

EI-1017

GIUSEPPE RUOTOLO

BIRTHDATE: AUGUST 30, 1938

INTERVIEW DATE: AUGUST 2, 1998

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 59

RUNNING TIME: 37:50

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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INTERVIEW LOCATION: PORTLAND, MAINE

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

ITALY, 1954

AGE: 15

SHIP: ANDREA DORIA

PORT: NAPLES

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: And it's August 2nd, 1998. I'm here in Portland, Maine with Giuseppe Ruotolo, who came through Ellis Island from Italy in 1954, December 21st, which would make it—has to be about the very end of the time Ellis Island was operating. He—Mr. Ruotolo thinks that he came on the Andrea Doria. He was 15 years old at the time that he came to this country. And he is now 59 at the time of this interview. Okay. So if you could start by saying your birth date and where in Italy you were born.

RUOTOLO: My birth date is August 30th, 1938. I was born, Composano [PH] [unclear].

LEVINE: Okay. And how far away from Naples was it?

RUOTOLO: About 25 miles.

LEVINE: Okay. And did you live in the same place up until you left?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: So up until you were 15, that's where you were, huh?

RUOTOLO: Right.

LEVINE: Yeah, okay. And what was your mother's name?

RUOTOLO: Joanina Maria Joanna [PH] [unclear].

LEVINE: And—and what was her maiden name?

RUOTOLO: Nappa.

LEVINE: N-A-P-A? P-P-A?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: One p?

RUOTOLO: N-P-P-A.

LEVINE: N-A-P-P-A. Okay. And your father's name?

RUOTOLO: Angelo Ruotolo.

LEVINE: Okay. And did you have sisters and brothers?

RUOTOLO: Two sisters.

LEVINE: And—

RUOTOLO: And one brother. He died when he was small.

LEVINE: Oh. And did your sisters—were your sisters older or younger?

RUOTOLO: Older.

LEVINE: Older. So do you—when you think of growing up there, what do you remember, like, about the town? And what was it like? What—where you grew up?

RUOTOLO: [chuckles] Well, we was—

LEVINE: What could you say about it?

RUOTOLO: We was poor.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RUOTOLO: And my father had a horse and wagon. He used to go in the—in the farms, pick up tomatoes and potatoes and bring them to the factory.

LEVINE: Bring them to the what?

RUOTOLO: The factory.

LEVINE: Oh, the factory.

RUOTOLO: Where they process.

LEVINE: Oh. So, you mean, he—he didn't grow them? He picked them up and brought them.

RUOTOLO: He just—yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, wow. And did you help him at all?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah?

RUOTOLO: I used to go with him.

LEVINE: Yeah? And was it like an agricultural area? I mean, is that—

RUOTOLO: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: —what everybody was doing?

RUOTOLO: Their farms.

LEVINE: Their farms?

RUOTOLO: Yeah, they was growing tomatoes, potatoes. You know, different season [unclear].

LEVINE: Yeah? And so what about your mother? Was she—do you remember any, like, foods that she cooked that you really liked or—

RUOTOLO: [chuckles] That's pretty hard—[unclear] she cooked like a pasta [unclear], pasta [unclear], pasta [unclear], macaroni. You know, all that stuff like everybody eat.

LEVINE: Yeah. Was your family religious?

RUOTOLO: We was Catholic, yeah.

LEVINE: Di—I mean, were—were you—di—did you observe all the, you know, saints days and—

RUOTOLO: Oh, yes. Yes.

LEVINE: —church holidays and—

RUOTOLO: Yes, yes, yes.

LEVINE: Yeah?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Was there anything different about the way you observed, like, Christmas or Easter there than people do it here?

RUOTOLO: Well, I—I'll tell you the truth. I like better the Christmases over there. No, holiday is better over there than they are right here.

LEVINE: Why is—why do you think that?

RUOTOLO: Because they're—I think they do more. Over here, you know, we did—we didn't never pass out gifts the way they do here.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: There they did not do that.

LEVINE: What did you do over there? What did you do when you [unclear]?

RUOTOLO: No, you just bring the families together and they—and they eat and they eat and they eat. [laughter]

LEVINE: Now, did you have a big family? Like, did you have grandparents and—

RUOTOLO: Yeah. Of course, I had a grandparent. My grandmother, she had a—like a store. You know, fruit store.

LEVINE: Oh. And what do you remember about her? Do you remember, like, being with her or how she was or—

RUOTOLO: Well, she lived alone because I [unclear] met my grandfather. He died before I was born.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RUOTOLO: And she had a donkey and she used to go to a market and buy the stuff and then bring it to town. And, you know—

LEVINE: Huh.

RUOTOLO: —early in the morning and then she used to sell them in a store.

LEVINE: Did your father bring her stuff from the farms to—

RUOTOLO: No, no.

LEVINE: No.

RUOTOLO: No. That's different thing.

LEVINE: Different. How was she to you? How—

RUOTOLO: She was good to me.

LEVINE: Yeah? Was there anything about her that you particularly remember?

RUOTOLO: Well, I used to go over there and she used to give me stuff [chuckles] for nothing. You know, I mean—

LEVINE: You mean, like fruit?

RUOTOLO: Yeah, fruit. You know, I used to [unclear].

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. Yeah? And so you—but you were the only boy in the family, right?

RUOTOLO: My family.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: So were—were you, like, the—the special one because you were the boy in the family?

RUOTOLO: Not necessarily.

LEVINE: No?

RUOTOLO: No. My older sister was the special one because she was, you know, gentle. You know, more—me and my other sister, we was more working type. My other sister, she was seamstress.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: Run a business.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And let's see. So did you have, like, aunts and uncles—

RUOTOLO: Of course.

LEVINE: —around?

RUOTOLO: Yes.

LEVINE: So when it would be Christmas, you'd go to their house and they'd go to your house?

RUOTOLO: No.

LEVINE: Or how did you do that?

RUOTOLO: They had their own family. They'd do their own thing. You know, [unclear], say, you know, "Merry Christmas" and stuff like that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: [unclear] and that's Italian way.

LEVINE: Did—did you have, like, a Christmas tree?

RUOTOLO: No, no. No, no.

LEVINE: So you went to church and then you ate?

RUOTOLO: Midnight. Midnight, they have, like, they bring little Jesus into [unclear] at midnight. You know, everybody follows it.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

RUOTOLO: You know, stuff like that.

LEVINE: Huh. And how about Easter? Anything special then?

RUOTOLO: Yeah, they used to—my mother, make cookies at Easter. They—
and—and they used to have a—they used to have special things,
Easter.

LEVINE: Is it, again, a lot of food?

RUOTOLO: Yeah, of course.

LEVINE: Go to church?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Is that—how about music? Was there anything with music?

RUOTOLO: Radios. We had radios.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: We didn't have TVs.

LEVINE: No.

RUOTOLO: No.

LEVINE: No, no. Yeah. How about automobiles? Were there automobiles at
that point?

RUOTOLO: Not—not too many. Just the rich people had an automobile.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah. Now, were there—were there rich people, like, in
your—were you, like, in a village? Was it a small—

RUOTOLO: It's town, small town. It's a lot of small town.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah. Like, did that town have its own school?

RUOTOLO: Yes, yes. We had a school.

LEVINE: So did you go?

RUOTOLO: Yeah, I went—I went four and a half years.

LEVINE: And was it like all the grades in one or you had separate—

RUOTOLO: No.

LEVINE: —teachers, separate grades?

RUOTOLO: Separate grades, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: Separate.

LEVINE: And was school strict there?

RUOTOLO: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: Yeah, they used to give you ch—[chuckles] with a stick on your hand if you don't learn, you didn't bring in the homework.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah.

RUOTOLO: And then they used to make you kneel down in a corner.

LEVINE: Was this a country school?

RUOTOLO: No.

LEVINE: No.

RUOTOLO: Just a regular school.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Kneel down and what?

RUOTOLO: For a penalty, they used to make you go in the corner and kneel down.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: If you didn't—you know, if you didn't be good, they penalized you.

LEVINE: Huh.

RUOTOLO: Then if you go home and tell your mother, she give you more.
[laughter]

LEVINE: What was your mother like?

RUOTOLO: She's—what do you mean, was she like?

LEVINE: What was she like?

RUOTOLO: She's still living.

LEVINE: What's her personality?

RUOTOLO: Good woman. She treat us good.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: She—we always had food on the table.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RUOTOLO: And we had [unclear] work. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Like, what did you start doing for work? Like when you [unclear]?

RUOTOLO: I used—I went [unclear] my father.

LEVINE: Oh, you—

RUOTOLO: I used to go help my father, yeah.

LEVINE: Right, uh-huh.

RUOTOLO: And half a day of school, half a day of helping my father.

LEVINE: And was that the only work you did while you were still in Italy? Did you do [unclear]?

RUOTOLO: When my—my father passed away before I came over here. So I had to do it.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: I used to go with a horse and wagon.

LEVINE: How old were you when he died?

RUOTOLO: I—I think I was about 14.

LEVINE: Oh, so for a year or so you were—

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: You—you took over.

RUOTOLO: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: And did you like doing it?

RUOTOLO: Well, I had no choice. We had to make a living.

LEVINE: Right, right. So how did you hear about the United States, about—why did you get interested in coming here?

RUOTOLO: I didn't. No get interest. My mother was born in Portland, Maine.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: She was six years old when her fa—mother took her to Italy.

LEVINE: I see. And was she from that little town?

RUOTOLO: No, she was—she—when she was in Italy, they live about two miles from my town.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: Different town.

LEVINE: And your father, was he from that town?

RUOTOLO: My father was from Composano, where I—he was living.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RUOTOLO: So they got married and then they moved to Composano.

LEVINE: But your mother's family came to this country earlier and she was born here?

RUOTOLO: My mother was born here.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. So—so when is sh—how old was she when she went back?

RUOTOLO: Six years old.

LEVINE: And then she stayed there until—

RUOTOLO: Then she got marry; she had us. And then my father die and [unclear]. We had a—I had to come over here before I was 17, I think, of law, to become, you know, an American passport.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. So did your mother have relatives in Portland after—

RUOTOLO: She had a—

LEVINE: —she went back?

RUOTOLO: One—one of her brothers, stay here with her [unclear]. That's when I came to live with, my Uncle Carmine. Carmine Nappa.

LEVINE: So that's why you came to Portland.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: I didn't want to come, believe me.

LEVINE: Why not?

RUOTOLO: Because I had a lot of friends there. I couldn't speak American. And now they want to leave. My mother say, "You got to go. You got to go." So I came.

LEVINE: And did your sisters come too?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: The whole family?

RUOTOLO: One—no, a couple years after.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: A year after. And my sister, my older sister, [unclear], she come over. And, meantime, my mother was living in New York, Brooklyn. She went over there with the kids. They didn't like it so they went back to Italy.

LEVINE: Oh. Huh. So when—when you came over, did you live in New York at all? No, just your mother.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: So did your mother come first? Or you came with your mother?

RUOTOLO: I came alone.

LEVINE: You were the first one?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, so you were the first one.

RUOTOLO: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: And because—because you had the American passport.

RUOTOLO: They all have; my sisters too. But my mother come over as an alien. See, I had to make out paper to call her. That's why I didn't understand the law over here. My mother was born here and she had to become an American citizen again.

LEVINE: Wow.

RUOTOLO: That's because they say that she was—live in Italy too long and she vote when she—

LEVINE: She voted in Italy?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh. But you got through with just your—

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: —passport?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Even—even though she was considered an alien?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RUOTOLO: That's why I didn't understand it.

LEVINE: Right.

RUOTOLO: I told her to become citizen over the immigration over here. And they [clears throat]—they say, "If I was you, I would say that you're [unclear]," because she got to know how to read and write.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: I said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "She was born here. If I want her—her birth certificate, I'll go to city hall and get it. If I wanted my birth certificate, I've got to go in Italy. And I became citizen and she can't?" So that's why my mother moved to New York, a resident in New York. Six months later, she didn't have to take a test or anything. She become an American citizen.

LEVINE: And if she had come to Portland, would that have been different?

RUOTOLO: She was in Portland.

LEVINE: I know.

RUOTOLO: But then she would—she could not become an American citizen in Portland unless she learned how to read and write.

LEVINE: Right.

RUOTOLO: So—

LEVINE: She went to New York.

RUOTOLO: She went to New York. She got a job sewing, seamstress in a shop. Six months later, she become an American citizen. Now, I don't think that's right.

LEVINE: No, it doesn't sound right.

RUOTOLO: The same laws.

LEVINE: Yeah, in different parts of the country.

RUOTOLO: [unclear] and over here they—you know, they—

LEVINE: Right.

RUOTOLO: —pushed you under the rug. Over there, they give a—I didn't understand that.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

RUOTOLO: I still don't understand today.

LEVINE: Well, it's probably because it doesn't make sense. Yeah. So was she a seamstress in Italy too?

RUOTOLO: No.

LEVINE: Hmm. Okay, So—so you came first. And you didn't want to come. Do you remember leaving?

RUOTOLO: Of course, I remember leaving.

LEVINE: Okay, what—what happened? Did people come around and say goodbye or what—

RUOTOLO: Yeah, they came to Naples. That's when—that's where the port is.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

RUOTOLO: So, you know, [chuckles] stand over there, just wave goodbye and cry. That's how—

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you think you were coming back again? Did you feel like—

RUOTOLO: Come back where?

LEVINE: Did you think, once you came to America, then eventually you'd go back to Italy? Were you thinking—

RUOTOLO: I did, 14 years later.

LEVINE: Oh, you did? To live?

RUOTOLO: Not—

LEVINE: No, just to visit.

RUOTOLO: Visit, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. But you—when you left—

RUOTOLO: I went over and got married.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: I got married in Italy.

LEVINE: Oh, great. Now, did—when you were coming here, did you—did you feel like you—that was it? You were moving for the rest of your life?

RUOTOLO: No. I—I always told my uncle—I tried to join in the service. N—I want to go in the Navy. They wouldn't take me because I had to have permission from my uncle; I was too young.

LEVINE: Too young.

RUOTOLO: I want to—they kept—they kept saying, "Go in the Army." I don't want to go in the Army. I say, "I want to go in the Navy so I'll go back to Italy on the ship." You know, they wouldn't take me. So that was that.

LEVINE: Ah—huh. So, now, did you know your wife before you left—

RUOTOLO: No.

LEVINE: —when you were 15?

RUOTOLO: No.

LEVINE: Okay. So—so you left. You got to—you got to Naples. Naples? And—and you—and you—did you stay there before you got on the ship and—

RUOTOLO: No.

LEVINE: No.

RUOTOLO: No.

LEVINE: You just got there that day, got on the ship?

RUOTOLO: Just got there, yeah.

LEVINE: And, okay. What do you remember about the voyage?

RUOTOLO: It was rough.

LEVINE: Yeah?

RUOTOLO: The sea was rough. I was sick for three, four days. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Now, wh—what kind of accommodations did you have on the ship? Were you down in the hull or were you in a cabin? Or—

RUOTOLO: Well, we—we was in a cabin. We had a bed.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RUOTOLO: There was two people to a—

LEVINE: Two people to a cabin?

RUOTOLO: No, no.

LEVINE: To a bed. A bunk bed?

RUOTOLO: This is a—this is a long—you know, like a long hall. They have different bunks. That's what we had.

LEVINE: Like a dormitory.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And do—were you traveling with anybody? Did you know anybody else on the ship?

RUOTOLO: No, no.

LEVINE: No. Were you scared?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, I bet. Yeah.

RUOTOLO: I never went nowhere.

LEVINE: That was your first time—

RUOTOLO: That's right.

LEVINE: —without—yeah. And you didn't know the language.

RUOTOLO: That's right.

LEVINE: So, yeah, that must have been something. So you—you really—and you didn't want to go.

RUOTOLO: No, I didn't.

LEVINE: So you—yeah. Yeah.

RUOTOLO: I—you know, I didn't want to leave my friends.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Sure. How would you describe yourself as a 15-year-old? Like, when you were taking that ship to come to a new country?

RUOTOLO: [sentence unclear].

LEVINE: Yeah. Were you—were you, like, an outgoing kid? Or were you a shy kid or were you a tough kid or—

RUOTOLO: No, no, no. I was kind of shy.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Huh. So—so, okay. So the ship was rough and anything happen during the voyage?

RUOTOLO: The ocean was rough. [laughs] Not the ship; the ocean.

LEVINE: The ocean was rough. The ship was probably—

RUOTOLO: Rocking, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: The water coming over the rail and we couldn't go outside. They locked the doors.

LEVINE: Oh, God.

RUOTOLO: And when—this was in December.

LEVINE: Yes. And was it, like, real crowded? And were there—were there facilities? I mean, like bathrooms and everything?

RUOTOLO: Hmm, it was all right.

LEVINE: It was okay?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. So did anything happen on the voyage that sticks in your mind? Anything in particular? No. Okay. Do you remember when the ship came into the New York harbor?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: What—what—what did you see? Or what was it like?

RUOTOLO: Well, when I g—I get off there. You know, they had alphabetic letters. They told us to stay on alphabetic letters so when somebody come and pick us up.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RUOTOLO: So my uncle couldn't make it so he had to send an agency to come pick me up.

LEVINE: Oh. Do you remember what the agency was called?

RUOTOLO: No. No, I don't.

LEVINE: So somebody—some stranger came?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: And had your name and—

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: How did you—

RUOTOLO: I—

LEVINE: How did you fi—

RUOTOLO: —stand underneath the—

LEVINE: The letter.

RUOTOLO: —the letter. So somebody, you know, come over and just figure out, took him in the office. They send him a movie with the secretary. And then they—they put me on the train to Portland.

LEVINE: Well, how long were you—were you at Ellis Island altogether, do you think?

RUOTOLO: I don't know. When—we had to go through Customs and all that stuff.

LEVINE: I mean, was it during the same day that you left?

RUOTOLO: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, you didn't stay overnight?

RUOTOLO: No, no, no, no.

LEVINE: No. I see. And so—so—so that must have been hard for you too. I mean, to—for a perfect stranger to come.

RUOTOLO: I know. Well, I didn't know my uncle either.

LEVINE: Oh, you didn't?

RUOTOLO: No.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Right.

RUOTOLO: Meantime, he was working in Hartford, Connecticut so he couldn't—

LEVINE: He couldn't get—

RUOTOLO: Couldn't make it, no.

LEVINE: So—so this person got you onto a train—

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: To Hartford?

RUOTOLO: Yeah, he called an agency in New York to come pick me up. They send me the movie with the secretary. And then, at nighttime, they put us on a train—put me on a train. And next morning, I come to Portland.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. So, what movie? Do you remember the name?

RUOTOLO: Oh, no.

LEVINE: How—what a funny thing to—so in other words, your first experience in this country was going to a movie.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: And, of course, you couldn't understand it.

RUOTOLO: No.

LEVINE: If it was in English.

RUOTOLO: That's right. [clears throat]

LEVINE: So you got on a train. And do you remember when the train—anything happen on the train ride that sticks in your mind? So when the train pulled into Portland, what happened then?

RUOTOLO: Then my aunt picked me up. My aunt, her brother, my cousin.

LEVINE: Did you know them at all?

RUOTOLO: No.

LEVINE: Oh, gosh. So were they nice to you?

RUOTOLO: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah. So you went and lived with them.

RUOTOLO: Right.

LEVINE: And do you remember any of your first impressions of things, like, that you had never seen before, that—

RUOTOLO: Froze. [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, yeah? Yeah.

RUOTOLO: Yeah, because where I come from when I see no snow, not much snow. Over here, froze [unclear].

LEVINE: And it was December, right?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. So—

RUOTOLO: A lot of snow here.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: Because, you—you know, [unclear].

LEVINE: [laughs] So you—what did you do about clothes? You must not have had, like, really warm clothes or anything, right?

RUOTOLO: No. My uncle came and took me to the—buy overshoes. You know, the rubbers they had to put on over the shoe and heavy jacket and earmuffs and—

LEVINE: [laughs]

RUOTOLO: —scarf and all that stuff. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. And let's see. So what about English? How did you—how did you start to learn it?

RUOTOLO: [chuckles] How did I start to learn? Let me see. I got a—a friend of mine got me a job washing dishes, [unclear] Diner. And I used to work nine hours a day, six days a week for 25 bucks a week. That's when I pick up a little better English.

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh. Yeah.

RUOTOLO: And then I tried night school and I couldn't understand the teacher.

LEVINE: Right.

RUOTOLO: So I—I didn't go too long, a couple weeks, and I quit.

LEVINE: So you've learned your English just by living.

RUOTOLO: That's right.

LEVINE: By talking to people and—

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, good for you. Was it hard?

RUOTOLO: [unclear], still hard today.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: You know, [unclear].

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. So—so did you stay washing dishes? How long did stay doing that?

RUOTOLO: Oh, about a year and a half and then I told my boss. I said, "Look, I've been here a year [unclear]. Don't you give me a vacation?" He said, "No," so I quit. I went and wash cars. [unclear] Car Wash. First week, I made about 70 bucks. I thought I was rich. [laughs]

LEVINE: Hmm, yeah. And did that—did you keep at that?

RUOTOLO: I—I stay there quite a while. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. Yeah. So—and how many years later did you go back to Italy?

RUOTOLO: Fourteen years later.

LEVINE: Okay, so between the time you went back and—from the time you got here till you went back, did—what else happened? Did you stay washing the cars? Did you—

RUOTOLO: No, no, no.

LEVINE: —do something else?

RUOTOLO: No. [chuckles] I went paint—painting, digging ditch, killing chickens. I—I done all kinds of stuff.

LEVINE: All in Portland?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Around Portland?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: Well, killed chicken was in Yarmouth.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: Yarmouth, Maine.

LEVINE: A chicken farm?

RUOTOLO: No. Killing. You know, where they bring the chickens in the truck, bring chicken in. And they killing and they cleaning.

LEVINE: Right.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: And they send the—to B—used to send them to Boston.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Yeah. So what made you decide to go back? Were you particularly going back to find a wife?

RUOTOLO: No, what it was, I was—I was married before that here. And then they—I had a kid. She got pregnant and then I decided, you know, I got married. [unclear]. We had an agreement. After we got married and she had the kid, she was going—you know, I was going—she was going to give me the kid.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: You know, and—

LEVINE: And that would be it.

RUOTOLO: —I'd get divorced, separated, whatever.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RUOTOLO: That didn't work out. So she got—she gave me a hard time so—

LEVINE: Did you get the kid?

RUOTOLO: I got the kid. I got custody of the kid on—when we got divorced.

LEVINE: Wow.

RUOTOLO: [clears throat]

LEVINE: Did you raise the kid?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow. So—so did you go back to find a wife or did you go back for another reason?

RUOTOLO: No. [chuckles] I had—my—in the meantime, I was [unclear]. I moved there with my sister when I had a kid.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RUOTOLO: So I, you know, pay for the babysitter and go to work because, you know, I—I had to work. And then my sister said—my older sister, the one that lives in Italy, she said, “Why don't you come over and get married over here?” So—

LEVINE: And how old was the child then?

RUOTOLO: My son was about four years old.

LEVINE: So you wanted to get married?

RUOTOLO: Yeah. [chuckles] So she—my sister from Italy, she sent me a picture and my wife now, she—I told her. I said, “When I come over there, if I don't like her, you know, what she look like,” because sometime the pictures, you know—I say, “If I don't like her, I'm coming back without being married.”

LEVINE: Really?

RUOTOLO: "I—I tell you. I tell you; you tell her." And I told my sister over here. I said, "If this ain't going to work out, I'm coming back single. I like her, sure, we going to marry."

LEVINE: And you got married there?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah. So why did you want to go to Italy to get—it was just because your sister knew this person? I mean, would you just as soon have met somebody here?

RUOTOLO: Well, to tell you the truth, I don't think the American people—what—you know, they like drink and they like dance and smoke.

LEVINE: Oh, so you wanted a simple—

RUOTOLO: That's right.

LEVINE: —good wife.

RUOTOLO: I want—that's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So you went to Italy and got—

RUOTOLO: Yeah. And I got it too.

LEVINE: Oh, good. Good. What's your wife's name?

RUOTOLO: Asunta [PH].

LEVINE: Asunta?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Is that a first name? That's her maiden name.

RUOTOLO: Her first name.

LEVINE: Asunta?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, nice.

RUOTOLO: We call her Sue.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: Asunta. Sue, for short.

LEVINE: Yeah. What was her maiden name?

RUOTOLO: Hassela [PH]. Hassela.

LEVINE: Hassela. And where you part of a whole Italian community here in Portland?

RUOTOLO: Well, you—that—there used to be—they used to call it Little Italy when Newbury [PH] Street—you know, a lot of Italian people and they—they kept moving and moving out of there. And I'm still there.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Yeah. But—so in other words, you knew a lot of Italian people. You could talk—you could speak Italian to a lot of people—

RUOTOLO: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: —in Portland.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: And did they have, like, social clubs? And did they do things, the Italian people, together?

RUOTOLO: No, because when—you know, some of the people, they was already old and a lot older than I was.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: Yeah. So, you know, they do their thing. And I used to go down to the barbershop. They used—talk Italian in there.

LEVINE: But they had children, right? I mean, those—

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: —[unclear] people?

RUOTOLO: A lot of people with their children, they wanted to learn to talk—

LEVINE: Oh, right.

RUOTOLO: —Italian.

LEVINE: Right.

RUOTOLO: So when—you can't—you can't—you ain't going to force them if they don't want to learn.

LEVINE: Right, right. And so just to—what happened was you came here when you were 15. Then your mother came next?

RUOTOLO: No, my sister.

LEVINE: Your sister. And one sister stayed there and one sister came here?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: And—

RUOTOLO: One—one at a time came.

LEVINE: And the sister came here to Portland.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then your mother came?

RUOTOLO: Then my other sister came.

LEVINE: Oh, she did?

RUOTOLO: Yeah. She went to work here si—you know, she came without her family. She went to work as a seamstress over here and her husband saying, "You've got to come back." So she went back.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: And then the whole family come over. Matter of fact, she had her twins in New York.

LEVINE: Oh, yeah?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: So her husband came back with her?

RUOTOLO: Yeah. The whole family came over.

LEVINE: Wow. Oh, so that's nice. So your sister's here.

RUOTOLO: No, no. They went back.

LEVINE: Oh, they went back. But the other sister—

RUOTOLO: My other sister's here.

LEVINE: She's here.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then your mother came and stayed in Brooklyn for—

RUOTOLO: Stay over here. Me and her was living together.

LEVINE: Oh. But didn't—but she just had to stay in Brooklyn at first? So she—

RUOTOLO: No.

LEVINE: Because of her passport, or an alien?

RUOTOLO: No, no. She came right here. When it came time, I want her to become a citizen—I want her to have papers—

LEVINE: Right.

RUOTOLO: —they said, "Forget it. She ain't going—unless she learn how to read and write—

LEVINE: She can't.

RUOTOLO: —she ain't—she ain't going to become a citizen.

LEVINE: Right.

RUOTOLO: So that's when she decided to go to New York.

LEVINE: I see. I see.

RUOTOLO: New York, she went to work there six months. She become a citizen—crazy.

LEVINE: And then she came back here?

RUOTOLO: Yeah. Well, she just re—she retired in New York and she came here. Now, she's in a nursing home.

LEVINE: Oh, really? Is she—

RUOTOLO: Alzheimer's disease.

LEVINE: Oh, yeah. Oh. So—so, but you have quite a bit of family here though. I mean, you have your wife, your sister, your child.

RUOTOLO: I've got three kids.

LEVINE: Three kids.

RUOTOLO: Matter of fact, one of them is getting married next—next week.

LEVINE: Really?

RUOTOLO: The 15th.

LEVINE: Wow! Wow! So what's your children's names?

RUOTOLO: Jo—Angelo; that's my first one with my other wife. Then it's Joanna and Andre. [PH]

LEVINE: Wow. So is your—is your daughter marrying an Italian—

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: —guy?

RUOTOLO: Yeah. Defury [PH].

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So how do you feel about, like, being Italian and being American? How do you—how do you think about, you know, how—how—what does it mean to you to be Italian, to be American?

RUOTOLO: Don't mean nothing. It's too late [chuckles] for anything now. I've been here so long.

LEVINE: Would you ever want to go back?

RUOTOLO: I'll go back. I'm going back next year.

LEVINE: But for a visit?

RUOTOLO: Yeah, got to go to a wedding.

LEVINE: A wedding?

RUOTOLO: My nephew's getting married. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, so you keep close ties with the [unclear]?

RUOTOLO: Of course. I have got—my—my brother-in-law's coming Monday.

LEVINE: Oh, for the wedding?

RUOTOLO: Yeah, him and his wife.

LEVINE: Oh, great.

RUOTOLO: When my daughter-in-law marry, he came too. He was the best man.

LEVINE: Wow! This is your sister's husband? No.

RUOTOLO: That's my wife's brother.

LEVINE: Oh, your wife's brother. I see. I see. Uh-huh. So—so would you ever consider, like, go—would you ever want to go back there—

RUOTOLO: To live?

LEVINE: —to live?

RUOTOLO: Yeah, I think—sometime, I think about it.

LEVINE: Yeah? What is it about there that you particularly like that you don't have here?

RUOTOLO: It's pretty hard to say. For now, over here, I've got a lot of friends. Over there, you—you got to make new friends. All my friends, the one I went to school with, they all probably gone.

LEVINE: Well, they're not that old. I mean, they're your age.

RUOTOLO: Yeah, but they moved.

LEVINE: Oh, they left. I see. Okay. I'm going to pause here and turn over the tape.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: Okay. So what do you think about the fact that you came here as an immigrant at 15 years old? Do you think being an immigrant, like, affected you as far as your personality, the way you do things, how you look at life? Do you think that made a big difference, like changing? You grew up in one place and, at 15, you go to a completely different place. You have to start all over.

RUOTOLO: When—when they—what would—what would you think if it was you?

LEVINE: I would think it would make a big difference. I'm not sure, but—but how did it make a difference on you, for you?

RUOTOLO: Well, the language, for one thing. I could—I couldn't speak. I couldn't understand. You know, people tell you something; you're just like a dummy.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: So that's different.

LEVINE: But don't you feel like you achieved something? I mean, now that you can speak and everything.

RUOTOLO: Well, yeah. I—well, I will never know if I would made—made it good over there too, either.

LEVINE: Right.

RUOTOLO: See, that's one thing I will never know.

LEVINE: Right. You have not—

RUOTOLO: No.

LEVINE: [unclear].

RUOTOLO: Maybe I could have made better life over there than I did over here. Who knows? True.

LEVINE: Well, you probably would have been a farmer. Right? Or some—

RUOTOLO: Not necessarily, because a lot of my friend, they become businessmen over there because they know the language.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: I could never become a businessman over here.

LEVINE: Right. Oh, so the language was really a handicap, even though, supposedly, there's more opportunity here.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: The—the language made a difference to you.

RUOTOLO: Right.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: Well, I never went to school here.

LEVINE: Right.

RUOTOLO: So you—I could no better myself. You know, I had to—to work for a living. Let's face it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

RUOTOLO: I could never start my own business if I—

LEVINE: You think you might have done that if you were over there?

RUOTOLO: If I was in Italy?

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: Why not?

LEVINE: Yeah, right.

RUOTOLO: Who knows? You never know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RUOTOLO: That's one—bad about it.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Is there anything else that you think, like, coming here made—made a kind of difference to you?

RUOTOLO: No, in a way, I'm—I'm glad to—because my mother, you know, now she's here. She was born here. I li—I bought a house right cross—for my mother was born.

LEVINE: Oh, wow! Nice.

RUOTOLO: So I'm still on Newbury Street. Since I come this country on Newbury Street, I'm still [chuckles] on Newbury Street.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Are you—are you happy on Newbury Street?

RUOTOLO: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: A good place to be?

RUOTOLO: As far as I know. I mean, the house is all paid for.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

RUOTOLO: My—you know, but now the rent, they—four, five or six, seven hundred dollars a month. Who—who can afford that kind of money?

LEVINE: Right.

RUOTOLO: You—you got to—you got to make \$1,000 a week to—to—

LEVINE: Right.

RUOTOLO: Ridiculous.

LEVINE: So you're all set then because you've got the place. You have the—

RUOTOLO: Well, yeah. I've got the place. It's an old house but I've got the place.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: It's mine.

LEVINE: Yeah, right. Now, how about in Italy? Wh—did you have—like, did your family have their own house there?

RUOTOLO: My—my sister.

LEVINE: Well, when you were growing up?

RUOTOLO: No, we was renting.

LEVINE: You were renting, uh-hmm.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Were things very different here, like, as far as a house? Like where you lived? When you came here, was the living very different as far as the house?

RUOTOLO: Well, the houses are wood over here. In Italy, it's the stone.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: Was stone.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: That—we didn't have to heat. We didn't have no heating. We had to have a fireplace. That's how you heat. And the stone, they damp. You know, the house is damp.

LEVINE: Yeah. And did your mother—your mother didn't cook in the fireplace? Did she have, like, a stove?

RUOTOLO: No, she used to cook on the fireplace. And then we got one of those propane tank—stove with propane tank.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. And how about water? Did you have running water when—when you were there?

RUOTOLO: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And—and, like, a bathroom and all that?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: You had all that?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh. So you—were—was the living better here or worse? Or—

RUOTOLO: [chuckles] Well, like I say, I come over here. You know, I'm all alone. I live with my aunt and I ain't going to tell my aunt—I say, you know, "Feed me." So if I was with my mother, you know, I know I could survive hungry.

LEVINE: Right.

RUOTOLO: I was bashful. I would never say [chuckles]—

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: "I'm hungry." See.

LEVINE: So that was hard too. Right?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Because you—right. So you—so—but—but did you start work, like, very soon after you got here?

RUOTOLO: Yeah, about four or five months after.

LEVINE: So then what did you do? Give money to your aunt?

RUOTOLO: No, no. Because I wasn't making enough—my uncle—I only was making 20-some odd dollars—

LEVINE: Oh, right.

RUOTOLO: —a week.

LEVINE: Right. Oh, I see.

RUOTOLO: Just enough for, you know—for my clothes and—

LEVINE: So were you, like, hungry a lot? I mean, you didn't—you couldn't really ask for food but—

RUOTOLO: Well, I would never ask. You know, if she put it on the table and say, "Come eat," I would. And otherwise, because my aunt and my uncle lived in Connecticut. He worked in Connecticut and my aunt was over here.

LEVINE: I see.

RUOTOLO: Used to come every month, every two, three weeks.

LEVINE: What was—what did he do in Connecticut that he traveled?

RUOTOLO: I don't know. He—he was making the—those plas—plastic dishes. Used—that's what he—he worked in a factory there.

LEVINE: I see. So he could—he—I guess he figured he could make more in Hartford than he could—

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: —in Portland?

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Huh. So is there anything else about Portland that you remember, like, when you first came? Anything like where the city was different then than it is now?

RUOTOLO: I'll tell you one thing. One thing, I—they had a beautiful Union Station over here.

LEVINE: Oh.

RUOTOLO: And they tear that down. That was—that was stupid.

LEVINE: Yeah.

RUOTOLO: They—

LEVINE: That must be—

RUOTOLO: That was a shame.

LEVINE: That must have been the station you came into—

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: —when you first came.

RUOTOLO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, that is a shame. Yeah, yeah. Well, you—

RUOTOLO: All granite. Somebody made some money. That's what—I guess that this country, that's what it's all about. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Is that a difference between here and Italy?

RUOTOLO: Well, no. They—crooks over there and there are crooks over here. So [chuckles]—

LEVINE: Right. Yeah. And has your little town changed much over there?

RUOTOLO: Yes, it did. Quite a bit. You don't see no more horses and wagon. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Right. [chuckles]

RUOTOLO: They're [unclear]. Now, everybody's got cars. And there's [unclear] one way. They—new schools. Quite a bit. Quite a bit.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Do you feel more—do you feel more Italian than you feel American?

RUOTOLO: Does—doesn't bother me at all, really.

LEVINE: Which way.

RUOTOLO: No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Yeah. Let's see. Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that—that involves your coming here and making a new life and—

RUOTOLO: No, that's it.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay. Well, thanks very much.

RUOTOLO: You're welcome. [chuckles]

LEVINE: It's been very interesting. I've been speaking with Giuseppe Ruotolo, who came from Italy on December 21st, 1954 when he was only 15 years of age, couldn't speak the language, and came to Portland, Maine. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]