughs] at noon, and, and then do, execute, uh, the, the meal for the evening. And I try and sing some of the, uh, my mother's songs, which I'm not very good at.

Audio file transcribed by Angela Riviuccio, FAU Digital Library