Vito Paratore

Interviewed by an unidentified interviewer on an unknown date at an unknown location.

Oral history tape number: 11

I don't know... well, I do know why I got talked into doing this. A lady by the name of Betty Kurtenacker, she's such a nice gal that if you say no to her, you'll kick yourself, so I decided that I would do this. Of course, she didn't have to fight me too hard. I said yes fairly soon after she broached the subject. What can I say to you? I think this has been gone over several times by other people and I've talked it over, naturally, with my countrymen.

What Betty asked me to do is give you a little background about the neighborhood, the Greenbush, the Bush. Well, I start off by saying that I could say I was born in Dixie, in a boomer shack, a tumble-down old shanty by the railroad track, but you wouldn't buy that. The truth of the matter is I was born in a shanty about a block from the railroad tracks, the Milwaukee Road. I was born at 818 Regent Street. In fact, our home site is still standing. It's next to Fraboni's grocery store. It's a three-floor home. I don't remember the old house, because I was too young. Our house was remodeled in 1921 and that's when we got the big house. I mean, just a big house.

Ladies and gentlemen and fellow classmates, since I last saw you, if I come up to you and ask you who you are, don't be ascared. Oh, the hell with that. I'll keep on going.

Now, where our house was was across the street from the Triangle project, where most of us lived. It was mostly Sicilians, but something Betty said for me to say was that a lot of people don't realize that there were a lot of Albanians. Now, that's quite a thing. We all said we were Italian. The truth of the matter is that 95 percent of us were Sicilians, but part of the Sicilians were Albanian.

My heritage goes all the way back to Albania. I was in my mother and father's hometown in 1975 and 1976 and people still speak our language, Albanian. They can speak Italian, too; they learned that in school. But their native tongue and the native tongue that my father and mother taught to me was Albanian.

Now here's the way it came about. A fellow that we walked with one night and talked with several times explained that in 1480 the Turks invaded Albania. Some people got into the hills and some people went in open boats across the Adriatic Sea. You can imagine what a trick that must have been. That's my people. Who the heck knows? My great-great-great-great-great-grandfather and mother.

As the legend goes, they brought with them a statue that was mounted on a pedestal-type thing with handles on it sticking out so people could put it on their shoulders and carry it. Legend says that when they landed they walked and walked and walked. All of a sudden this thing got real heavy and the men carrying it couldn't carry it any further and there is where they built their church. It's still standing there, from way back then. [unclear words in foreign language]. That's "the Blessed Virgin," is what it is. You can take that any which way you want. So now you know where the Albanian part came from.

Our names are Sicilian-Italian: Parisi, Skerow, Stassi. Of course, if you say Parisi in our neighborhood, you're going to gather up most of the Albanians, because they're inter-married with the Kushas. Holy Toledo! You know, a nice thing... the Parisi family, and it was Sam Parisi who used to be in school with us years ago, he organized a picnic many years ago for the relations, and today they have it at Marshall Park in Middleton. They have had as high as three hundred and fifty people and they're all related, down the line. Holy Toledo!

The idea years ago was that you married an Italian girl. Just for the sake of discussion, when our parents finally got over the shock then a few of the guys started marrying different other nationalities. It was mean for a while. In fact... gee, this is going to be a "this is your life, Vito Paratore." I went with a girl that was Irish. I was about fifteen. My mother found out about it.

And honest, as I tell you, my mother got down on her knees and cried and begged me not to go with her. Well, on the other side of the coin, when I used to go up to the Hawley household, I was not allowed in the house because I was Italian. If that isn't a dandy! But I'll tell you what. This girl I was going with was a lovely girl. God, I was in love with her! That's enough of that.

Getting back to the neighborhood. You take Regent Street, you take Washington Avenue and Park Street, naturally – that's the triangle. Other Italians lived beyond Washington Avenue on the other side, I think Gwinnett Court and a few other places there. That was so far away from where I lived that we used to call it the other side of town. We used to just be strolling around, nothing to do, and somebody would say "Let's go to the other side of town." We'd go over to Washington Avenue. How dumb.

Then if you come back to Park and Regent and you go down the block towards the viaduct, that was almost all... in fact, they were all... no, they weren't, they were almost all Albanian. And on Spring Street they were interspersed, but the majority were Albanian. I'm going to tell you a little something that I think is relevant.

My father got here in 1909 and my mother and my older sister Frances came over in 1911. Three years after my father got here, a few of the Italians got together... and my father was one of the founders of the Italian Workman's Club. Initially it was supposed to be for all of the people in the neighborhood, but there always was a little animosity. We got along with the other people, but there was always a little animosity between Albanians and Sicilians. They didn't want to go in with the Albanians so the Albanians went exclusively on their own. Now, you couldn't get in that baby [the club] with a crowbar unless you were an Albanian-Sicilian. They started their own club, which was [unclear] club. That animosity wasn't anything. Nobody got hurt in the process; just a few hard feelings and it was over with.

Today in our club we have quite a few people from the [unclear] that are in our club now. But hey, in our bylaws you had to have Italian heritage. We revised that law about two years ago or so and if your mother... see, you could get in possibly if your father was Italian and your mother was Norwegian. But to have a Norwegian father and a Sicilian mother, they couldn't get in. When they revised it, they allowed anybody in, as long as their heritage goes back to Italian. Would you believe the first guy that got in our club – I'm dying – his name was Dave Conners. His mother was a Lombardino and father was Richie Conners. Now we have several people like that.

What the heck! Look at the years that have gone by. I mean, how long do you keep these things? How long do you feel that animosity? Dumb! At the present time the Italian Workman's Club is going pretty strong. No commercials. I'll stop right there.

What can I tell you now? In that area there were a lot of people who sold wine. Natural! You make wine, you got too much, what are you going to do with it? Throw it down the drain? You don't do that! It so happened that my father was one of those who made wine for himself. There was some guy that my father knew, that he used to work with, and my father would invite him down for spaghetti and some wine. One day he said to my father, "My bosses would like this wine. Would you sell them any?" Things were tough in those days. My father was working on the garbage truck, for God's sake. I think he got six or eight dollars a week, and with four kids at that time. He said "Yes." That's the way he started, by the way. And I thank God that he did! I'm not ashamed of it. I used to be. I will tell you true: I used to be, but I'm not. In fact, I'm proud of it. We've met some wonderful people.

This is digging a little bit, but don't let it scare you. One night a kid came up to me when I had my business and he said "I heard something about your father." I said "What did you hear,

Pete?" He said "I heard your father was a bootlegger." I said "If your old man wasn't a drunkard, he wouldn't have known my father was a bootlegger." You know, you've got to defend yourself. Otherwise you're nobody.

I've got to get back to telling about the neighborhood. What they did down there, the families, they all were in the same boat relatively. They had great big families, as you well know, but it was decent. It was decent. I've talked with several people that used to come in there with the gas company or the milkman or the this and the that, and they tell me they never had any trouble at all down there. In fact, they were wonderful. Well, it was true.

There was a time when there was some bangety-bangety going on down in that neighborhood, but they were doing it to each other. This was their hot temper of theirs going overboard. For information purposes, there were fourteen people that got planted out here at Resurrection Cemetery. But I thought about it the other day. I thought, "For God's sake, if you were to take the number of people that have been knocked off around here lately, it would make us look like pikers." So anybody who was ascared of the Bush in those days – and even today some people still have it – there was nothing to be afraid of.

The one thing that you had to do was behave yourself. You couldn't horse around, you couldn't whatever. If you did that, one of our people would like you. And, say, if somebody just punched you for some stupid reason and you told that Sicilian whose house you were drinking at, he'd go find the guy and he'd beat his head in practically. That's the way it was.

I know the evolution of this thing. I've talked it over so many times with our people. The evolution of this thing was they came to us and told us they were going to tear down the neighborhood. The original concept was they were going to move the houses. They were going to move a block or two, tear it down, build houses and have the people stay right there. Oh, how they didn't do it! I think it was started in 1958 and in 1963 they were complete. It took about eight years before they built anything on that property. Please, I'm not going to talk very long on this because it makes me mad. It makes me sick!

But, you see, we as the younger people would have eventually moved out of the neighborhood, which I did myself. I was married in 1945. I left my mother's house in 1949 and then bought my own house. That would have happened. But here were these people who had lived in this neighborhood for all these years and all of a sudden they're going to take and chop them up. And one thing they did that was terrible, they didn't give them a heck of a lot of money. I know this to be true. Oh, I know this to be true.

One of the officers in the city government, one day when I was up at the City-County Building, said... I'll give you his name. I'm not ashamed or afraid of this guy. He said "Rupena is going around telling people how he beat those dagos out of a lot of money." Well, I just say for his sake and his wife's sake and his kids, it would have been pretty bad if there had been some of those old mustached Petes around. Mr. Rupena would probably be where Hoffa is. The same place. You can't find either one of them, I guess. Or you wouldn't be able to find either one. That's enough of that, too.

So anyway, I'll tell you... and that cough was a professional cough. That was to clear my throat because I'm smoking. I'll tell you one day how this came to me. I'll preface it with this. They took away their grocery store, they took away their churches. There was the Italian Methodist Church on...

They'd go in with their daughter or their son or their this and that. One day I was driving down Midvale Boulevard and right behind it – I don't know the street right now – I saw one of the old-timers walking around in front of this house. I thought to myself, "What the heck is he

doing out here?" I felt the same way when I moved out to 4734 Odana Road. My name was in the paper one day and I thought, "What's a guy by the name of Vito Paratore doing on Odana Road?" That's the way it gets you.

With the old-timers, their friends were there, their relatives were there. Those people didn't have the chance to live out their later years with pride and dignity. They took and destroyed the neighborhood. It wasn't me that said this or thought this first. A guy who I was talking to one day, who was not Italian, said "I wonder how many old people died before their time?" That's enough.

So anyway, I'm just going to say a little bit to you people, because you're my people. Some of the happiest years I spent of my life have been four years at West High School. I thank God for whoever is here is here. Let's be optimistic about this. Let's have another reunion. I'll let Betty Kurtenacker figure that out. She is pretty good. God bless you all, and thank you for listening to me.

Well, here we go again. That terrific lady, Betty Kurtenacker, dropped this cassette off for me to add to it, so stand back and see what happens. She said I should talk about the churches in our neighborhood. The majority of the people in the neighborhood went to St. Joseph's Church. Then I don't exactly when it started, I'd say it was the 1920s, the Italian Methodist Church was formed.

The thing about the people that went to Italian Methodist and the people that went to St. Joe's was, we were friends. We were friends all the time. Relatives. There was always that bit of rivalry between the two churches. For many years I didn't think very kindly about our people going to Italian Methodist Church. I was Catholic, going to St. Joseph's, and I also went to St. Joseph's School. For years I just didn't really know why it happened.

Jeepers criminy, one day I'm talking to a friend of mine, a woman that's my age. We were raised together, raised in the same neighborhood. I said "Mary, why is it that the people went to Italian Methodist Church?" Here's what she said. She said "It was a matter of having something to eat and having some clothing, and the reverends over there were doing the job." The guy that I remember quite well was Reverend Faroni. He got this people jobs when he could do it, he got them food, he got them clothing, he helped them to get their rent paid for, their upkeep or whatever. This was a basic need that was filled by the Italian Methodist Church and that's why they went there. This is relatively what Mary Macele told me.

Well, you know, I'm going to explain that the people in our home town, which was [unclear]... our language, incidentally, is similar in a lot of respects to Greek. Don't ask me how that happened. I don't know. The churches that they had were Greek Orthodox, Byzantine-rite, and they later got into Catholicism. Most of them got into Catholicism when they came over here. There's your reason for St. Joseph's Church.

In the old days, you had to go to church. Not only did the nuns tell you that you had to go to church but the priest told you, your parents told you. In a lot of cases, the mothers were always faithful. Most every one of them. And the fathers were whenever-they-felt-like type Catholics. My father was one of them.

I thank God for that, too. I wouldn't want it any other way. It was good teaching, strict discipline, and when you got out of there, you knew something. I could tell you this: In English I could diagram sentences in grade school. I enjoyed it. I didn't have to worry about my English through high school and my two semester starts in the university. That's how well I was taught. A tribute to the nuns. Oh, we'll get away from that.

As far as the people in our neighborhood looking for work, a lot of them came over as

section hands and were contracted for. The others just came over on their own. Speaking of my father, this was typical of a lot of them. My father went down to Rockford with another man. I don't know who it was. They had money to get there. They were going to try to find work. They didn't find work, so they had to come back and they had no way of making it back. They didn't have any money. They walked from Rockford, Illinois, to Madison. In those days it was seventy-two miles.

My father got a job at the tobacco factory stripping tobacco, and that was a dollar a day. Then he got a job on the garbage truck. Then we come to 1920, the Volsted Act – the thing that was going to outlaw drinking for good. You know what happened. I don't have to tell you that.

I'll tell you something about our neighborhood that I like to reflect on. Our clubhouse was built in 1920. I remember going there as a young man, youngster, even a child. They had, oh, they had baptisms, they had marriage receptions, they had... any occasion that would call for a dance, they would have one. The place would be jammed! A lot of the women brought their babies. [At the club] they had two pool tables. They would push those up against the wall and the women had the babies side-by-side like cordwood while the mothers went out and danced. I never forgot that.

On those cold days in the winter, when the door would open, the steam would just come out. You could see it billowing in the light. I remember that, too.

And they had their funerals there. I shouldn't be so sacrilegious about a funeral, but in the ritual they always had a man appointed by the club that gave a speech about the man or whoever it was that died. In the ritual he would call the man's name three times and if he didn't sit up, he was dead. No two ways about that. That used to strike me funny.

[Unclear], meaning "working men's club. " And then they added [unclear], meaning "mutual aid." It was founded with giving people some money when they were sick and contributing to their funeral expenses. A mutual aid society, that's what the origination was. It was formed in 1912. In fact, this year coming, we will celebrate our seventy-fifth anniversary. Our club is the longest chartered club in America. I'm sure there are a lot of other ones, other organizations founded before then or whatever, but [ours is] a continuous charter. We have had the longest continuous charter. That's something to be proud of.

We're a proud people. We're a proud people. And a trait that we have... they talk about volatile personalities, and we are. Not all of us. There are some there that just don't raise their voices, but they're few. We're the kind of type of people that we have no gray in the situation. We either like you or we don't like you. If we don't like you, we don't want any part of you. Might as well get out of the way. If we like you... I found this in myself: just to hear somebody's name and it sounds Italian to you, you're going to go over and introduce yourself and try to do something for them. I've felt that way all my life. This is the way we are. I like our people.

What the hell! I like the rest of the people in America, but I've still got that feeling. I don't know how long this tape is going to go, but I'm going to take a break here for a moment and I will be back.

The thought just came to me, when Betty talked to me about doing this thing, I thought I was doing it for the West High class of 1936. Then I realized that maybe, not maybe, but it wasn't the class of 1936. So my references to the class of 1936, we'll just discount them and we'll continue from here.

Things have changed in the neighborhood. Of course, we have to mention once more that destroying and tearing down of the neighborhood just killed everybody's souls for a long while. We've inter-married, a lot of different nationalities.

We try to maintain our tradition and our feeling. What we have to realize is that after we go, there won't be that. Even though we have several young men that we have gotten into the club in the last few years – we've gotten some real dandies – the feeling is diminished. When we go, I hope they keep it up, but I wouldn't bet on it. I seriously wouldn't bet on it. I feel that we've maintained our community spirit longer than most any other group, ethnic group.

That word "ethnic" bothers me a little bit. I'm not ethnic; I'm an American, I'm an American-Sicilian, I'm an American-Sicilian-Albanian. And that's enough of that.

This transition was bound to come. The very fact that these people came over and they accomplished quite a bit... I'm glad my father caught the boat. We have our memories, we have still some functions in our club where we can see each other instead of see them at a funeral parlor, we have our spring dance, we have the Columbian dinner that we just had recently, and then we have our Fest, which originated as a picnic and then we developed it into a Fest the last few years. We do get a chance to rub elbows with each other and renew acquaintances. There's an awful lot of warmth that comes from those days.

I had the privilege of being the "Columbian of the Year" last year, and I can say that it's the nicest award I ever received in my life. I don't know why I put that in there. I could have just as well left it off. But I'm feeling that way and that's why I said it. There's a difference in this sense of the word of... getting back to our childhood days, not having money was not a bad thing. It felt bad.