

J. MORAN: The following is an interview with Robert [Benda], a Duluthian of Italian descent. The interview took place on March 14th 1980 in the home of the interviewer, Jacqueline Moran. Mr. Benda, where were you born and in what year?

BENDA: In Duluth, Minnesota in 1900, March 1899.

SPEAKER 1 And your parents were born in Italy?

BENDA: [Brebbia], Italy.

J. MORAN: Brebbia, Italy, which is in the town of Como [Unintelligible - 00:00:52]?

BENDA: [Unintelligible - 0:00:44], yeah, near the Italian [Health]. Lake Como is just two miles from the town of Brebbia.

J. MORAN: And your parents were married in Italy?

BENDA: Yes, my father came to this country first. He went home and [unintelligible - 00:00:57] another brother back here. They were in [another] trip in 1907, with this family that [unintelligible - 00:01:06] and two sisters in 1970 made a trip back home in the entire time of a three-month period. It would be that.

J. MORAN: Now what would have been the first year that your father came to this country the first time?

BENDA: I seem to recall about 1890.

J. MORAN: Now did your father come directly to Duluth from Brebbia?

BENDA: Yeah, from Brebbia to Duluth, evidently because his sister, [Mrs. Samo] sent him the money to help him get here.

J. MORAN: Now what did your father do as an occupation in Italy?

BENDA: Well, I never knew that. I am assuming that he was a stonemason at the time. But his family background is not too well known to me; in fact I knew little or nothing. I think some of the family had what they call a [botica], which is like a store in this country, liquor and general merchandise. He had one brother that I know of but I don't know how many others he had. He never gave us too much information. He died when I was 20 years old and there was really no conversation about it.

J. MORAN: But you say that your father did work at times as a stonemason?

BENDA: Oh, yes.

J. MORAN: Now where did he learn the trade?

BENDA: In France. He went to France when he was about 12 or 13 years old as an apprentice, and while in France in the grand stone nation, he learned to talk French. Like many others, you can... [0:02:49] as a matter of fact, his two partners Dominic Benda and Henry Bielli both could talk French as well.

J. MORAN: So it was rather common for young Italians to go to France to learn to become stonemasons.

BENDA: That's right because there was evidently a building boom or some reason for construction, which there was none in the town of Brebbia, a very small town, semi... well, it was mostly farming area but there was [unintelligible - 00:03:30] spinning mills about five miles from Brebbia, where most of the girls, after they're about 10 or 12 years old, walk five miles to and from, every day to work at the spinning mill for [unintelligible - 00:03:45] or nothing.

J. MORAN: Would your own mother have done that?

BENDA: My mother did. She talked a bit often.

J. MORAN: When your father came into this country, did he live the first time with his sister or somebody close?

BENDA: As far I know, he never did for the reason there was always somebody with him that preceded him. He left [unintelligible - 00:04:07] at first for [ripe by] pickling. Now it's much depicted – upstairs of a supposedly a barn or an apartment house, which is reminiscent [unintelligible - 00:04:27] many years ago it was knocked down. It was an old wooden structure, I remember it. It was green. He lived there. As matter of fact, the director used to live [unintelligible - 00:04:40].

J. MORAN: Now that's not though where you most of the Northern Italians lived. Did he eventually go [unintelligible - 00:04:47]?

BENDA: There wasn't too many around then and they lived either with my Uncle Somar or they lived next to the library in a farmhouse in Somar. And

there must have been [00:05:00] 15 or 20 rooms or more there in the [unintelligible - 00:05:05] and behind it and the alley was too small out in which Cadzola, rather it was two Cadzola brothers; they worked so they lived in there. Since they [unintelligible - 00:05:17] the original art gallery is still there. You will find it in the bookstore downstairs now in the library.

J. MORAN: And I know the Lanas lived there too.

BENDA:: Yeah, and the Lanas. Yeah. Yeah. We used to go down there every two Sundays for a visit and the Lanas were there.

J. MORAN: So that most of the Northern Italians as early 1890s lived in that one location before spreading a little further west, then into the area where most of them eventually wound up.

BENDA: Yes. They went west – West and 4th and 5th and north up to Eighth or Ninth Avenue probably after 1920. Before that they were concentrated down. This Somar, my Uncle Somar had two houses on 4th Avenue west and 5th and Sixth Street in which [Almanari], an uncle of mine, lived and some other Italians. So, they kind of spread around.

J. MORAN: Now your father eventually owned some lots and some homes in conjunction with Mr. Bielli who was his business partner. Is that true?

BENDA: That's right.

J. MORAN: And he owns, I believe he told me, four houses. There's four lots with two houses in each one?

BENDA: Yeah, two houses on each lot. Their addresses were 447 South Avenue and 449 South Avenue, next to each other. Behind that facing 50 was 360 was 5th and 340 mostly. Or when Bielli died, Mrs. Bielli wanted to get out of it. She wanted to get rid of the property. When my father take over the whole four houses, which he didn't want to do, he wanted her to buy it, so there was a lot of discussion back and forth and they finally decided that she would take two of the houses and he would take the other two. So we took the 443 and 360, and they took the other two.

J. MORAN: Were these substantial houses?

BENDA: Oh, yeah, all six of them houses were well constructed and they are still standing and they have modern hot water furnaces in and all.

J. MORAN: Would you say though that [unintelligible - 00:07:43] started out with less substantial houses without foundations and so forth?

BENDA: Yes. Ordinarily they would buy a run-down house, no foundation. The first thing they would do is get the [guys] together out on Sundays and start building the foundation and everybody can kind of chip in and help. They would furnish the meals and probably beer or wine.

J. MORAN: Now after your parents arrived here as a married couple, did you live in a one-family unit, your own home?

BENDA: We didn't live in our own home. We lived just a half a block from what you may call a homestead. It was at 327 West 5th, adjacent to Dominic Benda who lived at 329 West 5th right next door, and it was a small unpretentious house. No running water, we, mother had to go up half a block up the hill for water for washing and cooking and stuff like that. And then later on, our father evidently bought one of the other houses was his and it's standing now at 316 West 5th. As I understand, part of that house, the top part, was moved from around First Street to 4th Avenue West up the hill and he purchased a lot there and we lived there for a number of years and he decided to build us another house directly opposite of that and it was 315 West 5th and then we moved over there about 1905 or seven. And he wasn't satisfied with that, with just having that house and that's the other four Bielli. He decided to build another house behind 315 West 5th which would have made it 315 and a half West 5th. So we had four houses all in a row from South Avenue to 6th Street.

J. MORAN: Now did the Italians actually build these houses in South?

BENDA: No. All the houses that my father and Bielli built were built by, in most cases, French carpenters who, again, [unintelligible - 00:09:54] as a store.

J. MORAN: I'll get to that story in a minute and we'll talk about them. One more question about your family [00:10:00] home, did you family take in boarders?

BENDA: Yes. They've got boarders up to this point if you were a relative. When my uncle comes from Italy he stayed. And our cousin by the name of Sylvester Benda who's a machinist, he stayed with us. And then one man, where he come from I don't know but his name was [Potoneger] or something like that. He was a chemist; he evidently got acquaintance with my father through the store.

J. MORAN: Now when your father first came to this country, did he work as a stonemason?

BENDA: Yes, for not too long because there seemed to have been a trend at the time, the town was growing up and booming and there was a – it was necessary for people to know where to go and buy food and stores just sprung up like crazy. He figured it would be easier to be in business because my Uncle Somer had already been in that kind of business and he probably told him this is an easier way to make money than break your back with stones.

J. MORAN: So now your father did start a business with Mr. Bielli and --?

BENDA: It seems as though he was in business on his own for a while. He was with Dominic Benda, Victor, at 23 East First Street for a while and then it appears as though he was in business on his own at 221 West of First Street. And finally Dominic Benda and my dad and Henry Bielli went into business on 309 West First Street.

J. MORAN: And the name of their --

BENDA: Benda-Bielli and company.

J. MORAN: Now this was a kind of fruits and confectioneries, tobacco --?

BENDA: Cigars, tobacco, candy, imported cheese and olive oil and imported wine.

J. MORAN: It was not a general grocery store.

BENDA: No, no. It was like a more of a confectionery store, although fruits were the main stay, but there was, I recall... they sold jewelry. I even recall they had guns for sale and knives and watches, anything they could buy to sell for a price to make money. The 4th of July, they also sold firecracker.

J. MORAN: Do you know how much capital your father may have had when he first went into business?

BENDA: I would say very little. He may have had some help, and no doubt he had help from someone. Or in stocking the store, the wholesale company like **[unintelligible - 00:12:54]** usually were willing to extend them credit. And I think possibly at times he had to go to the bank for money and he knew the banker, especially [Mahoney] with American Exchange Bank and I'm sure they helped. I don't know where else he could turn for money other than my Uncle Somar because there was no other out there who accumulated any money in those early stages around 1905, 1907, 1910 and so forth.

J. MORAN: Now the store I assume was also a social gathering spot?

BENDA: Sort of, yeah.

J. MORAN: For Italians?

BENDA: It seems anytime there was a picnic or something, you wondered how everybody, I mean, at particular times around **[unintelligible - 00:13:47]** would know, evidently they would go into the store almost every day and say, "Okay, we're having a picnic at 36th Avenue or 34th, wherever it is; it was 36th Avenue **[unintelligible - 00:13:59]**, where they had picnics quite frequently on Sunday. So I suppose the contact was there; we had phones at that time, the telephone.

J. MORAN: Would they play cards?

BENDA: They would play cards and stuff --

J. MORAN: In the back room?

BENDA: Yeah, in the back room.

J. MORAN: Was this strictly for Italians and some Americans?

BENDA: No. I think the musician would sit in, because I'm going right back on the memory deal. I was only five, six, seven or eight years at that time but I do recall other than Italians sitting around playing sometimes. Musicians are great for cards too, you know, during their layover period of industry.

J. MORAN: And I wonder what **[unintelligible - 00:14:43]** that created them?

BENDA: Between 3rd and 4th Avenue and West Street. Do you know where [Boyd's] drugstore is?

J. MORAN: Yes.

BENDA: That used to be exactly where they were at. It was an all tumbled-down wooden shack and along come **[unintelligible - 00:14:57]**. He bought the property **[00:15:00]** and knocked the store down and built a theater that he called **[unintelligible - 00:15:06]** and later on turned into Zelda's Grill and Bar and since then they have moved over west and the bar structure is currently occupying that place.

J. MORAN: Now you mentioned musicians, this was also close to the **[unintelligible - 00:15:23]** Theater?

BENDA: Just a block and a half, yeah, kind of a block or less than a block from **[unintelligible - 00:15:28]** Theater.

J. MORAN: So the musician patronized the store and the Italian men played cards in the back. Was there a place for Italian women at all **[unintelligible - 00:15:40]**?

BENDA: Women, no, no, no.

J. MORAN: Women other than --

BENDA: Back to musicians, there were several Italians that were musicians too and naturally, let's say probably because the musician come on, before you know it, it was a **[unintelligible - 00:15:59]** not all the time but from time to time.

J. MORAN: Now you mentioned that your father spoke French, that Mr. Bielli and Mr. Benda also spoke French. Was this the gathering spot then for French-speaking people?

BENDA: There is a lot of French people who would stop there, and knowing that they had somebody that could talk French and if they needed anything they would get some help. And in many cases, the company would send French carpenters out to work or get them jobs. Many of them were employed as contractors with the railway, which at that time was electrified and --

J. MORAN: So this was a kind of a clearinghouse for labor also?

BENDA: Yes, it seemed, especially people coming and wanting to go up to the mines. It seems though not all cases on [unintelligible - 00:16:59] but in many cases they were sent to [Edmond], Virginia on the iron range through the store contact on 309 [unintelligible - 00:17:08] Street.

J. MORAN: Do you suppose that your father and his partners made some sort of commission out of this?

BENDA: They must have. They must have changed something. Mr. Bielli did most of that because he started as a bookkeeper as well as a partner and took his turn waiting on trade, but most of the bookkeeping was done by Mr. Bielli.

J. MORAN: So they had a great many contacts with many of the miners already in [unintelligible - 00:17:31] another northern Italian mentioned that some of the Italians in town felt that a certain individual who was employed by the Oliver and Mining Company. In fact they were head of the security forces. But this particular individual was [distrusted] by the other Italians?

BENDA: There may have been a person of that kind who worked with them, and probably the idea of reporting back to the steel company of any union activities or wanting to be unionized at that time. The steel company had no unionization and there was no unions as we know them today, and I suppose that if somebody start talking about "Well, let's go with this person here; we got an organization that will help us get better wages." And this person, unknown to them, would probably report it back to the [unintelligible - 00:18:28] mining company to say here is the deal.

J. MORAN: But specifically this individual then was thought to be a spy for the mining company?

BENDA: As far as I know, he was not known to the average person. Somebody may have known but the average person didn't know until later. While this was going on, they probably didn't suspect, but later on when people were laid off, they suspected there must have been a spy amongst them.

J. MORAN: So your father at the time was not aware of this?

BENDA: No, he didn't know.

J. MORAN: Would your father have been against such an individual? In other words, would your father have been sympathetic to the labor movement?

BENDA: I think so, yeah.

J. MORAN: Now your father and Mr. Bielli were also ticket agents for **[unintelligible - 00:19:16]**. Is that correct?

BENDA: That's right.

J. MORAN: And they sold tickets to Italians coming to this country, Italians leaving the country?

BENDA: No. I think if anybody ever wanted to go back to Italy, they would usually come in and arrange for the ticket to come from Italy to Duluth. I don't know if they ever had any – they may have had, unknown to me, but they were coming from Italy to Duluth more than they were going from Duluth to Italy. A matter of fact, there were very few people around our town Brebbia that went home during say from 1905 to 1920. I know of no family **[00:20:00]** that went for a visit other than our own family. Did I mention we went home for three months? They all come here, they have to work. They couldn't accumulate money by hard physical labor to go on trips like that, although I understand that some of the other sections of them, they went home quite often, especially on the East Coast. We have a relative in New York who went home about every year. He was managing in our top. They're on Duluth, I mean, his family. Very few that I recall ever went home on a trip. A lot of them went home and stayed off.

J. MORAN: That's what's I wanted to ask you.

BENDA: Yeah, a lot of them come here just a few months, a few years, a year or two, and accumulate some money and they went home and never did come back.

J. MORAN: Were you aware of northern Italians specifically who did that, or relative?

BENDA: Yes. What happened to the southern ones, around Naples **[unintelligible - 00:20:53]** I had no contact of this until I was up in age, around 20 years or so. I was like I knew what was going on; as a matter of fact I I didn't

know that they do a very west say--20th or 30's or west, never went to
[unintelligible - 00:21:13] in Duluth until I was in my teenage.

J. MORAN: So you weren't aware of those two Italian colonies?

BENDA: No. I knew they were there, but who the people were, where they lived, I had no contact with them until in my later adult life.

J. MORAN: Let's talk a little bit more about the shaft the store. For instance, what wholesaler did the Italians use? Where did they buy their fruits, their wine and so forth?

BENDA: Well, as I recall, [Canutsen] brothers, [Weltson and Kathy] Lavin brothers; they were Jewish wholesale [couldn't reach].

J. MORAN: So there were no Italian wholesalers in town at that time?

BENDA: No. I don't know. There were no Italian wholesalers.

J. MORAN: Now they had candy, they had tobacco, roasted nuts...?

BENDA: They had candy and tobacco. Candies used to come, I recall, in 25-pound wooden [crate] from Chicago and they would take and place them in little paper cups on a glass tray in a shelf casing. People are buying by the [pitch] or by the pound. Chestnuts are roasted in season. Peanuts were bought raw and roasted to where the – our contraption evidently run by kerosene; I don't know how they heated it, maybe by **[unintelligible - 00:22:37]**, I don't recall, maybe kersone and they put the raw peanuts in sort of a drum and they just had a – they turn it. Fresh roasted peanuts was quite a big sale item.

J. MORAN: And the store was patronized by the people of all nationalities?

BENDA: All nationalities, all walks of life, from the highs and lows.

J. MORAN: Now evidently there were several of these confectioneries and these small shafts all up and down Superior Street,

BENDA: Oh yeah,

J. MORAN: And even First and Second Street.

BENDA: Yes.

J. MORAN: So they mattered locale they were in that particular neighborhood and they would patronize your father's shop.

BENDA: If you wanted to buy something from the store, like they had between 3rd and 4th Avenue, between 2nd and 3rd, there was probably another thing between the First, Lake Avenue and First Avenue East, there was Victor Benda and there was another vendor who was up on 2nd Avenue on the list of [unintelligible - 00:23:32] street, where priority grew up on 2nd street in the 2nd avenue of west. Around 5th Avenue West, there was [Zurichs] and there was a family, [Verini] and almost in every back there is at least one of these types of stores.

J. MORAN: Now we've mentioned that your family did not live near the southern Italian colony at 11th Avenue West, was there any particular reason for that?

BENDA: The only reason is because when my dad's company start to evidently [unintelligible - 00:24:08] from his sister who was Mrs. Somar, they had already located themselves at 6th Avenue [unintelligible - 00:24:16] where Chevrolet agency is now. And I suppose the tendency was there because of several reasons to live there. There seemed to be a [unintelligible - 00:24:30] around that, say from Lake Avenue to 4th or 5th Avenue, for the reason there was grain elevators at the 4th and 5th Avenue East and [Lake Run]. The first grain shipment out of this area was stored in grain elevators that are right between 4th and 5th Avenue East and the Lake Run. At that time, the canal was not [completed things] in the States. And the rail road went right along coming to this [00:25:00] and they loaded the grain there, and I suppose there was a lot of activities there, one of the reasons they located there and...

J. MORAN: But later really the colony really established itself around 4th and 5th Avenue West.

BENDA: That's right, around that area and they stayed there.

Why they didn't go any further, I don't know. It was never – the terrain was probably the same as it was in Brebbia [unintelligible - 00:25:25] for then I was through that and unless you got to [unintelligible - 00:25:28] and they were satisfied there. They were used to that kind of terrain. Somebody

else would probably want to go someplace else, and of course, there was no means of transportation going east or west until later when the streets got, went as far as lakeside and [inside]. The banks, the financial center was around 3rd Avenue West, right across the street where the **[unintelligible - 00:25:54]** now the Northern City, on the corner of 3rd Avenue West Street was American Exchange National Bank. The bank would just sell this and, and the hotels were all within a block or two from there, so the traffic was there.

J. MORAN: And your family lived right up the hill. Did they not [need] your father's business?

BENDA: I thought **[unintelligible - 00:26:13]**.

J. MORAN: Did the Northern Italians socialize with the Southern Italians at all?

BENDA: Not that I recall. They were there when I was **[unintelligible - 00:26:23]** I suppose at the church, that's as far as they went, but I don't ever recall until my adult life. I was never in – I started to [stay] at home. That was the only home that we ever went to was our own cousins, near relatives and friends from the same town. That the **[unintelligible - 00:26:42]** we were all very friendly but...

J. MORAN: Were you speaking Italian then as a child?

BENDA: Oh, yes. I talked Italian until I was probably 15 years old, and then for some reason or other, I kept talking... my mother would talk to Italians and they all answered back in English and, of course, that has helped her learn to talk English and she talked well. As a matter of fact, she also learned to read papers, magazines. I know she was home quite a bit and had too much work to do while we were all working and she would learn how to read on her own.

J. MORAN: Excuse me. I have to turn the tape here.

J. MORAN: Would you say there was any discrimination amongst the Italians, the Northern Italians towards the Southern Italians, at all?

BENDA: No, I don't think there was. The only difference we ever saw was that their foods are different now. The Northern Italians concentrated on rice, in which there was rice-growing areas where my mother was born. At times, she used to work in the rice field. Rice was the mainstay in Polenta, which is cornmeal and **[unintelligible - 00:00:46]**. The Southern Italians – we didn't know spaghetti. I don't think they knew spaghetti in the northern part of Italy like the Southern Italians. They had a different type of food like spaghetti and and really more spicy food. The Northern Italians tended to be more of a bland diet, like rice and wine.

J. MORAN: Other than the foods though, the Northern Italians did not perceive other cultural differences between themselves and the Southern Italians? You were familiar with the name of [Castillano], the Italian consulate in Duluth until late 1926. What impression did the Northern Italian community have with Castillano?

BENDA: Well, in most cases they were a little wary of him. They didn't think that they would get a fair shake if they went to him for a legal or financial – or a legal problem that's going on. In some cases, they had to go to him if they had some needs in contact with people they left back in Italy. But they didn't seem to have too high of a respect for him for some reason or another, why, I don't know. There were some talk of some shady deals with some of the people.

J. MORAN: So they certainly would not trust their money with him. They would have used another bank or...

BENDA: No. Matter of fact, very few of the Northern Italians even had any money for the bank or **[unintelligible - 00:02:28]** until probably their offsprings grew up to a point where they were bringing in money because they all had families, you know, several children. Not large family, two or three on average, but right away the average child would go to work after high school. We got educated in high school but very seldom college education. As soon as they got out of high school, they

went to work, started bringing money home, and of course then they were more self-sufficient, but they didn't depend on welfare or charity because they compromised. They didn't have the best of everything; later on when their income was increased by steady work and their children bringing home money, they got the finer things in life too. But they waited until they had enough money to buy it. Credit, there's so much a month it was almost unknown to the average Italian, in northern Italy especially. They would save [unintelligible - 00:03:21] with something until they had the money to pay cash, then they'd get it.

J. MORAN: You mentioned three children. Would you say that three children was probably the average for the Northern Italians? That's definitely a smaller family than most of the Italians.

BENDA: Three or four. I can't think of any that had five, six, seven or eight. I am sure in some cases, Southern Italians had more.

J. MORAN: Yes, they did.

BENDA: They had more.

J. MORAN: How about those Northern Italians then who were not merchants? They were probably stonemasons or craftsman of one kind or another. How did they live during the off seasons? Did the merchants lend them money, those who were relatives and friends and so forth?

BENDA: I really don't know. But it seems to that while they were working, they were conservative enough they always saved something for a rainy day, let's say, and if there was no work on the outside, they sometimes got jobs as janitors or servicemen from inside. But they lived frugally and they always saved, knowing that they didn't know whether they were going to go to work next month or not, so they were careful that way. And as their children grow up, they helped.

J. MORAN: Now let's talk a little about discrimination in general. You've said that you didn't feel the Northern Italians discriminated against the Southern Italians. Was there discrimination in Duluth against Italians, be it Northern or Southern? Did you experience any? [00:05:00]

BENDA: I think there was. There was some resentment, especially when we – I started at the Cathedral School and most students were Irish. And the Irish would mock us, you know, that the Italians are – “Here comes those bananas,” or they would call us some names. But they can look down on you. Why, I don’t know. We asked for no quarrels, we didn't do anything different than what the sisters would teach us. We were all good students. I don’t know of any who ever had to go to summer school to make up classes and so forth. But as persons grew up, the Irish, they forgot about it, you know. They respected, you know. They figure, “Well, after all they’re human beings like us, what's the difference?” And of course the Irish had a discrimination stigma against them for years not only in **[unintelligible - 00:05:58]** but in the east, you know. They had signs up in Pennsylvania, New York, help a lot of the Irish demand the **[unintelligible - 00:06:05]**. And that was the same thing for the Italians. They were pushed around. They wouldn't hire the Italians [in those days].

J. MORAN: Was there a great deal of discrimination in Duluth against all Catholics, Irish and Italians, whatever?

BENDA: I don’t think it was open like that.

J. MORAN: I had heard there was a great deal of discrimination against the Catholics **[unintelligible - 00:06:28]**.

BENDA: Well, of course, in business and in different industries and in different offices, if there was a promotion in order, I'm sure there were times when a Catholic was overlooked and a Protestant pushed up because of the Masonic Lodge. The Masonics, they’re trying **[unintelligible - 00:06:51]**. They were instrumental; matter of fact, they happened to be thought to be better educated or more luckier in business. They had more business and they we're hired, and when it came to make a decision they'd always hire their own member. If you are a Mason or [Shriner], you’d get first choice. I think that was obvious in many cases, but in...

J. MORAN: And how about the Ku Klux Klan? It was said that there was a Ku Klux Klan in this town that was after, against Catholics primarily around 1920s.

BENDA: It was a staging of burning of a cross at one time. What they were trying to prove, I don't know; whether they just wanted to know they were [actively] against the Italians. Who they were against I never did know, but I knew of a case where a cross was burned down about **[unintelligible - 00:07:44]** and in later years, in confidence someone told me that the Irish part of the Catholic faith at the time **[unintelligible - 00:07:57]** to alert the people that there's somebody trying to make things difficult, so they got together, you know, rallied together. And of course at that time they blamed the Ku Klux Klan for the cross being burned but they established later that the Catholic side, some Catholics burned it as a symbol to rally support to fight against the clan rather than to indicate the clan was – maybe the clan was starting to get strong and they wanted to squelch them before they got too strong by having the show of burning of the cross.

J. MORAN: Interesting. How about Father [Durilli], the pastor of the Italian National Church here in town?

BENDA: Father Durilli.

J. MORAN: What did your family think about Father Durilli?

BENDA: He was ambitious, go-getter, he wanted to do as much as he could do for the Italians in the neighborhood, and he always had something on the fire: build a new school or build a new church or get donations and - - but he was around, he frequently visited all the families one by one, Southern, Northern Italians. I know in many cases he would come to our home. My mother was sickly at times, and he'd come for confession for her, he'd give her holy communion, but the next day he'd probably wound up down to my father's store **[unintelligible - 00:09:36]** for something new, a new church, and he was not afraid to contact other than Catholics. He'd go down the street in the business

and he also would ask for money because he wanted to build a new church and he got this new school. And the average Italian didn't have too much to give; they didn't have an income. But [00:10:00] he knew that if he went to a person with business, that it was to their advantage to donate because he'd mention it in church, he'd probably put a plaque or something, and then in many cases same [vows] as were donated. People were happy to make some money, have a little better income than the average.

J. MORAN: He did have this reputation, something of a money grabber. Was there antagonism towards him because of this?

BENDA: I don't think so. They more or less admired him for it because he was working at something all the time.

J. MORAN: I know now that you Italians were not too happy with this idea of building the parish school however, [unintelligible - 00:10:43] hostility there, resistance.

BENDA: There was, yeah. But they admired the man's willingness to do those things. Now they figured there wasn't enough Italian children who lived in the neighborhood to frequent the school or support the school. It was a common business sense of, it was a financial fiasco [unintelligible - 00:11:05] because there was no assurance that the next generation coming after the first generation will have enough children to fill that school and it [won't happen]. Now, it proved that most of these second generation Italians married other than Italians, and before they know it, they are not in the church at all. I mean, the church had to be closed because there wasn't enough donations to support. When you went to the public schools—most Italians went to the public schools—there was no tuition. Very few went to the Catholic schools which required tuition. We happened to go; I happened to go with my two sisters. They all went and graduated, but I didn't because of this reason. At the fifth grade, I left on my own and went to the public school, [Jackson] School, for the reason that all of the fellows that I

chummed around with were going to public school and I wanted to be with them.

J. MORAN: And they weren't Italians.

BENDA: No. They were German mixed with Italian, German-Irish with... we had Jewish there. We were a big variety of people in that sense there, a little of everything really.

J. MORAN: Did you or other members of the Northern Italian community hear of Father Durilli's dispute with Bishop Nicholas and thereafter with some of the other bishops who followed Bishop Nicholas?

BENDA: Oh, yeah, there were some. I heard some talk about some difference of opinions, whether a parish should be cut up a certain way geographically or according to the nationalities. I never did know in detail what he was reaching about. I think he was reaching for that he wanted the Italian church just for Italians or just for the Catholics in that area. But as the figure were polled, people were [forced] to the cathedral into their church.

J. MORAN: Are you familiar with Bishop Nicholas? Were you old enough to know him?

BENDA: Bishop Nicholas, just to see him; I never had conversation with him. When I was a child, probably seven to eight years old, Bishop [Magawic] who preceded him was known to me because I used to go to the Cathedral School. After school, across to the parish home, he had a big library of books and he was asking to help him put the books away, but I never was sold the idea of being an altar boy. Whether Magawic ever asked me to it or not, I don't recall, but the Irish, they were all altar boys. Almost all of them were altar boys.

J. MORAN: But you are not familiar with Bishop Nicholas and knowing about him?

BENDA: No. I knew that he was evidently from Cincinnati, I recall, from a rich family and his case were different from the ordinary, especially as we're talking the Italian families. They didn't want to be

[unintelligible - 00:14:13] ordinary people, but he wanted to... the best of everything.

J. MORAN: So he was something of an aristocrat.

BENDA: Yeah.

J. MORAN: Do you recall ever hearing of a petition which was circulated within the Italian community around 1920 to remove Father Durilli from the parish? Do you recall hearing anything...?

BENDA: I don't ever recall.

J. MORAN: How about later when Father Durilli came back to St. Peter's after the new church had been built? Or perhaps it was even in the old church, before the new church was built. There was some dispute with the men in the parish about using the basements for [unintelligible - 00:14:54].

BENDA: Yeah, there were...many of the masons in the library [00:15:00] helped out the church that they have in West and 3rd Street and they figured they donated most of the time. There was some money paid; they got some money, they didn't work entirely for nothing. I don't know where they got the funds. But it seemed though they figured, "Well, here's a good place to have a place for us to meet and sit around because now we all have been working. So they used to go down to the sub-basement. There's a church property and there was a basement, and the sub-basement contained the heater, hot water boiler or hot steam boiler, I recall. And the coal was there and everything else. And they would play cards and pass time, you know, while they weren't working.

J. MORAN: Father [Duke] permitted this?

BENDA: And they were five [unintelligible - 00:15:50]. As I recall, there was some disagreement there that he wanted to eliminate, that he didn't want [unintelligible - 00:15:58]. So, I think they finally left. And I remember seeing [unintelligible - 00:16:04] sitting around playing cards. There were only, say, ten at the most sitting around [unintelligible - 00:16:11] making some stuff up. So, you find them

hanging around and they're always to a pool, a [resized] pool or different pools downtown. They didn't play pool in the south, you know, why this opportunity costs money for it. That's how conservative they get; when they know they don't know whether they are going to work today or tomorrow, and so they just watch somebody else play, but in some places, they'd get away from the house, to downtown take a walk and probably on their way home buy groceries and go home. But they evidently broke that up or something and they figured, "Well, if that's the way you feel," probably they said, "Oh well, [unintelligible - 00:16:54]."

J. MORAN: Possibly Father Durilly felt this was improper, I suppose, on the church property.

BENDA: I suppose that he was so isolated that – I recall this one time, for some reason I had to work for some Mason to do and I knew that that's where I'd find him. He wasn't home and I went there. To get down there, you almost have to a monkey, you know; the stairway wasn't as well as it could be. But I saw the place and it wasn't a place that I would like to spend too many hours in.

J. MORAN: You know, some people in the parish seem to feel that Father Durilli acquired a personal fortune over the years that he pastored that parish. Do you think there is any truth to that at all?

BENDA: Well, I understand completely. As a matter of fact, I think with all the information I've heard and gathered, when he died, in his safe was around 70,000 or not more. But he stipulated in there that so much of that money would go to furthering his ambitions plans for the [unintelligible - 00:18:06] had too much damage by the Bishop, after so many years otherwise, it would revert to his estate or something.

J. MORAN: Actually that [was] true.

BENDA: And...

J. MORAN: Do people think he acquired this money... how do they think he acquired this money?

BENDA: Well, as the average priest, as I understand, I don't know the details but as I understand, when a priest marries you, buries you, not bury but at least marries you and christens your child, there is always a donation from the parents or from the marrying couple. Now if you do want to get married ordinarily, the priest comes, you go into the church or hallway, whatever it is, there is always a donation of 10, 25, 5, 50 dollars depending upon your income. Well, if you do that over a period of 15, 20, 40 years, several times a year and you only get five dollars [of tax], it won't take long to accumulate a fortune. Plus the fact that you could probably take that money and invest it, he may have invested some, he may have some stocks, bonds, who knows, but...

J. MORAN: Did he own rental properties?

BENDA: Yeah, I understand he bought a house from a lender, which was a brick house just a block from the St. Peter's Church on 4th Street, and the address was 725 West [Parkview]. There's two houses, [Unintelligible - 00:19:36] and his brother-in-law, they're in the summer, in fact two summers again, only two houses. And he bought these, from this understanding that it's 20,000. For some reason, he went to Montana. He had something out in Montana, but he came back later. He bought one... the nuns, while they were teaching schools, while the school's open, were quartered there; [00:20:00] whether you charged the parish for the with nuns staying there, I don't know, but as I understand, he owned that. I understand also he owned the house, a small house, a house next to the road. That's the [Kenwood] school there.

J. MORAN: Had you heard that the parish itself was paying the [unintelligible - 00:20:21]?

BENDA: No, I never heard any conversation or ever inquired about it, but I heard he wanted to own the [unintelligible - 00:20:30] and he also owned the one on [unintelligible - 00:20:35]. Other than that, I don't know. I think myself that he was shrewd enough to invest some money someplace other than real estate, maybe stocks.

J. MORAN: How do you feel about the association of Italians with crime?

BENDA: Italians with crime?

J. MORAN: In the minds of most, Italians are associated with crime.

BENDA: I don't follow the question really. Say that again.

J. MORAN: Well, first of all, there seems to be no question but that Italians are associated with crime. How do you feel about this?

BENDA: Oh, nationwide, you mean. Oh, yeah. Well, like I say that **[unintelligible - 00:21:20]** there is no question in mind that there is a lot of Italian-organized crimes. There is also a lot of Jewish-organized crimes. There is a lot of Irish, a lot of them – in fact, I personally know of many Jewish people as well as other than Italians that are in crime sort of they call the mafia, they control organized gambling, prostitution, narcotics and so forth. But because the Italians have been stuck with that name for some reason I don't know why but I guess one of the biggest crime bosses in the country is the Jewish [Lansky] or something like that **[unintelligible - 00:22:04]** and out of Minneapolis I know of two-brother **[unintelligible - 00:22:14]** whether they're tied up with a whole national syndicate, I don't know, I knew him personally through the **[unintelligible - 00:22:20]** but there was never any murders or anything else while they were running the slot machines **[unintelligible - 00:22:29]** who are in Minneapolis, Italian **[unintelligible - 00:22:35]** and so forth they were in bootlegging, they were gambling; whether they were in prostitution, I doubt it. But they accumulated money and when the flamingo in Las Vegas was available too they got together with the [Adolfs] who were Lebanese or Syrian and they went to Las Vegas and made a lot of money out of the flamingos **[unintelligible - 00:22:59]** but not only the Italians but many others, if you want to go through them.

J. MORAN: Had you ever heard of the Black Hand when you were younger?

BENDA: I just heard that. Well, I was too young to know that there was some activity around Chicago, if I recall.

J. MORAN: But now in Duluth, you never heard of any activity of Black Hand in Duluth?

BENDA: No, no.

J. MORAN: How about the 11th Avenue West area, the so-called “Little Italy”? Did they have a bad name at all?

BENDA: I don’t think so. They just called it Little Italy. I saw most of the Italians from the southern part [unintelligible - 00:23:34] close to there, there was businesses too on 11th Avenue West and Michigan Street. At one time, [Regimen] who was with [Regiment and Rustle], they had a pool hall right on the western Michigan, then later on they tell I recall, I think I can't recall now whether this Duluth street railway we had their barns there on 11th Avenue or whether farther from the street railway or street railway was sold to them. At one time, their dirty business started there; as a matter of fact, the [unintelligible - 00:24:10] himself lived just two doors from outside the suburban and he used to have a lady deliver milk and he used to have to cross our yard to get into his barn, you know. My dad and him were friends and I think they were considerably the same Germany were very friends with my dad and gave him business.

J. MORAN: This little Italy area you, don’t think that they had a bad reputation? How about during prohibition?

BENDA: Oh, during prohibition, they had a reputation of having many bootlegging there; as a matter of fact, several of the fellows in the second generation sold their liquor on... there is a place, an old gas station by 11th or 12th Avenue West Michigan Street was a night spot. [00:25:00] There was, let’s say, several families who probably derive income from bootlegging but the majority were still hardworking people; they had jobs, their children had jobs, they didn’t need that income.

J. MORAN: Okay, we just have a couple of minutes left here. You mentioned the trip back to Italy with your father in 1907.

BENDA: That's right. There's a family [unintelligible - 00:25:28] two sisters, mother and father and I.

J. MORAN: Now how was it that your father was [unintelligible - 00:25:33] to make that trip in 1907?

BENDA: Well, we had been in business, I think, probably at least 10 years at 309 West with Bielli and Dominic [Benda]. And I remember saying to my mother... she didn't want to go because going on a boat made her sick all the time. He says, "Well, we got little money together and money you kind of worked to get is a financial [unintelligible - 00:25:59] what they call inflation today. "Let's just go and use some of this up." So we went for three months and my grandfather on my mother's side was a farmer, probably better good than the average. He had a little farm away from this home they lived in and he had oxen and a cart, and he had corn, graze corn. He had sheep; he was a sheep herder and had grazed corn. I remember going to his farm and helping to take corn out of the – what do they call it [unintelligible - 00:26:44] something and take all by hand and take the kernels out. I remember coming home with blistered hands, helping him. He lived in house, a duplex, or triplex almost. He had sons that were... he had one son who was a mason, I don't know, he was a carpenter and he lived there next door near a carpenter shop. That gets him almost to town proper. So he was better off financially than the average person.

J. MORAN: Mr. Benda, thank you very much./AT/ee