

Hudson River Valley Institute
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories
Dr. Louis Zuccarello

Date: Friday, October 10, 2008
Length: Approximately 36 1/2 minutes

Camera Man: Whenever you guys are ready you can start.

Interviewer (Paul Contarino): Could you please state your name for the camera?

Louis Zuccarello: Louis Zuccarello.

Interviewer: Where did you grow up?

Zuccarello: Grew up in the Bronx, New York.

Interviewer: So where did you go to school in the Bronx?

Zuccarello: I went to school at p.s. 87 at one point. Then I went to Saint Francis of Rome School, then I went to Mount Saint Michael High School, keep going?

Interviewer: Yes-college?

Zuccarello: I went to Saint John's College and then I went to Fordham University for my doctoral degree.

Interviewer: So what did you major in?

Zuccarello: History, government in college, and then political science in graduate school.

Interviewer: Why did you decide to choose those fields?

Zuccarello: Why did I decide to?

Interviewer: Choose those fields, were there any? [Cuts off]

Zuccarello: Well, I was always interested in, I had some great teachers in history, one of whom we honored last Saturday with naming a classroom here at Marist after him, but I had had him in high school. So he was certainly inspirational. I- at one time, entertained the idea of becoming a lawyer so that those fields were related but I gave that up in college because I didn't want to spend the rest of my life buried in a library. I worked in a law library. So I went and got a PhD and went teaching which probably I do more work [laughs] in the library than many of the lawyers that I saw.

Interviewer: So what did you teach [cut off by camera man].

Camera Man: I'm sorry, stop for just one second; just give like a two second pause in between asking after he stops so we have some dead space in between for editing. Thanks.

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Interviewer: So where did you start teaching?

Zuccarello: Where did I start teaching?

Interviewer: Yes.

Zuccarello: I started teaching as soon as I got out of college at Mount Saint Michael High School, I taught there for two years, then I taught at New Rochelle High School for six years and then I came to Marist.

Interviewer: How long were you a professor at Marist?

Zuccarello: 1966-I retired in 2001 and I am still teaching here part-time.

Interviewer: What do you teach?

Zuccarello: Political Science.

Interviewer: How did you-how did you become affiliated with Mount Carmel parish?

Zuccarello: In the late 1980s, we were looking for a new parish. We had been in a parish-another parish in the Poughkeepsie area. Father LaMorte was appointed as pastor of Mount Carmel parish. We knew Father LaMorte from his previous association at Marist. He was basically in the same neighborhood that I grew up in, in the Bronx, he went to Mount Saint Michael High School so we had linkages and that was our reason for going there.

Interviewer: Since you happen to know quite a bit about Mount Carmel parish, where and when did the push come to establish a separate Italian Church? Did Saint Peter's itself play a significant role in facilitating that process?

Zuccarello: Well I think there's two questions there, the first question is really the major Italian settlement in Poughkeepsie, at least my research shows was in the middle to the end of the 1880s and naturally they got used to Poughkeepsie. They were interested in a religious community. So initially they were; the Italians in Poughkeepsie, were invited or asked I don't know who took the initiative to have their religious services in the basement of Saint Peter's Church. The pastor of Saint Peter's Church was Father Sheehan who was a very good man, [cuts off] no I am sorry, the first pastor was Father Nilan who had been educated in Italy, spoke Italian and sought to respond to the spiritual needs of the people at the time. He died in 1899, 1899-1900, I don't remember the exact date and he was replaced by, eventually by Monsignor Sheehan. Sheehan was the one who was really the pastor of Saint Peter's at the time the Italians got organized and began their push for a church of their own. During the time they were worshipping in the basement of Saint Peter's Church, there was a priest who came over, periodically from Mother Cabrini's orphanage across the river in Westpark. His name was Father [Yaccabucchi??] and he was the person who tended to having mass said for the Italians in Italian. In the mid, say maybe in the early 1900s, the desire for a church of their own began or at least some place that they

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could worship. Now this idea of worshipping in the bottom of Saint Peter's Church was not something unique because throughout the Archdiocese of New York this was a strategy that was used by Irish churches to accommodate Italian or even Polish newcomers. Polish people would also worship in the bottom of Saint Peter's Church. So it wasn't something unique. In [slight pause], let's say in 1905, that era, really the pressure was building to do something, to have a church of their own. They were beginning to accumulate money to that purpose and in 1908; the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was incorporated. There was no building but the parish, the community was initiated. The second question you had was about Saint Peter's. Saint Peter's accommodated the Italian settlers. They didn't push for a separate church; they didn't stand in the way of a separate church. There were misgivings about where's the church going to be located? What would be the impact on the parish? but for the most part, Monsignor Sheehan was supportive, only interested in making sure that if the church parish was established that it would be able to support itself.

Interviewer: How did Mount Carmel serve the Italian community?

Zuccarello: Well in a sense, if you understand what I'm trying to say, it gave them the church back because now they had church they could worship in, in their own language with their own practices, their own traditions, their saints, not that these saints were unique to Italians but Italians as part of their culture, especially southern Italian culture had the saints and the statues of the saints were an important part of their worship service. So they could have their own church, shaped, conducted the way they understood and they way they wanted. Jay Dolan in his book *History of American Catholicism* quotes a Polish immigrant, the same thing could have been said about the Italians, that he said, "we're lost here in this country, we don't have our religion, we don't have our prayers, we don't have our God," why, because it wasn't the culture, the religious culture that they were used to. The Irish who were in charge of many of the churches that these folks gravitated towards didn't understand the cultures that they were dealing with as the Italians and the Poles didn't understand [Slight laugh] the culture that the Irish were dealing with. So we had a failure to communicate. Oh how did it serve? I kind of went off it. So it obviously served in religious ways, in the spiritual ways but also the church was more than just a religious institution, it was the social center. It was the place where the community would gather for celebrations of feasts. It was a mutual aide society in a sense because people would help each other they would know each other's needs. So it was much more than a religious organization, it was social, it was economic, it was cultural. Now one thing you should be aware of is the challenge facing the church was that we talk about these people as being Italians, they probably identified themselves, as more as Neapolitans and Sicilians, and people from Calabria, etc. Getting those groups to cooperate with each other, to integrate with it each as it were was a challenge which the church I think successfully, achieved.

Interviewer: Did Mount Carmel help Italians coming to America help find labor-jobs in the area?

Zuccarello: I don't know of any specific organized program other than the program of word of mouth, I know this, you know there's a job here but in the Poughkeepsie area, there was a powerful padrone and as you know the padrone system was a system for linking up new arrivals with jobs and so that system persisted-existed in the Poughkeepsie area.

Interviewer: When was Mount Carmel School established and why was it established?

Zuccarello: The school was established in 1936 in the heart of the depression. It had been in the works as it were, it was a desire or a plan from the late 1920s; people were saving money, trying to get the wear with alls to establish this school. Some very few as far as I could determine from my research, very few could attend Saint Peter's School but it wasn't a very comfortable setting for them. Many of them who did go to school went to the public schools and in the public schools, and in the public schools, they faired, you know, the same [door closes] as anybody else attending the public schools. The desire for a school of their own where their culture could be continued, where they were more comfortable being understood was a long standing desire; 1936 it was realized and that's the founding.

Camera Man: Stop for one second, I'm sorry you might have to re-do that question. I want to make sure they walk the other way so we won't have any more interruptions. So like I said you might want to re-ask it again for safety purposes because you had a door open on both sides. Whenever you are ready?

Interviewer: When was Mount Carmel School established and why?

Zuccarello: The school was on the minds of the community for awhile I would say certainly in the 1920s but the school was built-completed in 1936 and the major reason for the building of the school was so that they would have a parochial school that was comfortable with Italian culture, the Italian subculture, with Italian youngsters the ways of the community which wasn't always the case when they attended public school or attended Saint Peter's School where they would be a minority in a school of a different ethnic group. So the job of the school was to help preserve and to applaud the culture from which these youngsters came but also to help in the process of assimilation and movement forward.

Interviewer: Was it priests and nuns who taught or the laity or was it a combination that taught at Mount Carmel School?

Zuccarello: It was heavily sisters I am not aware of any priests that taught on a regular basis in the schools and in the course of the development of the school there were one or two lay people who did teach in the 40s-late 40s, the 50s, and then after the Second Vatican Council you have this drop in the religious that were available to teach in the school and the emergence of the lay people as the dominant body in the school. There were two orders of nuns that taught in the school at different times. One was the Sisters of Saint Francis which was a Franciscan order, the same order that runs Saint Francis Hospital or did at that time. The Sisters of Norte Dame which was an order that was not necessarily, entirely in tune with the Italian-American experience. They were wonderful educators, they were learned women but as far as sensitivity to the culture, the Sisters of Saint Francis who were also excellent teachers, you know they get rave reviews among their alumni that we've interviewed. They were more people that were closer to the identity in the neighborhood.

Interviewer: So primarily Mount Carmel School just served the Italian community?

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Zuccarello: Pretty much, in fact a couple of months ago I met a gentleman who had come up back to the Mount Carmel feast. He was from Florida. He says for a while, he was one of two Irish kids in Mount Carmel School; lasted about three years.

Interviewer: Speaking of the feasts when did those Mount Carmel feasts begin?

Zuccarello: Very early, they began very early in the history of the parish we're talking the beginning of the twentieth century. Right now the feast is held in honor of Saint Anthony but that wasn't always the case. The original feasts were in honor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel the feast day being July 16th and the other in honor of Our Lady of the Assumption; feast day being August 15th. So those were the two primary feasts there were others feasts but those were the two primary feasts and they were really something that became identified with the Italian community. I remember one woman that I interviewed from up town rather than this downtown area she said that for the most part people kept to themselves, to their own ethnic groups. So the Irish with the Irish, the Italians with the Italians, the German with the Germans, but one of the places of where she did encounter, she wasn't Italian herself, where she did encounter Italians was at the feasts which everybody felt was something that they could go and enjoy.

Interviewer: So did the- so did these feasts also get the outside community, outside the- so there was that-?

Zuccarello: Yes, yes there was that mixing that took place. It was something that people looked forward to.

Interviewer: Is it still well-attended today?

Zuccarello: Yes it is, it is, it's still put on by the parishioners and it is well attended, it's well attended. [Laughs] What else can I say about that but its - [Cuts off]

Interviewer: How did parishioners respond to when Mount Carmel was relocated in 1965?

Zuccarello: Well in 1965 when that occurred, it was really a directive from the archdiocesan headquarters on Madison Avenue in New York and it was part of restructuring that took place in general. Most of the people that I've spoken to were very disappointed with this relocation because they loved their church which still exists now as an office building but they loved that church it had a lot memories for it, it had a lot of meaning for them, baptisms, funerals, marriages all took place within that context. It was also a very Italian church if you know what I mean, with the statues and the murals on the walls they there were things that they could relate to. So it was hard to take when after all of these years and all of these memories and all these linkages they were told to move around the corner to Saint Peter's Church and people from Saint Peter's it was equally difficult to leave their church you know which, had such a historic background being the first Catholic Church in Poughkeepsie and one of the first churches between New York and Albany back at the beginning of the nineteenth century. So it was tough.

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Interviewer: So does Mount Carmel still focus just on the Italian community or did that change in light of Vatican II?

Zuccarello: Well if you look at Vatican II occurred, the realignment occurred and when the realignment occurred, it was part of a movement really to get rid of national parishes. National parishes being ethnically identifiable parishes, so that they would be territorially parishes and really not bother about what the ethnic group was but I mean most of the people that attended Mount Carmel at the time were Italian. Today I mean the population is very diverse but still there is that Italian heritage that people identify with that church.

Interviewer: How has Mount Carmel changed in the last 40 years or 45 years?

Zuccarello: Well I think that among the- Mount Carmel has changed because the whole society has changed, the demographics have changed. So one of the things that occurred that I think you know other research will show is that the Italian neighborhood which was hand in hand with Mount Carmel Church has shrunk, right, it is much more extensive than it is now, it's populated now by a variety of people. You know we have Yuppies in some of the buildings there who are quiet favorably disposed to the neighborhood because they have nice living accommodations, can run down to the Metro-North going to the city so that's one population. We have other ethnic groups, we have African-Americans, we have Hispanics in the neighborhood. So it's really a change and that core Italian neighborhood maybe has shrunk to two or three blocks now. The other big change that occurred and occurred with the City Of Poughkeepsie in general is the movement out to the suburbs, so that you know the younger people leaving the old neighborhood and establishing themselves in the wider community out in LaGrange, up in Hyde Park, further into East Fishkill etc. Now a lot of those people maintained their contact with Mount Carmel but a lot didn't and took up church going in the area where they resided. So that's a big change. The other thing is that when you talk to some people who graduated from Mount Carmel School, one of the things that they remember is going to school in the morning, going home for lunch and then coming back after lunch to resume their school day. That's not possible if the children live far away from the schools that they attend. One of the ways in which Mount Carmel addressed that or tried to address that and I'm not sure of the dates on this was to have a bus which went around to the nearby suburbs, picked up the students and brought them back to Mount Carmel. So the recent closing of the Mount Carmel School because of, well depends on who you talk to you'll get a different reason as to why the school closed but I think demographically, the population of the school was shrinking and then the population didn't seem like it was going to support the need, you know the core base that the school had to have to survive. That's indicative of change and it's a result of the changes that took place.

Interviewer: When Mount Carmel relocated in 1965 was there any rededication, was the building renovated?

Zuccarello: Oh yeah, I mean yes in other words [slight pause] one of the things that occurred at that time was that the two churches, the old Mount Carmel, and the old Saint Peter's and what was going to become Mount Carmel were really built to accommodate a pre-Vatican II church. So initial changes that took place in Saint Peter's was to make it more in tuned with the post-Vatican II rituals and to the expectations in the church. Then gradually, I would say, elements

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from the old church, not necessarily things from the old church, some things yes, but elements of that old-style of the old church were gradually re-introduced at Saint Peter's.

Interviewer: Has anyone ever shared stories about the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge with you being that you're very involved with Mount Carmel and the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge itself goes just about right over the church. Has anybody ever shared any stories?

Zuccarello: Sure, yes, first of all there was the fact that people from the neighborhood did work on the railroad bridge. So there was one of the other things that attracted laborers to this area and whether it was [intransigent ??] or permanent settlement attached them to Mount Carmel Church, to the Italian community. So there's the stories largely had to do with people who rose through the ranks and assumed more important positions in the railroad. I mean railroading became their life. The other story that I thought was interesting and poignant is if you look at the way the railroad bridge runs, it runs into the City of Poughkeepsie and at certain points it's not that far above, I think when I drive to school, I usually come along Washington Street and that railroad bridge is you know quite low. One of the things that people remember is during World War II, when the troop trains came over the bridge that the soldiers on the troop trains would frequently drop letters to the people below asking them to mail the letters. So I thought that was a poignant story and at times some people would bring things if the train was you know just staying there waiting to continue on its journey. They might come and bring things to the soldiers who were there. So that was a recollection that several people did comment on. Oh a lot of prejudice also among the workers-against the workers who were working on the bridge. I mean the anti-Italian bias was very palpable.

Interviewer: And was that ever a problem for Mount Carmel parish was there anybody that used to perhaps-was there like a lot of harassment?

Zuccarello: I don't think-I can't think of coming it own to the Mount Carmel parish level, but the stories of individuals who happened to be members of the parish. I don't know if the parish ever did anything about that because that would have been in the earlier years when actually the parish was just in process of formation.

Interviewer: And the final question, did Mount Carmel Church ever work with or help facilitate the development of the Italian Center? (or there was just pretty much two separate-you know separate things that happened ???), the formation of the church and the Italian Center or were there-[cuts off].

Zuccarello: As I understand it, the development of the church and the development of the Italian Center you know were kind of parallel. Many members who were working on the Italian Center were members of Mount Carmel Church but as far as any kind of a coordinated effort I'm not aware of it. I know that Father [Pernicone??] who was the pastor during the 1930s, encouraged you know membership in the development of the Italian Center but as far as an intimate linkage between the two, there was overlap. There were processions that might lead from the church to the Italian Center but they were two different spheres. Let's say from an administrative or governmental point of view they were two different worlds and at times the

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pastor or one of the priests from Mount Carmel was the chaplain of the Italian Center but at other times that was not true. So there was no, you know, like our chaplain is always the pastor of Mount Carmel. It was nothing like that.

Interviewer: Does anybody have any [cuts off] do remember anybody telling you stories- because the bridge fire basically happened not too far away it was like about that section on the Poughkeepsie side, did anybody from the church ever see like the fire back in 1974, any stories?

Zuccarello: The only stories, I mean everybody was watching it. Stuff was falling down I think around Tallmadge Street from the bridge because of that and you know so it was something they were affected by but I never heard any real stories. I remember we here at Marist, most of our classes in '74 were in the Donnelly building and if you go out that main entrance, the main exit from Donnelly into the parking lot, a little platform there and we were standing there watching the bridge burn. I mean it was- it was memorable but I don't consider it like you know a major catastrophe. I guess the people that were closer probably felt that way, you know the bridge burned. But the bridge had been out of function for so long, you know in a way there were periods of time where nobody knew who owned the bridge. They were trying to get someone Saint David's Pennsylvania who allegedly owned it; you had to call a taxi stand to get in touch with. I mean-I think its intriguing story for somebody to tell-to find out who owned the bridge at that time. Everybody said the bridge [slight laugh] is you know going down hill, you know they should do something about it. Well who was the person who was going to do it?

Interviewer: Have you actually ever been on the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge?

Zuccarello: Who?

Interviewer: You.

Zuccarello: No, definitely not. I'm going to have to make a great leap to go up there. I don't like heights because it looks beautiful, I mean the plan, I saw the plan, it looks like a beautiful plan.

Interviewer: You can also see the steeple of Mount Carmel parish as well.

Zuccarello: Right, yes but I mean that's-I can see that when I come across the Mid-Hudson Bridge, when I come down the hill.

Interviewer 2 (Jason Schaaf): I have a question, in your research have you found that the bridge itself or the construction period of the bridge brought more Italians into the region?

Zuccarello: I've heard that, I don't have any data [cut off by camera man]

Camera Man- Sorry stop one second; if you could just ask to make it look like he asked you the question, just so it's continuous. Sorry.

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Zuccarello: Okay, alright sorry. I don't have any data that would really speak to that issue. You've got to stop for a minute. [Laughs]

Camera Man: Sorry, yeah go ahead.

Zuccarello: It's just so natural that I realized that [DVD edit] distracted me, and then I was looking and all of a sudden I went to the left.

Camera Man: That's fine, for him to you know re-ask it.

Zuccarello: So the question is whether or not?—

Interviewer: The bridge construction brought more Italians into the area?

Zuccarello: I think that it did bring more Italians into the area but there—I've read things and I don't have it in a coherent organized way that I feel comfortable with. That there were instances where the Italians would go back New York City which is where they were living; some; other people were residents here and worked on the bridge so they would stay here. But I would say that there probably was as a result of the bridge, an influx of Italians, some of whom stayed. I don't have any data, you know, numerical data that would back that up but inferences in the things that I've read are really what I am going on.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Zuccarello: I can sit here and talk for two days about it; you don't want that to happen, no. [Laughs] I've been researching the history of Catholics in Poughkeepsie and right now I am concentrating on the Mount Carmel project in order to help out with the celebration of the hundredth anniversary. So we have a committee that is doing oral interviews with residents from every period of time. We're trying distribute the interviews so we get not only the oldest people in town but some of the younger people so we get a mix of their remembrances of Mount Carmel and make it, not the classical history that so and so is the pastor, this is what he did, he was replaced by so and so but really try to tell it through the stories of the people themselves and some of the stories are just great. So it's an interesting subject.

Interviewer: How have you liked being a member of Mount Carmel Church?

Zuccarello: How do I like?

Interviewer: How have you liked being—actually how long have you actually been member of Mount Carmel?

Zuccarello: Since 1988, so that's 20 years? Yeah we've liked it. It's very warm and welcoming church. It's a church where at least the congregation I think is enthusiastic about not only the religious services but as far as bonding together; the good people that are there, the new people I think feel welcomed. At least you know in the comments they make about why they joined the church because they do, do a census for each person that joins, you know they felt

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very welcomed. I did a series of telephone interviews with people because I was working on membership and that seemed to be the recurring theme, you know people were warm and accepting. A good spirit prevails and I think a lot of that has to do also with the leader; Father LaMorte was a very, very, innovative person in terms of bringing people together. So I think that was the beginning of my experience at Mount Carmel and it's proven to be the case.

Interviewer: How long was Father LaMorte pastor, is he still pastor there?

Zuccarello: No, no he was pastor from I think, I'll give you an approximation, 1989-1999. So he served almost two full-terms. Maybe it was 1988 to 1989 and then he-they had a rule in the archdiocese which they no longer have that you could serve two six-year terms and then you were expected to move on. So he moved on to Regina Coeli up in Hyde Park but then for personal health reasons he had to give that up and then he came back to Marist where he had been earlier in his career to become the Catholic chaplain at Marist. So you know I have continued my friendship with him and relationship with him. He was replaced with Father Peter Khim-(??) who is the current pastor.

Interviewer: Okay thank you very much.

Camera Man: One last thing, could you spell your first and last name into the camera just so we have a record for it.

Zuccarello: L-O-U-I-S Z-U-C-C-A-R-E-L-L-O (ph)

Camera Man: Perfect, thank you very much.

Zuccarello: I spelled it correctly.

[Laughter]

[End of Interview 36:39]

Transcribed by Paul Contarino