

Interview with Paolo Lafranceschina (my Dad)
December 12, 2004

Grandpa Paul, Paolo Lafranceschina
born on December 18, 1918
declared on January 4, 1919

So today is the 12th of December 2004, in six days he will be 85 years old
We are going to retrace the history of Grandpa Paul at the request of Emilie (my daughter) because she has a little work to do for the school concerning immigration, notably of the Italians in the region ; and I think that my dad is a good example for tracing the history of Italian immigration in the region.

So you're going to tell us how we came to this immigration insofar as Italy was at war and the war ended for you in 1943.

The war started in May 1940 and ended for me in September 1943.

Where were you? Were you in Rome?

As I was in the air force, 8 days before the end of the war, I was in Gioia del Colle near Bari and then we were taken by plane to Siena in Tuscany

When we arrived in Siena, the armistice was signed by Marechal Badoglio.

The commander of the base gathered us and said:

"The war is over, be careful, go home to your family or friends or else we have 3 planes ready to leave and we don't know where we would land, we could be taken prisoner or shot down".

So we spread out, everyone went left or right, we went to the station and took the train without paying until just after Rome, because then it didn't work anymore, there was complete disorganization.

I arrived in Corato on September 25, 1943, having walked, gone by carts, and a sailboat along the Adriatic coast. In Margherita di Savoia we took a fisherman's sailboat, we gave some money to the fisherman. On the way, the wind died down and we ended up rowing. We arrived in Trani. The front between the Germans and the Allies was at the level of Foggia. We were 4 or 5 on a horse-drawn cart when we met German soldiers on a sidecar, they looked at us and then turned around.

We then arrived at Margherita di Savoia, where we took the sailboat to Trani.

In Trani, we took a horse-drawn cart to travel the 12 km to Corato.

I arrived in Corato, there was nothing to do and I remained unemployed, without working for 2 or 3 months.

Then I asked the English for work as they had installed a base in Molfetta on sports grounds. Molfetta is located between Corato and Bari, 30 km from Corato.

Trucks of the English army came to pick us up and brought us back every day after work. They gave us a snack in the morning and lunch at noon.

My job was to repair, dismantle and reassemble damaged motorcycles of the British army that came back from the front and we put them all back together again. We changed all the broken parts (wheels, engine, bodywork, lights, wires, tank)

I was a motorcycle mechanic specialized in BSA, Norton, Ariel, Triumph brands. Only English motorcycles.

That's where you learned mechanics. You already knew the mechanics of airplanes. Were you an aircraft mechanic?

No, mechanic's assistant.

Did you dismantle aircraft engines?

No, I did repairs, simple maintenance.

You took care of the linkages, the controls...

Yes, also cleaning.

How long did you stay with the British?

I stayed 2 years, from 1944 to the end of 1945. Then the war was over, the British left. So no more work.

Were you paid by the English?

Yes, of course.

They paid well for the time, better than in the olive fields or in the vineyards?

Yes, double, and with a 13th month at Christmas.

Was your salary higher than that of a farm worker? How many times?

Yes, twice!

It was worthwhile.

So the British left at the end of 1945 and you had no more work.

What did you do then?

I went to work for the farmers as an agricultural worker, picking olives, working for the market gardeners. I did this for a few months until September 1946.

But I don't earn a good living, there are no jobs in Corato.

People started to talk about emigration, friends were leaving for America. There are people organizing emigration routes, they get paid for it.

So you're thinking of going somewhere else, what are you thinking of? America?

Yes, I have my uncle (Giuseppe Tarricone, my mother's brother) who is already in the United States, who wanted to take me in New York, but his wife also wanted to welcome another nephew from her family, so my uncle had to give up because he couldn't afford to host 2 people ; because in addition, he had to have a deposit in the bank for each person he hosted or even to pay for the return ticket if the person did not acclimatize.

Therefore, he didn't welcome anyone.

So then I decided to come to France. We were a group of friends, one of whom knew a guide and the way to France.

We went by train to Turin. Everyone paid for the trip. There were about 15 of us.

Other groups had also left before us.

We arrived in Turin with a bag and a little money that we had left after paying for the trip.

I was 25 years old, I had no one waiting for me in France. My brother Antonio had arrived in Grenoble a month before and I didn't have his address.

In Turin, we boarded a freight train to Bardonecchia and got off at a small station before Bardonecchia, where there was no one around, so as not to be spotted.

A smuggler was waiting for us and he took us along the mountain paths to the French border in city clothes at the end of September 1946. There was a little snow on the heights.

We walked at night with a big bag in our hands, a jacket and a small coat.

I didn't have much money left, I even had to give my watch to the guide or to the person who would host me in France.

When we arrived at the border, we waited for 2 or 3 hours at night for a French smuggler who was supposed to arrive from Modane and who did not show up.

We joined another group of Coratini who were also waiting for the smuggler.

As this guide did not come, we decided to cross the border alone and go down to France. We ended up in Avrieux near Modane.

The guide had promised us a meal and there was nothing. It was early in the morning, we went to a farm, we slept on the straw.

The next day, old cars (4 horse-power, jalopies...) took us by 4 or 5 at a time to Grenoble to the home of a family or to the home of Coratini who had already settled there ; and I was lodged on rue St Laurent in Grenoble (Italian district at the time), with someone I didn't know.

The next morning, a guy came to accompany me to Domène by bus, place Dr Martin (ex Square des Postes) to Domène.

This guy takes me to the "Rivets Emile Morel" company and introduces me to a workshop foreman. There was a lot of work and I was welcomed like the god who falls from heaven. We worked in 3x8, in 3 shifts each 24 hours. There were 200 to 250 workers.

We produced rivets for industry, boats, airplanes

It was the beginning of October 1946, I was introduced in the morning and I immediately started working.

How did you eat and sleep?

The director provided us with a 4-room apartment and each room housed 4 workers. I arrived in a room where there were 3 Italians from other regions (Milan, Rimini, Susa...). There were many Italians who came to France.

So you live in a four-bedroom apartment...

The apartment is located right next to the factory, all the occupants were Italians, I would come out of the apartment and go directly to the factory.

To eat, I went to the square in Domène, there was a restaurant, everything was taken care of by the company, morning, noon and night.

The first pay, I received a deposit during the month of 5 Francs ; a loaf of bread (about a kilo) on the black market was worth 25 centimes.

We also had ration cards and tickets that were given to the restaurant.

We only used them directly to buy bread at the bakery. We were given 200g of bread per person after waiting in line. The bread was not of very good quality because it was mixed with semolina. The rationing system lasted until 1948.

I lived in this apartment next to the factory until my marriage in 1952. I managed on my own,

I did my own laundry. I also cooked for myself. I also went to Grenoble to get clothes.

You live mainly with Italians, how do you learn French?

How do you manage to speak at the factory?

With all the Italians, we speak a mixture of Italian and French, and with the French I am beginning to learn the language.

Among the inhabitants of Domène, how are the Italians considered ? You are immigrants Like the Arabs of today...

We used to get together in the square to talk, sometimes one of us would play the guitar, we would go to the movies from time to time.

How are the Italians considered ? Are you accepted or rejected?

No, we were well accepted, with the work that we did, we were well appreciated. Never insults like "dirty macaroni".

We had the same religion and we went to the same churches as the French.

This was already a step towards integration.

No fights between French and Italians?

No, we were well liked.

Were there other immigrants with you, other nationalities?

Yes, there were Spaniards, but very few Algerians.

There were German soldiers (5 or 6) who were prisoners and worked in the factory, guarded by French soldiers.

They were guarded by French soldiers and lived in the castle (owned by the company's owner).

They stayed for 2 to 3 years as compensation for war damages.

Were there any in other factories?

I don't know.

Did you have any contact with the Germans?

No, just hello, good evening, they were friendly contacts, that's all. They did their work, We didn't eat together. They slept in the castle, they were constantly guarded by French soldiers, to go to work, to get food at the restaurant.

The restaurant was in the Domène square in front of the Post Office and was called "Rama". The Germans were freed late 1948, or early 1949.

The factory boss offered them the option to stay and work. There was one who had a pilot's license and when he had the chance he was able to fly a plane. He was a good metalworker who did an excellent job. He stayed in France and the others went home free. The boss had bought another small factory and entrusted him with the order of German machine tools to produce welding rods.

The German travelled by motorcycle to present his work to other companies and generated many orders. He worked in this factory for many years.

He then asked the boss to take a stake in the company. The boss refused and the German left. He founded another factory in Le Fontanil, working on his own account.

Meanwhile, the company that produced welding rods closed down because it was no longer profitable. On the other hand, the "Rivets Emile Morel" factory could no longer sell its rivets which were slowly replaced by welding, and went bankrupt in 1964.

What did you do on weekends and vacations?

For my leisure time, I bought a good second-hand bicycle in 1948, I repaired it, I changed the wheels. The tires were worn out. To get a good pair of tires, you had to have a good signature from your boss because you had to live more than 5 km from your work. I was local and therefore I was not entitled to this voucher.

I started to ride my bike all over the place, I went to Grenoble, to the mountains.

At the time, we were entitled to one day of vacation per month worked, that is to say 12 days over the year. They were paid vacations.

In August 1951, I had 4 days of vacation left to take. I had to go to the Italian Consulate in Lyon to get my passport because I needed it to go to Italy and at the same time I thought I could go to Turin during these 4 days.

So I cycled from Domène to Lyon then Lyon to Chambéry and then to Lanslebourg where I slept the night in a hotel.

The next morning, I took the bike and attacked the 14 kms of the Moncenis pass, then I arrived at Susa before doing the remaining 60 km to Turin. I went to the market of Porta Palazzo where my uncle was working the market with my cousin, I took the opportunity to

buy a pair of new tires (rationed in France). At my uncle's, I changed my tires and the worn ones I rolled up and put on the on the luggage rack. I stayed 2 days with the family. On Saturday morning, I took the road towards Susa and then Montgenève.

And to eat?

I bought bread, mortadella and cheese, I made sandwiches out of them and put them in my jacket. When I arrived in the mountains, everything had been eaten.

When you arrived at the French border, were you checked?

Yes, I showed my passport, on which the color of my bike was marked when I entered Italy. Then I rode to Briançon, Col du Lautaret, Bourg d'Oisans, Riouperoux, Vizille then Domène. I made this trip in 4 days.

In Turin during my stay, there was a race that I listened to on the radio, the Tour of Piedmont with riders like Fausto Coppi, Bartali, Magne and Serse Coppi. They were all 4 of them in a leading group.

But Serse Coppi fell at the entrance to Turin, he fell and died of a cerebral hemorrhage. (according to Wikipedia, Serse Coppi died on June 29, 1951, so my father must have done this in June and not in August 1951)

How do you meet Mom? Did you go to Corato ?

Yes, I went to Corato by train in 1951, I met Mom and we got engaged. We decide to get married but the organization of the marriage dragged a little.

My mother died on January 30, 1952. We waited a few months and my cousin who became our best man, organized our wedding on April 24, 1952.

On May 1, 1952, we took the train to Rome with my friend Tony Leone who had gotten married 5 days before me and with whom I worked in Domène.

But in Rome, on May 1st, a public holiday, no public transport was available.

Fortunately his uncle came to pick us up at the station with a horse-drawn cart and took us to Mom's sister's house in the middle of Rome.

Then we took the train back to Rome to go to Domène.

Mom's sister (Concetta) arrived from Corato 2 years later and then we moved to 37 Rue de la République in Domène.

We stayed there until 1967.

And you had your 3 children.

In 1964, the "Rivets Emilie Morel" factory went bankrupt and closed and I was taken over by "Les Roche Foundries" in Domène.

His son was at school with me, as wall as the son of the engineer Maillet.

This Mr Roche was very kind and greeted all his workers by taking off his hat.

He had a large house near the church in Domène.

End of the Transcription. My father died on March 10, 2010

Louis Lafranceschina