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George Pozzetta: Talking to Mr. Armando Lopez, and it's March—April 24 today, at Hacienda de Ybor. Can you tell me where you were born?

Armando Lopez: In Cuba.

GP: In Cuba? In Havana?

AL: In Havana.

GP: In Havana, and what year was that?

AL: Nineteen aught-four.

GP: Nineteen aught-four. What was your father doing in Havana? What kind of work?

AL: He was a cigar maker in the early times of his life, but he was manufacturer of cigars before my mother died. After that he lose everything he got, because that's my father's whole life, and we mourned, very poor. Not enough to be humble, but very poor.

GP: What was life like in Havana? Can you describe what life was like?

AL: At that time, the poor people lived so badly. Like me.

GP: Not much food?

AL: Well, there's enough food, because we are to get more quantity. So, if you have your food to get more amounts of anything, then you be satisfied with that.

GP: What was your house or apartment like?

AL: No, I go in there in some kind of a complex that we call *solares*. *Solares*—in the Spanish, the real meaning is "lot," but over there it means some kind of complex with so many rooms, but individual.

GP: Individual rooms.

AL: Individual rooms, you live in, but individual room. They've got—

GP: How many rooms did your family have?

AL: No, not my family. Me, my two brothers, and my father lived in one room, all in one room. In that room, we eat, we work, and we sleep, you see? Everything. Because at that time, the toilets, the service, the restroom is one for supposed to be for every twenty or thirty people. You had to go outside the room, and go where they have to give you your (inaudible) things. That's my early, young—

GP: Yes.

AL: The old times.

GP: How old were you when you came here to Tampa?

AL: Seventeen years.

GP: So you came in 1921?

AL: Twenty-two [1922].

GP: Nineteen twenty-two. Did your brothers and your father come?

AL: No, I'm by myself. My brother wasn't in Cuba; he was in Chile, because he's eighteen months older than me, and he went to Chile with some kind of corporation. [It] went to Cuba to recruit him—cigar makers, and he was a cigar maker already—and then he went to Chile.

GP: Did your father stay in Havana?

AL: In Havana.

GP: Was it your father that taught you how to make cigars?

AL: Oh, sure.

GP: Your father did?

AL: Oh, sure, because he was [a] manufacturer of cigars in the early times. But after my mother died, he went crazy and different things. He lose everything.

GP: Did the cigar makers in Cuba make good money?

AL: No, no, no, no, not that time.

GP: In the early days yes?

AL: Not at that time because, you know, they are families. The larger families' work was so full with the—I don't remember exactly, but I believe it because always I work with him, and in our room. I made the cigars from.

GP: You made the cigars in the room?

AL: Oh, sure.

GP: Not in a big factory?

AL: No, in big factory. When I was about sixteen years, I then went to cigar factory.

GP: What did you do with the cigars you made in the room? Did you sell them?

AL: Yeah, he sell, because there's small sizes to sell for three or four cents apiece.

GP: Did you sell them to ordinary people or to an owner?

AL: No. To a little store.

GP: To a store.

AL: To a store.

GP: Yes.

AL: And besides, he was salesman on a small (inaudible).

GP: Small shop?

AL: A small shop, and then he mends his own and we make.

GP: What did people in Havana know about Tampa and Ybor City? Was there much information?

AL: No, at that time I don't know nothing about Tampa. One of the—were leaving, and that's (inaudible) at that time. One in Pedro Diaz and the strike from Tampa. He went with the, what—

GP: The Ten Month Strike, in 1920?

AL: Yes, that's right. He went over there because he got family. I know him over there, and I was talking to him about Tampa, and I met (inaudible). I came here, to live my life. But, when I came to Tampa before was, he wait for me in Port Tampa, and bring me to Ybor City, and he went into (inaudible) Sunday. Went to the small (inaudible). The owners had told me, "Well, everybody here is more competent than you, because—in the other big cigar factories, maybe you can, but right here, too cheap, too cheap." Then he repeat that word, four, five, six times.

GP: Cheap.

AL: Cheap, cheap.

GP: Did you know what it meant?

AL: Well, cheap to make it, cheap to make it. And then I was surprised that it was. And the cheapest (inaudible). How cheap do you—it is he told me that on the ride was cheap. Five dollars a thousand, five dollars a thousand.

GP: To the maker?

AL: To the maker.

GP: That's not much.

AL: But, I have to accept it because the man that brought me here was no cigar maker. It was selector.

GP: Oh a selector.

AL: Selector, right.

GP: How many cigars could you make in a day? Could you make a thousand a day?

AL: No, no. At that time I made four, four-hundred, four-fifty.

GP: So it would take you two and a half, maybe three days.

AL: About 250, or something like that, and then my room and board would cost me six, nine dollars a month. I make nine dollars a week. Since I got nothing else, nothing remains. I pay my room and board, laundry, and that's all.

GP: Did the cigar factories in 1920s have the readers still, the *lectores*?

AL: Yeah, the readers, *sí*.

GP: What do you remember about them? Do you have any memories of the readers?

AL: Oh, sure.

GP: What kind of things did they read?

AL: They read different things, different literatures. In the morning they used to read the (inaudible) we would hint to read in the morning, news, news from different parts of the world, especially news from Cuba, news from Spain, and the news in Tampa. That's in the morning. Then, in the afternoon, (inaudible) and after they read the news, and before noon, before lunch they have to read thirty minutes a unions, union things. (phone rings)

GP: Labor union in the news.

AL: Labor and unions. What's happening over there, what a strike in some other place, what they made it. We call that *prensa obrera*. That means "labor press." *Prensa obrera*. And afternoon stories. Stories and after two (inaudible) and they have thirty minutes for the stories. Mainly the old histories, the way you used to select more that the name of the books, the name of the authors. Émile Zola—

GP: Zola.

AL: (inaudible). The writers—

GP: The famous, the great writers.

AL: The famous writers, that's right.

GP: Who paid the readers?

AL: The readers? We paid the readers.

Pause in recording

AL: Individual, and we elect one of our—

GP: Fellow workers?

AL: Fellow workers, and we call him *presidente de lecturas*, mean *lectores* president, and then he collect, according to our commitments, supposed to be twenty-five cents a week, thirty cents, according to the—they give the amounts of the salary (phone rings) of the

reader, and take in account the biggest; the cigar factory is cheaper than we can get because [there were] so many. And then, they used to be the famous, the most famous reader.

GP: Were the readers usually Cubans, or were some of them Spaniards or Italians?

AL: Well, regularly Cubans.

GP: Usually.

AL: Usually. That don't mean that—maybe some other people, but most of them were Cubans.

GP: Which factory did you work for?

AL: The first factory that I worked in was (inaudible). That was (inaudible), a small one. Then I went to the Villazon [Arango, Villazon & Co.]. That's a little bit bigger. And then, I went to—we call Martínez Ybor. That's—

GP: The big one.

AL: The big one.

GP: How many workers worked there when you were working there?

AL: I figure about maybe seven hundred.

GP: How many readers would work for that number of workers? Just one or many?

AL: No. Sometimes, one reader read the news. The other readers do the stories, because the readers specialize, someone in news, and someone in stories because they used to characterize according to the (laughs) book they are reading.

GP: What did the owners think of the readers?

AL: At that time, they accept them because that's ancestors mining. But after they make their minds that the readers open our eyes, our minds, and then they think can teach us, the *lectores* in the lectures, how to fight for our benefits. They don't want any benefits for us.

GP: So what did they do?

AL: They tried to stop the *lectores*. And they get, they win—and the time being they win, because one time they and (inaudible) they took out the—

GP: The platform?

AL: The platform, and then we went to strike. And we lose that strike.

GP: This was in the 1930 strike?

AL: About that now I don't remember exactly.

GP: Thirty-one [1931].

AL: Thirty-one [1931], that's right.

GP: So after the strike was lost, the readers were gone?

AL: They never won again. Because they think that the *lectores* teach us how we can fight better.

GP: Where did you live when you first came here in 1922? Where was your first house?

AL: The first house, Eighteenth Street and Twelfth Avenue. Right there, on the second floor of the Miami Cafe.

GP: Were there other Cubans living all around you?

AL: Well, mostly Cubans, but many Spanish, too. The Spanish and some Italians in that neighborhood, because down in the Eighth Avenue, there live many Italian peoples.

GP: Down toward Eighth Avenue.

AL: Toward Eighth Avenue, Ninth Avenue, Nineteenth Street, Twentieth Street, and up to Twenty-Second [Street] and Twenty-Third [Street] and Sixth Avenue, Fifth Avenue, so many Italian people. No Cubans, what (inaudible) around here in Ybor City.

GP: Was there an area where most of the people were Spanish?

AL: Most people were Spanish around there. Sanchez Street.

GP: Oh, Sanchez Street.

AL: Ybor Street, little bit north.

GP: Of where the Cubans were?

AL: Yeah, a little bit north and a little bit west. Over there on Tenth Street and North Avenue, Twelfth Street—I mean Tenth Street, Eighth Street, Ninth [Street], Nebraska [Avenue]. That's (inaudible) they've got more Spanish, more Cubans around here, and more Italians over there. That don't mean that exactly. That's concentrated, more people

there, because always, three countries, we get along good. We get along because we never fight, and that's because we don't be people to fight. We people to live here according to the law. We respect. Plenty respect for the law, always.

GP: So these three groups of people, you say, got along very well.

AL: Very well.

GP: In the workplace, the theaters.

AL: In the entertainment, the theatre, and—

GP: In churches.

AL: Sure.

GP: Where did most people go to church in Ybor City?

AL: In Ybor City right here in the Catholic Church.

GP: Most of the people were Catholic?

AL: Yeah.

GP: What was the name of this church again?

AL: Our Lady's Health.

GP: Of Perpetual Health, yes.

AL: Perpetual Health, that's right. O-L-P-H, we know it by the initials. O-L-P-H. (laughs)

GP: (inaudible) Would you say that the church in the early days was an important institution in the community?

AL: Yes, but not to me, because when I came here, I had to fight for my life. I mean working, that's the main thing. I've got no time for that. So, they went all right, the most women—

GP: Mostly women went to church?

AL: Mostly women went to the church.

GP: The men joined—

AL: The men would never get into (inaudible) for the church.

GP: What was Seventh Avenue like in the twenties [1920s]?

AL: That's the main entertainment of—

GP: Describe it to me.

AL: We go to the Seventh Avenue, especially on the Fridays and Sunday—I mean, on Saturday and Sunday—to go up and down, and view the windows, and that's the place where most married couples get in touch. That's the main road to get in touch with.

GP: The young boys and the young girls.

AL: That's right.

GP: The mothers and fathers go too?

AL: Yeah. That's (inaudible) at that time, and the theatre, concentrated on the Seventh Avenue, the old theatre over there, they have the funny stores, we call them (inaudible). That's all the time.

GP: You remember playing *bolita* in Ybor City?

AL: Sure. That's the only game we used to get, but no special to me. I never liked *bolita* because I figured out the percentage they take—they go for prizes. I don't like that.

GP: I see.

AL: I like the game much. I like. But, I never used to do, because everywhere when you go to play the game, they took what we call (inaudible). (inaudible) means "the percentage," the amount like the jai alai, like the horse race, like the greyhound race, and then you put over there a dollar in the (inaudible). They took thirty cents from that dollar, and they return only seventy cents, and I don't like that.

GP: Did the wages in the cigar factories go up during the 1920s?

AL: No, too low. You can get the proof, and the pensions, we got it. Social Security started in thirty-seven [1937]. Then, you can be sure there's more pensions, and every way, in every trade, is the cigar maker. That means that the cigar maker makes less money than anybody else.

GP: What happened to the cigar factories when the Depression came?

AL: Well, [they] shortened work times. I had time when there was only three days. Three days. With that money I have to feed my wife and my son. I had only one son. Only one, because at that time, that what we call *cesis* (*sic*).

GP: Crisis.

AL: Crisis, right, we can't afford to get more food. So our plan was to have no more children.

GP: What did most people do in the 1930s when the Depression came and many factories closed? What kind of work did the—?

AL: Nothing, if they've got nothing to do. They got no other place to work, because the specially [of] the cigar makers. That's one thing that you cannot be sure of, and we resented that at that time, but if you review the laws and the contract, you can see that the law has to compel to eliminate—you know that (inaudible) don't leave because we are Spaniards. Her name was such and such that they didn't go to any place else. Even in the best store, they don't employ Latin women.

GP: Latin women?

AL: Womens, at that time. After then, the law changed, and then they compel to—

GP: To employ these people.

AL: To employ these people because they live here, they went to the school, and even with their high school diploma, they don't employ over there.

GP: This is in the old days?

AL: In the old days, sure, in the old days. I'm talking about the old days, because the law changed the minds of the people, even those manufacturers, working nights that they is wrong. They don't lose anything if they employ different peoples, because they working like the other peoples.

GP: Do you remember any other instances of this discrimination against the Latin people in the early days?

AL: In every way. We can't go to some other places like Clearwater, because they've got signs, "We don't like Latin people, even dogs."

GP: Really?

AL: Really. That over there. Over there, right here in Tampa, we call Sulphur Springs. That's (inaudible) we call crackers. But they used to fight with anyone that gone over there if they are Latin people. And the young people, you know that, well we got jealous sometime of young people that fighting too, we went over there to get fights, too.

GP: Great.

AL: Not me, because I never went so. And any place, I don't think that they like me, if I think that you don't like me, you can be sure that I ignore you.

GP: Did you join one or more of the clubs here in Ybor City?

AL: Yeah, I joined the Cuban Club. They give me some kind of assistance in time of sickness and sometimes if I get sick they give me a small amount of money. Two dollars a day, for thirty or forty days the most, because when you pay, it's only a small amount of money. And other societies, that we call (inaudible), the same thing, the same setup of the benefits. And even we belong—I mean, I belong to one of what we call *cooperativa*. That means, consumers store belongs to the peoples in that year that they joined. Then we go over there to buy our groceries, and pay the amount, and then at the end of the three quarters—three months is quarter, a quarter of a year—they give some kind of dividends. We call dividends. That's the profits that we make in that days.

GP: Is this still in existence?

AL: No. [It ended when] when the war coming.

GP: The war? When the war was coming?

AL: Coming everybody went out, because we have to work over there for a small amount of dividends. Most of our members think that they can, at that time, work in another place made more money than the—and so we, be only twenty or twenty-five only, that remain because we had more, more. Somethings where they could put even *cooperativa* at the end, we get tired too. And then close.

GP: Do you belong to the club now? The Cuban Club?

AL: No, I lose my membership over there in thirty-seven [1937]. When the crisis came, I went to New York.

GP: Oh, you went to New York?

AL: Yeah and went over there with the mind to remain in New York more, but I don't like that life.

GP: Did you live with Cuban people in New York as well?

AL: (inaudible) With the family, my sister-in-law, my brother-in-law. But I don't like that kind of life, and then return, and came home in eleven months. I'd be back. Then, I lose my membership in the Circulo Cubano, in the Cuban Club.

GP: Were there other people than Cubans who belonged to the club?

AL: Oh, sure.

GP: Spanish people?

AL: Oh, sure, they don't discriminate. Even if you are a China [person], you can belong to the Circulo Cubano, or any of the others. Naturally, the most is Cuban because, you know, one go to the other and the other called the other.

GP: Yeah. But even in the old days, you didn't necessarily have to be Cuban?

AL: No. Only to be president do you have to be Cuban. That's the only privilege the Cubans got. To be president, you have to be Cuban, or a son of any Cuban. The same goes for the Spanish Club, too. The Spanish had the same thing, the same—

GP: What were the World War II years like here? Was it a prosperous time? Did the people get jobs?

AL: Yeah. Oh, sure. You know, it was in wartime, they don't use, [go] to the beach, so they give orders to make the other (inaudible). They go (inaudible), and then that time can be so strict with the—

GP: Money.

AL: The money.

GP: Were you working in the cigar factories during World War II?

AL: Well, I went to where they make tugs.

GP: Boats?

AL: Yeah.

GP: On the docks, the boat docks?

AL: Yeah. I don't remember what the name of the place, but I only went six or nine months because I had an accident, and sprained my—and they gave me my discharge.

GP: Ah, I understand.

AL: At that time, I was thirty, thirty-five, so I have to go over there or get drafted.

GP: Were you living in Ybor City when the urban renewal came?

AL: Sure.

GP: What did you think of that?

AL: This is a nasty thing they do, because they can do it a better way. They could do it, tearing down one block, because the business in that block was (inaudible). Then, they built it up and gave it to all the peoples, and then can change the (inaudible).

GP: When did you come and live here, in Hacienda?

AL: I believe it was seventy-two [1972]. Nineteen seventy-two, October.

GP: Are most of the folks that live here Cuban or all mixed?

AL: Not exactly—well, most are Cuban—well, not most, minority are Cuban, but not exactly, because we got a wait here. In the building where I was living, maybe twenty Spanish people and thirty Cubans. But we've got fifty apartments over there. But any how, the minority Cuban because that's at the most people in Cuba but that was a kind of a—

end of interview