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**Ana M. Varela-Lago:** This is an interview with Mr. Frank Perez. Frank, I would like to start by talking a little bit about your family. Could you tell me why did they come to Tampa, what did they do here in Tampa?

**Frank J. Perez, Sr.:** My father came from Asturias. Folgueiras, in Asturias, a small village. He came to Cuba, and he learned the cigar, to be a cigar maker. Then when the Spanish-American war broke out, he came to Tampa and worked in the cigar industry. My mother was born also in Asturias, in a small village, Llames de Parres, which is near Infiesto.

AVL: Llames?

FP: Llames.

AVL: Llames.

FP: De Parres.

AVL: De Parres.

FP: And they met here, my father worked in the cigar factory, and my mother was a bander in the cigar factory. They met at the factory, and they got married. I had three brothers and three sisters. We had a pretty large family. My father became a foreman for several cigar companies here in Tampa. Then he became general manager of La Integridad Cigar Company. He was active in the Centro Español. He was on their Board of Directors, an officer. He passed away in 1929. I was ten and a half years old when he passed away. My mother, after she married became a housewife, and she raised all the children. She did a beautiful job. She managed after my

father's death to hold the family together.

I went to the public school from grade one through seventh, and then I went to Jesuit High School. At that time it was called Tampa College High. It was downtown, next to the Sacred Heart Church. And I graduated from there in 1936, during the—after that I went into the cigar business. I worked at the cigar company where my father had worked, where he was General Manager. And I didn't like working in the cigar factory.

AVL: Why not?

FP: Well, the—

AVL: What was it that you didn't like?

FP: Because, there was no future.

AVL: I see.

FP: So then I started— I took courses in bookkeeping and accounting at the Business University of Tampa, and took everything they had to offer. And then I took a correspondence course through La Salle Extension University out of Chicago in higher accountancy. The war came along, and I was drafted. Well, while in the service, I was in Paris for 13 months, worked in the U.S. Army newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*—and I was working in their accounting department. When I came back, while there, my immediate superior was a certified public accountant with Price-Waterhouse. He told me, "With your ability, you should go into public accounting." He said, "When you come back, if you come to New York, I'll hire you." He was a partner. But, I came to Tampa and I applied with the auditor that used to audit La Integridad Cigar Company, and he hired me on a provisional basis. He said, "Okay Frank, I'll give you a chance. If in two months, you don't like it, you tell me, and I'll find you a job with one of our clients."

Well, he, after about two months he raised my pay, and, you know, so much. Hey, what happened? So I went and told him that, "Mr. Montenegro, you made a mistake on my check." He said "Oh, no, I think you deserve it." And he told me at the time, "If you become a CPA [Certified Public Accountant], I'll make you a partner." And I became a partner in 1952, when I got my certificate. From there, I practiced public accounting under the name Montenegro and Company, as a partner, until 1969. That's when the Florida law was changed to permit the national firms to have offices in Florida. And I became a partner, we merged our practice with Arthur Young and Company, and I became a partner in Arthur Young and Company. And I served with them until 1978. I retired, under our partnership agreement we had to retire at age 60.

So then I went to work for one of my clients. Villazón and Company, it's a cigar company here in Tampa. And I worked for them from '79 through December 31st, 1996, doing their accounting for them. While working in the cigar factory, I was active, very active at the Centro Español. I served on the Sección de Recreo, and I was on the board of directors and during that period of time is when all the activity was happening in the Spanish Civil War. The club was pro-

government. They believed that, they considered the rebels to be fascists. And they did a lot of work having, holding dances, picnics, and plays and so forth. The money that was made from that was given to the American—the Spanish Red Cross—and it was used for the government forces.

After the war ended in Spain, there was a new group formed, which was a take-off from the Frente Popular. It was referred to as Cultura Española [Junta de Cultura Española]. They, in turn, continued collecting money by holding dances and so forth, and that money was sent, spent in helping the refugees who had left Spain, who were either in France or Mexico, Cuba—wherever they had gone to—to keep that Spanish heritage going. After several years we were in war ourselves, and I went into the service. And they, I'm sure they, well, the Spaniards of Tampa had their own children to take care of, or worry about. And I think that's when they forgot about Spain. Now they were thinking about their own children in this country.

AVL: Let me, before we start with the war again, going back to your family. You mentioned before that a lot of the young men in Spain left there to avoid the draft. Was that the case in your—?

FP: In my father's case, that's what it was. And in my uncle's case too. I had—

AVL: How old were they when they—?

FP: My father must have been about 13, 14 years old when he left Spain. They had to get out before they had called it, would be called in to go. What they were doing, they were taking their youth and sending them to Spanish Morocco in Africa. And they said it was a very hard life, very dangerous, because they were fighting there all the time. So that in order for their children not to have to go into the service of the Spanish government, they would send them out.

AVL: So, did you have family in Cuba already, that your father—?

FP: My father had an uncle, who was a cigar manufacturer in Cuba. At that time, when you learned the trade, they would even sleep in the cigar factory. They had cots, and they'd sleep there, and they were apprenticed. And they would have a boarding house across the street where they'd get their meals and take their baths and so forth.

AVL: And how about your mother? Why did your mother leave Spain? Do you know?

FP: Well, her brothers had come over earlier, and the whole family came over. Her parents had died. They had a tavern in their town. And the tavern was downstairs, and they lived upstairs, and they had their farming, they had cattle and milk cows and so forth, and they grew different crops. But it was a very hard life, so they all got out. Her—my mother's father—was a brigadier general in the Spanish army under the monarchy. He was assigned to Cuba, and he was in charge of customs in Havana. And then, he contracted malaria or some other disease in Cuba, and he went back to Spain. And he married my grandmother. My grandmother was referred to as *la inglesa*.

AVL: Really, why?

FP: Because she had blonde hair and blue eyes.

AVL: It wasn't that common, I guess.

FP: That's right.

AVL: It's interesting. Could you tell me your parents' names, Frank?

FP: My father was Benito Perez.

AVL: Do you know his second last name?

FP: Menendez. And my mother was Teresa Juan Escobio. Juan is the last name. Maria Teresa Juan Escobio.

AVL: They never returned to Spain?

FP: No, they never went back. They stayed here.

AVL: Do you remember a lot of people returning to Spain, after awhile?

FP: Well, my uncle saw, visited, he went back, but not to stay anymore. They had their own families here. They maybe went on a vacation, or something like that.

AVL: Because I always heard that a lot of immigrants left Asturias thinking, I'm going to America, try to get some money and then return to their, you know.

FP: Oh, no. My father considered, and my uncles, considered they were fortunate to be in this country. They loved it.

AVL: But do you think that was common among Spaniards in general, that people would retire in Spain?

FP: Yes. There was a lot of them that retired that left here and went back to Spain to live. I know several families that did that. In fact, I remember one family, the Lado family. They went back and then when the war broke out in Spain, they came back to the U.S.

AVL: Okay. Let's talk a little bit now about the war in Spain. Do you remember when you first learned that there was a war in Spain?

FP: I think we learned about it as soon as it broke out. I remember, you know, hearing more than reading it. But the local Spanish papers—and even the local papers here—since there was such a big Spanish community here, would have dispatches in them every day of what the situation was

and so forth.

AVL: Do you think people here expected something like that to happen? I mean, were people here following the events that led up to the war?

FP: No, they didn't think it would break out into a war. They knew there was political upheaval over there. They knew that there were too many different political parties. And when you have this many political parties it's hard to have a strong government. But they never, I don't think we, at that time felt that the war would break out. It was a surprise, when [Francisco] Franco, in fact, the way I understand it, he was in Spanish Morocco, and he came to lead the rebellion against the government.

AVL: You mentioned before some of the things people did here to support the Republic. I wanted you to talk a little bit in more detail about some of these activities; you were telling me about the gathering of the tobacco, do you remember that?

FP: Well, the people would make—the cigar workers—which primarily where they recruited their money, would contribute every—they were paid, back in those days you were paid in cash on Saturdays, or Friday, depending on the weekend—and on the way out there would be people standing there with small cigar boxes asking for their contributions, and they would give twenty-five cents, a dollar, depending on how much they could afford. They collected that money every week.

And that money was used to buy blankets and medicines and bandages and stuff. These were then packed and sent to the Spanish Red Cross for, in support of the Loyalist government. One of the things that the cigar manufacturers would do is, they would take the scrap tobacco and cut it up and make it, to fine tobacco, and then they would package that in small little bags with a drawstring, and then they would get cigarette paper and put it on, so they could roll their own. And that was shipped to the Spanish government soldiers.

AVL: How about the functions, do you remember a lot of functions?

FP: We held, most of the clubs would unite together. Because, though they were separate clubs, they would unite together and gather, hold a picnic, the proceeds of which would go to the Frente Popular, was at the time, which in turn turned it over to the Spanish Red Cross. They would hold picnics and dances; all the proceeds would go towards the war effort in Spain. Back then, there was a neutrality act which forbid our government of helping, or of doing anything. And so they would, it was—they tried to get through legal means, peaceful means, to get the government to change its view. Because here was a sovereign nation and they were not adhering to the principles of the Geneva Conference.

What happened was that the Germans sided with the rebels, and they used Spain as a proving ground for their weapons for the coming of World War II. The Spaniards were the first city to ever be bombed. We had never seen that in our history. Then the Italians joined the Axis, and they in turn had troops in Spain, supporting the rebels. England and France and the U.S. did nothing to help the legitimate government. Russia did send some troops over there and gave

them some help, but they were never strong enough, or gave enough, to combat what the Axis did. Because both Germany and Italy sent troops to fight there, and they were well trained, well armed, which the local government could not combat.

AVL: So people here wanted the United States not to be neutral?

FP: No, we wanted them to support the government. We asked for the, we had sent delegations to Washington asking them to cooperate. And these dances were very—and picnics that we held, were very successful, because we had some prominent Spanish, like the ambassador *Don* Fernando de los Ríos came and spoke. And that would, everybody that was Spanish would want to go hear him, and he'd tell them what was happening over there. We had a woman that was Rio—I think she's a senator—

AVL: Isabel de Palencia?

FP: Yes. And she was a very good speaker, and that attracted more people. And we had continual, there's another one, I think—Largo Caballero, was he?

AVL: No, I don't think he came. Are you thinking maybe of Marcelino Domingo?

FP: Marcelino Domingo came, and, so, yes, these would help bring the attendance.

AVL: Now, what kind of things did they tell the crowd?

FP: They would tell what the situation was, and what, you know, that they all thought that the government would prevail and eventually, they had the popular song "*A Madrid ¡No Pasarán!*" which means that they thought that Madrid would always stay with the government. Unfortunately they were able to gradually move in and take different places. Some places fought real hard, others gave up. My brother-in-law had some sisters in Asturias, and they were captured by the fascists and they were abused. They were imprisoned. He was very bitter.

AVL: I know that a number of people from Tampa volunteered to fight—

FP: Yes. They joined what was called the Lincoln Brigade. And several young men from Tampa went to fight over there.

AVL: Did you know any of them?

FP: I remember, when I read now the names and so forth, but I didn't personally know any one of them. But when they came back they were heroes in the community, you know, they had gone to fight for liberty and for what's right.

AVL: You mentioned before, Germany's and Italy's support of General Franco. How did the Italian community here respond to that?

FP: Remember that the Spanish community and the Cuban community were greater than the

Italian community. If they felt any loyalty towards their government, they didn't show it. They went along. They contributed to these collections, and also the Italian colony here was primarily Sicilian, and they were not, I don't think they were fascists in their thinking. They were pretty liberal in their thinking about government and so forth.

AVL: So they weren't—

FP: There weren't any conflicts with the Italians. They followed suit, because the other thing—the majority—the Spaniards controlled the cigar factories where they worked. So they had to follow what the Spaniards wanted.

AVL: And how about the Cuban community?

FP: The Cubans were very supportive. The Cubans all supported the government. I don't know any Cubans with fascist beliefs.

AVL: How about the Americans? Were they involved in any way with what the Latins were doing here?

FP: Well, they thought—you had, there was a little conflict—they knew what was right, you know, just like the American Revolution and, we broke away from England, and they knew what freedom, liberty, and all that meant. But they also feared; they thought that, there was an element that thought we would, they would be Reds. They thought that they would be communist. And so, there was always that fear there.

AVL: Do you think that Americans here in Tampa thought of the Latins supporting the Republic as Reds?

FP: Yes, I think a majority of the Americans here looked upon those who supported the Spanish government to be radical or Reds.

AVL: And do you think that prevented some kind of joint action—? How did that affect the way they looked at the community?

FP: Well, we were looked down upon—for being Spanish, for being Latin. The same way that the blacks were looked down upon. These were rednecks.

AVL: But for instance, how did the American newspapers report— ?

FP: No, they would keep you abreast of what was going, what was happening over there and so forth.

AVL: Do you think they were biased in any way, one way or the other—?

FP: No, I just think they did outright reporting as different cities and sections of Spain fell to the rebels, they would report it. I don't think they were taking sides, though. I think they just

reported the facts and that was it. They could have done more to generate doing away with the Neutrality Act, so that we could have, because had the government been furnished armaments to fight the fascist regime, I think that they would have prevailed—I think. But they were not furnished, and didn't have the ability of buying their weapons.

AVL: And were there Americans participating in these events?

FP: Some, very few. They participated but very few. It was primarily the Spaniards, Latins, in the community.

AVL: Do you remember any of the demonstrations? I heard that there were some demonstrations.

FP: Well, there was a demonstration, it was one of the last ones, at the Labor Temple, and they went down to the City Hall. I don't think it did any good, you know. They just wanted to know, wanted them to realize—but the City Hall could do nothing about it, you know. It's a small—you had to go to higher ups, and we weren't that well organized to be able to—

AVL: Was the Mayor supportive, though? That was Mayor Robert E. Lee Chancey.

FP: He listened to them, but I don't think he cared one way or the other.

AVL: How about the church? The church in Spain was very supportive of General Franco, and I was wondering—

FP: Well, the church here was supportive. The Catholic Church was, I call it, really, pro-Franco. A lot of the, the Spanish people that came here would send their children to Catholic schools. But they themselves didn't practice any religion. They wanted their children to know about religion, but they did not practice, you know. They wouldn't go to church on Sundays. Just a few families would do it. And when the war broke out a lot of them took their children out of the Catholic school and put them into the public schools, because the church was leaning towards the Franco government—the Franco regime—rather than helping the legitimate government.

AVL: How did they do that? Was there any actual support of Franco by the church, by the priests—?

FP: They, you know, would get up and when they'd give their sermon, they'd try to collect money for what they call, send money to the Spanish Red Cross. But it wasn't the one that was supporting the government. So the people got angry, they said, "No, we don't give money to help— " Strange, you know, after the war they all went back to their church. But at the time they were angry, they didn't like it.

AVL: Now there must have been people here, within the Spanish community, that were supportive of General Franco.

FP: There was a few, I think, but they had to meet in secret. They couldn't. *La Gaceta* used to

expose who they were and what they were, you know where they were meeting. But they weren't very vociferous. They kept it quiet. We knew their feelings, but you can't say, well, you know, it's this, that or the other. They had—because, since the majority of the Spaniards were pro-government, or pro-Republic, they, what would I call it, they would boycott these people if they—a merchant in Ybor City would, say it's rumored that he was pro-Franco, they would boycott his store. They wouldn't buy from him. So they had to keep quiet or they'd lose their business. Their pocketbook was more than the patriotism they had for Franco.

AVL: Now, did they ever come out, so to speak, when Franco finally won the war?

FP: No, I don't recall them celebrating, or saying anything. No, no. I don't remember. If they did, I don't recall.

AVL: You were telling me also about listening to the radio; some people got news from Spain—

FP: Well, they used to listen to a radio, short wave, most of them were little table models. There was a lot of static on it. But every night they would turn it on to see where the different lines were drawn or how the movement was going and so forth. Hoping to hear that the government had been able to repel the rebels. And they kept up with it—it was a daily ritual, every night. Try to reach Spain on the short wave radio.

AVL: Did your family do that?

FP: Oh, yes.

AVL: Were your parents involved in the Frente Popular in any way?

FP: No, my father had passed away. He passed away in '29. And my mother was a housewife. My uncles participated through the Centro Asturiano, the Centro Español, and ran all this activity and got all the children round up to go to these affairs, and so forth.

AVL: They were very united? I mean, the headquarters was at the Labor Temple.

FP: Yes, but they were very united, but they worked through the clubs. Because, remember that these people that were in the Labor Temple were also on the Board of Directors of the Asturiano and Español. So they would work together on it.

AVL: And how about the cigar manufacturers? Were they at odds?

FP: Well, the cigar manufacturers were primarily, I'd say, all pro-government. They kind of feared, because the Frente Popular was coming out of the Labor Temple, there was a little fear there. But, it was more involving the labor relations than it was of what was happening in Spain. They cooperated; they gave the tobacco to make those, be cut up to make cigarettes and so forth. They gave the shipping cases and all the materials necessary for that. Some manufacturers were accused of being fascists, others were accused of being with the government, but the majority, I'd say, were pro-government, pro-Republic.

AVL: What happened when the war was over and Franco had won the war? What was the feeling like?

FP: Well, some of the clubs refused to fly the new Spanish flag and they kept their old flag flying over their buildings. There was a feeling of let down that, you know, they had lost some, they wouldn't, they would send money to their families, the workers that had family there, but they wouldn't visit. It took many years before they were able to bring themselves to go back to Spain, even for visiting.

AVL: When did the clubs reconcile themselves to the idea that this is gonna be their country? I mean, when, for instance, the issue with the flag—when do you remember that situation solved?

FP: I remember, you know, it'd come up at a Board of Directors' meeting or something and they'd go, We fly the Republic, we don't fly, we don't recognize the—

AVL: Yes, that happened right after the war, but when did they, I mean, how long did it take for them to realize, well—?

FP: I think after, I remember after the end of World War II, when they reconciled to it, you know, immediately after—well, almost immediately—this country went to war, World War II. And then we were worried about our brothers, sisters and sons and daughters going into the service for this country. So, we kind of forgot Spain, because now it was closer to home.

AVL: I wanted to ask you, how did people look at Franco then, in hindsight? I mean, through the years, what did they think of him?

FP: Well, here, locally, they didn't care for him. Now, when finally we started to, we got bases in Spain leased, we started to ease up on him a little bit, you know. Of course we had a naval base in Rota, and we had Torrejon for an air— which we needed for the European defense. So, when that started coming about, they kind of eased up on him. But he was always thought of as a dictator. He was put in the same class as [Adolf] Hitler and [Benito] Mussolini.

AVL: And that opinion never changed?

FP: No.

AVL: Before you talked a little bit about the Junta de Cultura Española and how that money went to help the refugees, the Spanish refugees—

FP: Well, there were a lot of Spanish, after Franco took over a lot of people had to leave Spain or they would be imprisoned or persecuted, prosecuted in Spain. So they went to, some of them went to France, others went to Mexico, and they would, these collections were continued at the cigar factories, the cigar workers, and they in turn would send money or supplies to those people who had left. Because France, the Vichy government, put a lot of Spaniards, after they got out of Spain and went to France, and then the Vichy government took over, and they interned them.

And we'd send money, through the Red Cross, to help them.

AVL: And was there as much support as there had been before for the Republic? How easy was to really—?

FP: Well, it kind of died down; it kept slowing down.

AVL: Did refugees come to Tampa, do you remember any Spanish refugees coming to Tampa?

FP: I don't recall. Now we had, you remember back in those days, there was an immigration act that, you were limited as, to come in. The only way you could come in would be illegitimate, and I don't think that there were that many that came in.

AVL: Were families here trying to get relatives in?

FP: They would try to get relatives in, but it was very hard to do, because of the limitations.

AVL: Finally, Mr. Perez, I would like to ask you, is there anything else you would like to add to the interview? Some aspect that maybe—

FP: No, as far as I can remember, I think you covered it pretty well. I think you had much of this information already.

AVL: But I wanted to hear it from you. Okay, so there's nothing else you can think of?

FP: Not at the present time.

AVL: Okay. I want to thank you, Mr. Perez, very much for participating in this project. This concludes the interview with Frank Perez.

*End of interview*