

EI-1023

GERARD (GERARDO) CAPRIO

BIRTHDATE: NOVEMBER 29, 1910

INTERVIEW DATE: SEPTEMBER 28, 1998

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 87

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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ITALY, 1912

AGE: 1

SHIP:

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is September 28th, 1998 and I'm here in Leisure Village, which is—is it—what is the name of the town here?

CAPRIO: Lakewood.

LEVINE: Lakewood. Lakewood, New Jersey.

CAPRIO: Right.

LEVINE: And I'm here with Gerard Caprio, who came from Italy when he was somewhere between one and two years of age—

CAPRIO: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: —in 1912.

CAPRIO: Right.

LEVINE: And where also here is Mrs. Fehney [PH]—what's your first name?

CAPRIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Frances Fehney, who is—

CAPRIO: Right.

LEVINE: —Mrs. Cap—Mr. Caprio's daughter.

CAPRIO: Right.

LEVINE: And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, if we would—if you would say again for the tape, please, where you were born and when you were born.

CAPRIO: In the town of Manoli Pino [PH] in the county—the province of Avalino and in the year, November the 29th, 1910.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So that makes you 87, about to turn 88—

CAPRIO: Right, right.

LEVINE: —this upcoming month or next month. Okay. Now, do you have any memories at all—

CAPRIO: No.

LEVINE: —of—of the Old Country?

CAPRIO: No. No, Ma'am. There's only that what my mother told me, you know.

LEVINE: What did she tell you?

CAPRIO: That we lived in this p—piazza and the—the name of the piazza was—what the heck? I can't—it was a doctor—a doctor that cured some illnesses in that town and they named the piazza after him. You know, the doctor. And I remember my mother telling me that my brother was like two-and—two and a half years old, used to go to church every—every day. I thought he was going to be a priest. [laughs]

LEVINE: Huh. Yeah? But he didn't become a priest, huh?

CAPRIO: He doesn't even go to church. [laughs]

LEVINE: He stopped going. [laughter] Well—well, tell me this. When you—wh—did—had anybody in your family come to America before?

CAPRIO: My father came here before—sent to earn some money so he can bring us here. See? They—he probably—they—these people, the cousins or friends—dear friends, probably—he borrowed money from them to come here. And then when he got a job, he had enough money for us to come. And then he—finally, after, he had to pay them back, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: So—so did he send tickets? Is that how you—

CAPRIO: I don't really know. I know it was—we was—my brother—I had a sister that was born in 1905. And my brother was born in 1908 and she never wanted to come here. You know? And—

LEVINE: Your sister or your mother?

CAPRIO: My sister.

LEVINE: Sister.

CAPRIO: She hated it because—I don't know—she wind up getting sick and passed away at 11 years of age.

LEVINE: Oh, wow!

CAPRIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: So how about your mother? How did she feel about it?

CAPRIO: Well, she had—naturally, she had to come. You know, I—she—I don't know. She never said anything to me about it but I guess she liked it, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAPRIO: With three children, her being in a cr—you know, cross those ships in—I don't know how many days they, at that time, took to come here, you know.

LEVINE: Could have taken as long as three weeks.

CAPRIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: Yeah, at least she had maybe—at least 15 days anyway, you know. So we never spoke too much about that, you know. And—

LEVINE: So—so your father was here when—

CAPRIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: —when your—

CAPRIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: —mother and your sister and brother arrived?

CAPRIO: Yeah, he was there when I was born, even. See, so he must have came, like, seven or eight months—

LEVINE: Yeah.

CAPRIO: —prior to me being born, you know.

LEVINE: I see. Well, now—do—do you remember any stories that your mother told you about—

CAPRIO: Italy?

LEVINE: —about Italy?

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah. That they used to go—my mother's father was a—a ranger, mountain ranger. We lived right near this mountain, you know. Today, I hear a lot of Germans come there and go skiing in—in that mountain, you know. And she used to say how they used to go up in the mountain and get wood for the firepl, for the fire—you know, to fire their stove. And they used to carry the wood on top of their head because they actually had pictures of—put a band—bandella [PH] on their hair and they'd carry the wood. And also, you'd go there. You catch chestnuts. And they used to get the—have the flour. They used to get flour and—and then they had a baker knead it and make their loaves of bread for them. It's very interesting what she was saying about the life in Italy, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: And the piazza that we lived around, there was the big church [unclear]. It looked more like a cathedral for—for that little town. And this town was named after this Dr. Leonardo De Cappua [PH]. And in fact, my mother's maiden name was De Cappua.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CAPRIO: So—so near, you know, my father's name, Caprio. And—and that's the life that they—they lived in Italy.

LEVINE: [unclear].

CAPRIO: And I was baptized over there and, in fact, I was confirmed there—over there before we came across there. They claimed that they were allowed to confirm me, being I was going over on a ship that maybe wouldn't make the States. You know, at that time, they used—those ships wasn't so re—so reliable, I guess, you know.

LEVINE: So they confirmed you, which would have taken place many years later.

CAPRIO: So, yeah, like—

LEVINE: Yeah.

CAPRIO: —14—

LEVINE: Yeah, right.

CAPRIO: Fourteen years of age, yeah.

LEVINE: Huh.

CAPRIO: I was confirmed by a bishop before we left Italy.

LEVINE: Was your mother very religious?

CAPRIO: Oh, yes. Yes, she used to go to church every—you know, I don't know what she did over there, you know. The church was so close that—that I probably—you know, like I couldn't remember what date—but they said my brother used to go every morning, used to take a hike to church. [chuckles] He thought he was going to be a priest. [laughter]

LEVINE: How about—

CAPRIO: He turned out to be a gambler. [laughs] He'd bet on anything, football, baseball, cars, horses. God Almighty.

LEVINE: Well, did your mother tell you anything about the voyage?

CAPRIO: Not too—no. She never mentioned it, to tell you the truth.

LEVINE: How about your mother—oh, your mother's name? What was her name?

CAPRIO: Theresa.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

CAPRIO: De Cappua.

LEVINE: And—and your father? His first name?

CAPRIO: Aniello—A—it's—

LEVINE: Yeah, spell it.

CAPRIO: Aniello—A-N-I-E-L-L-O.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: You see a lot of that—names around—

LEVINE: Yeah.

CAPRIO: There's some of the actors there—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: —by that name. Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, what was your father doing for work after he stopped being the ranger in Italy—

CAPRIO: My—my—

LEVINE: —when he came to this country?

CAPRIO: That's my mother's father.

LEVINE: Oh, that was your mother's father. What about your father?

CAPRIO: He was a barber.

LEVINE: Oh, in Italy?

CAPRIO: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And here too?

CAPRIO: And here too, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: He worked for somebody and later on, he—he bought the place. The guy was going to retire, the man that owned the—and he bought the place off him.

LEVINE: Okay. Well—no, it's all right. It's okay.

CAPRIO: She can't hear me.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Well, [clears throat] we'll talk a little louder. Okay? So when you first got to this country, where did—where was the family living then?

CAPRIO: On the Lower East Side. I—I—I was living in Front Street near Jackson Street on—which is the Cletis Hook [PH] Park, the Cletis Hook Park. That's where the river turns from south, going from the Battery, and then at the—at the park it turns to go north. And diagonally, it crosses the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

CAPRIO: So we always lived near the waterfront, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: In fact—and then from there, my mother used to tell me I used to—she used to go shopping and leave me on the fire escape. I don't know whether—if she tied me down or what. [laughs]

LEVINE: Wow.

CAPRIO: And—till I come back. Then we moved around the corner, around the block to 91 Jackson. That was right on—at the front of South Street, which is right by the water there in a big apartment. And she claimed that when I was—and I only remember a little bit about that place. And she claims she had one of those sewing machines like that with a—a cover was made out of all kinds of flags of all countries, you know. And

I—I set it afire from fooling around with matches. And that's what she told me. And then we moved from there to Callare Street, right across the street from the park too, you know, which is—the park would run like an L, you know, 91, then this way.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: And that was Callare Street. And around the corner was all the car barn, all the streetcars, you know. Before that, they had horses pulling the cars when I was a youngster, you know.

LEVINE: Pulling the troll—like, where they like trolleys?

CAPRIO: Yeah, trolley—horse trolleys.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: The horses used to go from there up to Jackson Street, turn—and turn left on Madison Street to go down to City Hall.

LEVINE: Oh.

CAPRIO: And—and right—later on, they became trolley cars, you know, run on motors.

LEVINE: Right.

CAPRIO: And for many years, and after that became buses.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAPRIO: And now the buses still run there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAPRIO: And they used to run direct from there to the—just to the ferry, the Avery [PH] Ferry at West Street to take you to Jer—Jersey. And—but now they—they stopped—they can't go through there. You've got to go to Pearl Street, make a turn at Pearl Street down to [unclear] Street and go around very [unclear]—

LEVINE: More complicated.

CAPRIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: Zigzag, because you can't go into the municipal building no more.

LEVINE: I see.

CAPRIO: And—

LEVINE: Was it mostly an Italian neighborhood where you were?

CAPRIO: No, we were mixtures. Where I lived—the streets I lived was a mixture of Italians, Irish, German, a few Jewish people. So as you went inland more, the next block would be Italian, you know.

LEVINE: Hmm, uh-hmm.

CAPRIO: And then they go further—a little—then became Jewish people and later on in years, they mixed in together because of the people that needed apartments, you know. And, like, we did too. We—we—later on in years when I married, we lived in Louis and Cannon Street [PH] on Broom [PH] Street.

LEVINE: Oh.

CAPRIO: And that was a mixture of everything there too.

LEVINE: So were there many people in your neighborhood that had come from the same part—

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. That's how—that's how we come to move there, because we had quite a few people that—that came from that part of Italy, you know. And in fact, everybody, I think, around that area, outside of a few come from other parts of Italy—you know, Italian families, but we had quite a bit. Maybe 12, 13 families that—

LEVINE: Hmm.

CAPRIO: —came from that town.

LEVINE: And did your father—was your father the only person in this country from your family?

CAPRIO: You mean when—

LEVINE: When you came? Was he the only one? Like, did you have aunts and uncles or cousins—

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. I had an aunt that lived in Bridgeport, Connecticut and an uncle that lived in Hartford, Connecticut. That was my mother's sister.

FEHNEY: Father's brother.

CAPRIO: And my mother's brother. And my father's brother lived in Brooklyn on Atlantic Avenue. He had a barbershop there. He owned his own home there, two-family structure with a backyard and a basement. He was like a millionaire compared to us, you know.

LEVINE: Did your father work in a barbershop in the Lower East Side?

CAPRIO: Yeah. Yeah, on Jackson Street, in 49 Jackson. That was two blocks from the waterfront.

LEVINE: Wow. Do you remember the name of it?

CAPRIO: Forty—yeah. M—my—what?

LEVINE: The barbershop?

CAPRIO: Was—the—the owner's name but the bar—there was a bar on the corner. The owner, his name was Murphy. He owned the building, the barber, you know, everything.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

CAPRIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

CAPRIO: And that's what—my father bought that shop after the man retired.

LEVINE: Oh, he bought that shop there?

CAPRIO: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And how about going to school? Do you remember—

CAPRIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: —starting school?

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah. I started school. [chuckles] I was a sickly kid when I was young. I started school and before I know, and I had to stop. I—I didn't

wind up going to kindygarten until I was about seven years of age. Going to one school and then got sick, going to the other. I got diphtheria. What else?

LEVINE: Wow. Do you remember anything about the diphtheria?

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: What happened?

CAPRIO: Well, the city gave—put up, you know, what do you call, on the door, a label that—

LEVINE: Quarantine?

CAPRIO: Quarantine, yeah. And then as I got a little better, I went to the doctor on Mulberry Street. And my—we had to get on at—the Delancey Street trolley car was a bumpy car. You had two big wheels in the middle and two small wheels in the back. Used to hob—we called it a hobble skirt. And this—the trolley cars out of there was green color and they were smaller than the other—than the Madison Street line. And—and later on, they put buses on that route too, and went to a doctor on Mulberry Street. And he gave me an in—an injection, you know, and wind up—you know, he cut my behind. I've got scarred now [unclear]. I was bleeding like a pig, with no ether or nothing.

LEVINE: He cut your behind?

CAPRIO: Yeah, yeah. On the cheek of my behind.

LEVINE: You mean to give you the injection?

CAPRIO: No.

LEVINE: No.

CAPRIO: It was like in—I guess it was inflamed—from what, I don't know. And when he cut it I sort of—I start screaming like mad, you know. And—

LEVINE: And it worked?

CAPRIO: Yeah, I guess so because [laughs]—

LEVINE: You're still here. You got [chuckles]—so you got better after that.

CAPRIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow. Was it a big epidemic at that time?

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Could you say anything about that?

CAPRIO: I think it was 1918, that epidemic there.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

CAPRIO: 1917, 1918.

LEVINE: 1918. And can you say anything else about, like, what was going on with people in the city with the epidemic, or anything that you recall—anything else about it?

CAPRIO: All I know that it was a lot of quarantines all over the place, you know. At that time, we had—we lived in an apartment that was toilets in the hall and shared by two families. Each had a key to the bathroom and then—and down in the basement you had a stall, your own stall. Each family had a stall where they could store odds and ends. Some people made wine down there and store—a lot of—stored the extra beds or whatever. You know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: Storage, really. Storage space.

LEVINE: Did your father make wine?

CAPRIO: No, my father's friends—those did make wine.

LEVINE: They did?

CAPRIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: And when you needed to take a bath, you had to go into the kitchen and there was a slab in that tub there. You could take out—one was like washing the dishes or the other one was washing clothes. So when you wanted to take a bath, you'd take that slab out and—

LEVINE: You'd get the whole big tub.

CAPRIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: Either that or go to the public baths, which was a few blocks away. That was from Broom Street.

LEVINE: What were the public baths like?

CAPRIO: Well, they had the big swimming pool. They had stalls, a lot of stalls there where you could go and change your clothes, go swimming, take a shower. It was called a Bernark—Bernard Baruch's Baths, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: And then later on, they had a—a boat around South Street. Remember where right there you could do the same thing. They had a pool in that boat, and take a shower and a bath and stuff. And that park was a—we used to have baseball games. On the Fourth of July they had big games. You know, races and what not on—on the Fourth of July. It was really nice, you know. And it was very neighborly. People—people was very friendly. If you took sick, your next-door neighbor would come over and help, you know and all. And it was very frien—not like today. Today, you could be laying down and people walk over you.

LEVINE: Were you living in a typical tenement building?

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Tenement.

LEVINE: And what floor were you on?

CAPRIO: Every—huh?

LEVINE: What floor were you on?

CAPRIO: We was on the fourth floor. They're usually like five—five floors high.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: Most tenements. Some of them—very few was like six or seven stories. Very few.

LEVINE: And were you in the front or the back?

CAPRIO: We was in the front and then, when we got richer, we had front and back.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. [laughter] Yeah?

CAPRIO: Yeah. No electric. It was all gas.

LEVINE: Yeah?

CAPRIO: And then [clears throat] when we moved to 61 Jackson, my—my father knew of a fellow, a friend of ours. You know, he was electrician. He put electric—we were the only ones in that building had electric.

LEVINE: Wow.

CAPRIO: And then we got a telephone, which was, “Wow! Telephone. Wow! You must be rich.”

LEVINE: Yeah.

CAPRIO: And people used to be—used to bother you to take calls. They wanted—“Call Mrs. Hastings down”—got a telephone. It got to be a pain in the neck.

LEVINE: How old were you, about, when—when your family got the telephone?

CAPRIO: I was 14 years of age at that time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: And—

LEVINE: And how about school? Which school did you go to?

CAPRIO: I went to, oh, a lot of schools. I went to—at that—when I was four—14, I went to—first, I started in 110. That was near Cannon [PH] Street, by the Williamsburg Bridge. And I remember I went there only a little while; I guess I took sick. [clears throat] Then I went to [unclear] nine—97, which was on—imagine, Stanton and Houston. [PH] And then became a junior high school, so then I went to 188. That was on—on Houston Street near the East River Drive, which is today the East River Drive. And one day, the—they took us to [clears throat] the Low—Avenue B to see Charlie Chaplin and Kid [PH], you know, in the movies.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: The whole school went. And that was a big theater there. And then, after that, I went to P.S. 22, which was on Stanton Street at Stanton and Willis. And then I went to P.—P.S. 34.

LEVINE: Wow.

CAPRIO: From 34, I went to 147 and that's where I graduated, out of 147. It seems—

LEVINE: Well, that must have been—

CAPRIO: —they kept changing around the schools, you know. And then if you lived there, they'd put you out and go to that school and that—being—being that we moved around, they—they changed the—from school to school.

LEVINE: Well, so in other words, it wasn't that you moved so much. It was that the schools—

CAPRIO: Yeah, well—

LEVINE: —changed the way you—

CAPRIO: It was both. It was us and the school.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: We made—like we said, I went from Front Street to Jackson Street, Jackson Street to Callare Street, Callare Street—

LEVINE: Oh, right.

CAPRIO: —to Broom Street.

LEVINE: Right.

CAPRIO: Broom Street back to Jackson Street. And then from Jackson—and they chased us out. They were starting to build those projects. We went there for—from Jackson Street to Willis Street.

LEVINE: Why did you move so often? Do you know?

CAPRIO: Well, in those days—well, first of all, one main thing was you needed more room. As the family got bigger, you needed more space. And in those days it was easy to get an apartment. In fact, the landlord, they give you a month's rent free, you know, to move into their place. But the

most important part was that the family grew, because then I had a sister born here and my brother was born here. Then another sister was born here. So naturally, you know, when you had, like, five people because you had a—my other sister had died when—when I was six years of age.

LEVINE: Could you—talk about that. What happened to your sister?

CAPRIO: She winded up getting consumption, you know.

LEVINE: Huh.

CAPRIO: And—and she was [clears throat]—she was over on the island, Ward's [PH] Island there in the hospital. I remember I was a kid. My mother used to take me to visit her, you know. We'd take the—the trolley car and a bus and then to go over the ferry to the island, you know. And—and she died in 1916.

LEVINE: Now, was she sick when she came over here?

CAPRIO: No, no. No, she got sick here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: Whether she worried herself to de—you know, to that—that—

LEVINE: Yeah, what do you think? It sounds like—

CAPRIO: You know. Yeah, I—she never liked it here. She—you know, she was the oldest, see?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAPRIO: She was born in 1905 so she would been about seven years old. And she's li—well, my brother was only, like, two and a half, three years old.

LEVINE: Right.

CAPRIO: And he didn't mind it so much she did. She knew—I guess leaving her friends and—over there and that's why—

LEVINE: What was—

CAPRIO: I imagine that, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah, what was her name?

CAPRIO: Lucy.

LEVINE: Lucy?

CAPRIO: Lucy.

LEVINE: Yeah. So is there anything else about Lucy that your mother told you or that you—you—

CAPRIO: Only that—that she, you know—I didn't—you know, I didn't know too much about her myself because I was that young.

LEVINE: Do you remember her though?

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

CAPRIO: We took pictures here together, but my memory at that time wasn't so good, you know, thinking I'm—

LEVINE: Yeah.

CAPRIO: Ah—but I—that's what I think. [coughs] She worried herself, I think, into sickness.

LEVINE: Hmm, hmm. And how about your father? What was it like being around your father? Because that was like the first time you met [unclear]?

CAPRIO: Well, I'll tell you some—I'll tell you something. The barbers at that time, I wouldn't be a barber if they gave me a hundred dollars a week.

LEVINE: Why's that?

CAPRIO: Because [clears throat] they used to get up in the morning, go to work. Eight o'clock in the morning they'd be in the shop. They wouldn't be home till maybe eight o'clock at night. And on a Saturday, they'd—10, 11 o'clock at night before they'd come home. And then they had to work on a Sunday and maybe two to three o'clock in the afternoon before he could close shop. So that, being a barber—but today, I would take—I'd be a barber today in a—like nothing, because they don't even work—some of them don't even work Saturday, you know, Sunday. And if—if they work Saturday, then they're off Monday.

LEVINE: Right. How about—

CAPRIO: And the—and the prices. Twenty cents for a shave.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

CAPRIO: Thirty-five cents for a haircut.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: And they thought the barber's—"Wow, your father's rich. He's a"—I says, "Yeah? Takes a half hour to give you a haircut. That's 35 cents a half hour, 70 cents an hour." For a man to have to pay rent and towels and perfumes and all this, [unclear] and soaps and stuff, to—to make 35 cents and 25 cents for shave.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: Today, everybody shaves themselves now, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah. Was that a social [chuckles]—

CAPRIO: [chuckles]

LEVINE: Was that a social meeting place, the barbershop?

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah. They used to come in and chitchat and sometimes they'd go in the back room, play cards and—and that's—that's—

LEVINE: Is that where your brother learned to play cards? [chuckles]

CAPRIO: My brother? Yeah. [laughs] I guess so. My brother became a barber when he—when he felt like it. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

CAPRIO: But I—I never did. I—I used to help open up the—the people and they give you a nickel tip, maybe, you know, [chuckles] and they—instead, they give the barber the tip. You know, might—like, my father, they give me the nickel. I might have made a dollar [chuckles] for—and then I—I packed it and I—which I'm glad I did because barbers didn't have no pensions, no nothing, you know, and no Social Security. But my father—when my brother joined, you know, became a barber, my father used to pay his Social Security, you know, and his own, of course. But it was terrible being a barber in those days.

LEVINE: How about your mother? Did she have any kind of social group that she—

CAPRIO: [clears throat] My mother used to do a lot of helping out, used to sew coats—

LEVINE: Oh.

CAPRIO: — and, you know, the buttonholes, and they sewed around, like that— not where the button is but the other part where they stitched and sewed. And sometimes, I used to go to the clothier and get the bundle and bring it home and she'd do the work. And then when it was done she'd wrap it up in one coat and tie it, and I'd put it on my shoulder and walk to the—to the factory and drop it off. I—

LEVINE: Do you remember where the factory was?

CAPRIO: Yeah, it was on Delancey and Mangen [PH]. And that time, we lived in Broom Street, you know, up near—between Mangen and Tompkin [PH]. And one day, there—I was coming with a bundle of clothes, so windy—it must have been like a hurricane. It blew me right across the street to the—up—landed up against the garage across the street. That's how strong the wind was. But good thing there was a snowplow there. I hit the snowplow before I—it was very—like a very scary—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: —what was called homework.

CAPRIO: Homework, yeah. Help out. Help out, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

CAPRIO: Of course, you know, those salaries wasn't that great and the money that my father made, I mean, first of all, he probably had to pay—help—pay the guy he bought the barbershop from, pay him so much a month or so, you know.

LEVINE: How long was he working for the other man before he actually got the shot for himself?

CAPRIO: Oh, I guess about seven years ago, so about seven years, I guess. Yeah.

LEVINE: Can you remember any things—any attitudes your mother or father had that they told you about, either about being in this country, or about ways they wanted you to be, or ideas they had about how you should do things or—

CAPRIO: Oh, they—they sort of, you know—I don't think they had much time, you know, between working and by the time they got home, eating and—and going to bed. And like I say, it was work seven days a week, you know. But what—what little time he had, like, we used to go on outings with the—with the Pythons [PH], what they called, you know, friends of—of ours where you'd go to places like Canarsie or Coney Island or—near Coney Island, there was a field there where they used to have outings, you know. Today, it's all built up but those days there was a lot of open spaces. You know, even Brooklyn there. Brooklyn was like a prairie. [unclear], taken by [unclear] you today, that's all filled up. I remember my cousin, a second cousin, bought a home on Homecrest [PH] Avenue off of Avenue U. It looked like a country. And then the—you know, very few homes was around there.

LEVINE: Yeah. Could you say—describe anything more about the Lower East Side, what it was like in those days?

CAPRIO: Well, it was—was friendly; I tell you. We used to swim on the—between Delancey And Broom underneath the bridge, you know. And there was a little beach there. Like, I was about five or six years of age then—six or seven, maybe. And there was this solid tower, you know, a stone tower that'd hold the bridge up, one part of the bridge. We used to swim around that and around the other way, come back this way, or climb up on top of that tower and dive off in—in—and then there was a dock between that—outside that tower. And there was an old, old dock. They had logs, you know, from probably other—other piers, you know. They put the dock—it was full of logs in there. We used to swim over there, climb up on these lo—on—on the top and—and dive off. And there'd be big rats in there, like water rats.

LEVINE: Oh.

CAPRIO: Big—and diving in. And then there was another pier to the right—to—south—yeah, another pier south of that, which is like a block. We used to go there and dive off there. And later on, as I got a little older, we—there was another pier a block from there, which was on Broom to Grant Street and was like a—only the neighbors would—would go there, you know. And we had a rowboat there and a lifesaving shanty, what they got through the city. The city gave them the rowboat, oars. And then in the back we had a shan—an old trolley car, another trolley—a bus, just

the shell of the bus. You know, the seats and all. It was like us—we had, like, Coney Island everyday down there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: Diving off the back.

LEVINE: Were these piers on the East River? Is that where—

CAPRIO: Yeah, East River.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

CAPRIO: And then we had, you know, those tanks of—gas tanks—oxygen tanks, I should say. We had a big one hanging on there. And those days, they had a lot of pleasure boats or excursion boats, used to go to Connecticut, you know, go—going north. And when they passed by, we hit a—bam—we banged that three times and they would blow their whistle three times back. You know?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: It was very interesting. It was like—

LEVINE: It sounds like you had a nice childhood [unclear].

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

CAPRIO: Yeah, until they—they started to build the East River Drive and they knocked us out of the—completely.

LEVINE: Oh. When was that? When did they start building it? Do you remember?

CAPRIO: About '30—'39, '38.

LEVINE: Oh.

CAPRIO: '38, '39—in—but, you know, they—first of all, tho—those days, the men was at that—had business with horse and wagon. They used to bring their wagon at night to the dock. They—like a storage [unclear], you know—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAPRIO: —and then pick ‘em up the next morning, take the horse and walk him down, take the [unclear].

LEVINE: Were you then by the Fulton Fish Market? Was that going [unclear]?

CAPRIO: No, we were—we was north of the fish market, you know.

LEVINE: Oh.

FEHNEY: East, east—

CAPRIO: North.

FEHNEY: East.

CAPRIO: Yeah, east—what—yeah. Well, east.

LEVINE: So you didn’t have—you didn’t hang around the fish market there [unclear]?

CAPRIO: No, no. We only went there to buy fish [unclear], you know.

LEVINE: What was that like, the fish market in those days, early on?

CAPRIO: Well, I te—tell you, it was the same as, not today, since they built it up with this sight-seeing place, but today, the fish market—they was on both sides of the street and the dock on the other side. And the guys crate with the handles. And when I used to drive through I used to get a lot of flats because of the nails, you know, in those boxes there. So I stopped going through there to go down to—like towards the Battery, you know. And when they built that highway there, I used to take the—

LEVINE: [unclear].

CAPRIO: Yeah, the highway down. But, you know, it was always crowded [unclear]. But that—that was true, like—like seven or eight o’clock on the morning there, about end up. They worked mostly in the dark, you know. And then the daytime, they had men come washing the street down. Of course, the fish was very slimy. You know, the streets were slimy. They used to wash it down every day. But it was very hectic there, that fish market, you know. And they claimed these gangsters had—had all to do with the—you know, that I—I know nothing about. But you only hear what you hear, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: Rumors.

LEVINE: How about religion? What—was your family religious when you [unclear]?

CAPRIO: [clears throat] Yeah, we always—you know, with the church.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAPRIO: I guess, prayed to our saint. Our Lady of Mount Carmel was the Italian saint, you know.

LEVINE: Of the church where you were? Is that—

CAPRIO: No.

LEVINE: —the name of the church?

CAPRIO: No.

LEVINE: Oh.

CAPRIO: That—there's—people from our town used to pray—

LEVINE: Oh.

CAPRIO: —for—in fact, I take the—and so all of Italy, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, I—I learned later on. But we used to have—have once a year in July the 16th, we'd have a little get-together in the church, have a mass said. And downstairs, we'd have a—a little shindig, you know, coffee cake and stuff. And whatever money was leftover, we gave it to this church for—you know, we—like, we're shipping, like, \$10 a piece. And whatever cost them for the stuff—sodas.

LEVINE: And how about—how about when your sister died? Did you—did you have a funeral? Did you have it in the home?

CAPRIO: Yeah, all those funerals was in the home at that time.

LEVINE: And what was that like?

CAPRIO: Well, it was very—

LEVINE: What happened, like [unclear]—

CAPRIO: When they brought her home from the hospital, they had her in the—like a metal coffin with ice—ice on—till the undertaker came, you know, and took her out of there and—and put her in a regular box. At the time, they had the horses, you know, horse and wagons. [clears throat] The funeral—and then I had another sister passed away with leukemia when we lived on Willard Street. She was still in a home and that was 1940. She was 20 years old and was going to get married and we went to three different doctors before they found out that she had leukemia. First, they thought they had—anemic—she was anemic. And to this day, they can't do much about leukemia. In fact, one of my doctors died from leukemia himself.

LEVINE: Hmm, hmm. So in other words, did you have, like a—did—did your youngest sister—was she, [clears throat] like, in the—in the house and people came in?

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: And had a service—

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: —there? And—

CAPRIO: Not the service. The service—

LEVINE: No.

CAPRIO: —they took to church. But the work was in the house. Then later on, I guess, maybe 1945—I don't remember the exact date when they started to go to the funeral parlors.

LEVINE: Oh.

CAPRIO: You know.

LEVINE: Oh.

CAPRIO: But when my mother-in-law died—what year was that, Frances? She was in the house, also.

LEVINE: Huh.

CAPRIO: You had to go up four or five flights of stairs that—wherever you lived, you know.

FEHNEY: '48.

CAPRIO: Huh?

FEHNEY: '48.

CAPRIO: '48. So '48, was still—

LEVINE: Still—

CAPRIO: Still in the house.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Yeah.

CAPRIO: It was terrible, you know, you—you didn't get much sleep. You work—somebody had to stay up with the—you know, and they didn't believe, like, everybody going to bed and the corpse is alone. Like today, you know, two to five, seven to nine, and then it's empty house and they're a—they're all alone.

FEHNEY: Then you moved.

CAPRIO: Yeah, and then we moved out of there. We went to the—Madison Street.

FEHNEY: Each time somebody died.

LEVINE: Oh—

CAPRIO: Yeah, we did—never—yeah—any—

LEVINE: Did you move because they died?

CAPRIO: Every time someone died, they'd get out of that house because, I guess it was like they didn't want the memories of—you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CAPRIO: That's one reason. Yeah. Sure enough. It's a shame. Yeah.

LEVINE: So was there anything—what—what did you do for fun when had you were a little boy growing up?

CAPRIO: Well, we used to—when—we used to play, like, where I lived on Broom Street, it was cobblestone street. We used to play, like, passing a

football around and tagging one another, or play softball. See? And on the street—

FEHNEY: Stickball.

CAPRIO: Stickball was—on the street where we lived was—Broom was narrow but the next one from Tompkin to E. Street, which is the East River Drive today—Tompkins [unclear] E. Street was very narrow—I mean, very wide. And—

FEHNEY: [unclear]?

CAPRIO: And we used to [telephone rings]—

LEVINE: Okay, we're going to pause here for a [unclear].

CAPRIO: Yeah. [tape off/on]

LEVINE: So you—and you played—you were saying all the [unclear]—

CAPRIO: We played softball. Softball. And wind up later on, we had—they had such a good team that they—they joined us—a league, softball league, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: But it never materialized, you know. I forgot the—the announcer started that. The radio announcer, he started that. He just died not too long ago. [clears throat] I'm trying to think of his name. And—

LEVINE: Did you go to any, like, social clubs?

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah. We used to have a lot of clubs. We had what they call a dollar beer racket as you got ol—you know, as you got older. They'd have a band and for a dollar, you'd get roast beef sandwiches and all the beer you could drink.

LEVINE: Wow.

CAPRIO: And that time was during Prohibition. They used to have to buy a barrel of beer at time for \$25, you know. And I'll tell you, the dance hall—you—I could never dance but at that time you could dance. It was so packed, you didn't even—you didn't [chuckles] need to know.

LEVINE: [unclear] the moves. [chuckles] Well—

CAPRIO: Some of them was in the stores—you know, these places. And some—we had a building [clears throat], a two-story building on Grand and Mangen Street that we used to have, you know. And—

FEHNEY: Your voice goes down.

CAPRIO: But [clears throat]—for years. Why don't you put your hearing aid on? [chuckles]

LEVINE: All right. So—so when you would go to these social—would there be—would there be people from Italy and people from other countries too or [unclear]—

CAPRIO: No, it was on—only neighborhoods.

LEVINE: Just the neighborhood.

CAPRIO: [clears throat] Yeah, neighborhood.

LEVINE: And what about Prohibition? Do you remember anything about that?

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah. That's what—that was during Prohibition.

LEVINE: What do you remember about that particular time? Anything?

CAPRIO: Well, [chuckles] just that [unclear]—beer was—it was so hard to get. It was, for us so easy to get because [clears throat] [unclear], well, like I say, \$25 a barrel, that was a lot of money, you know, in those days. And a dollar beer—imagine, a dollar. You could get a whole lot of sandwiches and all—all you could eat, roast beef sandwiches and all the beer you could drink for a dollar.

LEVINE: Well, now, had you already finished school when you were going to these beer parties?

CAPRIO: I—oh, yeah. I was already—I was working at the time.

LEVINE: What did you do after you left school for work?

CAPRIO: [clears throat] I—I was driving a truck. Oh, after I left school? Oh, I worked in a couple places, Remington Typewriter, at that time. [coughs] It was known as Remington Typewriter. Now—then it became Remington Rand and then I went to work for a silk house. You know, a rayon and wools—I had a good job there working five days a week. I was getting \$20 a week—

LEVINE: Wow.

CAPRIO: —which was a lot of money in those days.

LEVINE: What were you doing—what were you doing in the silk—

CAPRIO: We was like, when the customers were ordering spools, we'd empty one case and put some of this and some of that in the case and seal it up and then mark it off and for shipment, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: And they—then they moved to Long Island so I lost my job because they never even asked me to go, but, well, going to Long Island was like going to Europe—

LEVINE: Yeah.

CAPRIO: —at that time. You know? And from then on, I—well, I—I wound up in a—in the neighborhood, there was a lot of trucking outfits, so I wind up being a helper on a truck. And later on, I drove a truck and—

LEVINE: Would you go on long hauls or local?

CAPRIO: Local hauls. Local.

LEVINE: Oh.

CAPRIO: But the—some, you know, would go sometimes, like, [unclear] and, which was very long at—with those trucks. They could only do about 15 miles an hour at that time, you know.

LEVINE: Oh.

CAPRIO: It ain't like today. Chain drives on the Macks. They had chain drives, trucks. And—

LEVINE: What is that? Chain drives?

CAPRIO: It—that's what it—the chains were like a bicycle. You know, the chain would—

LEVINE: Oh.

CAPRIO: —would make the wheels go.

LEVINE: Oh.

CAPRIO: And if the chain fell off, why [chuckles] y—you couldn't go no more. You had to put it on yourself. And then they—till that night, they—you had the mechanic tighten up the chain that—tighten up the gears, you know, and the—it was hectic then.

LEVINE: So did you still drive in the truck? Is that what you—

CAPRIO: What?

LEVINE: Did you stay driving a truck?

CAPRIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Is that what you mainly did?

CAPRIO: In those days, you didn't even have electric lights. You had the gasoline lights and the little lamps, you know. And on the back where the—the license plate was, you had a lamp hanging out. And I—I'd be—working at night—

LEVINE: Wow.

CAPRIO: —hanging down off the—and no—no glass—[unclear]—icing glass covers on the side. And most of the time they were torn and the rain and the snow would come in on you. It ain't like today. You got heaters and doors and everything. And they—and it was hectic. Then—and then it was, you know, during the Depression that—well, later on, when I wasn't working everyday, I'd work a day and might be two days. I—I wouldn't work for a week and maybe two weeks I wouldn't work. It was tough. And then I finally—in 1940, I finally got a job for a electro-type [PH] house driving a little panel truck. And from then on, I was all right. I worked there 32 years—

LEVINE: Hmm.

CAPRIO: —until business went kaput. There's—all these [unclear] came out, you know, with—electric typing was by impression. You put types on the press and the press would [unclear] bring down and make the impression of the—of the—whatever it is, like pictures of—and then they put them in tubs. And—and make a plate out of it, [unclear] sheet, was a very interesting job. And—but I used to go and pick up these types from the type houses and then bring them back and they—like a steel frame where this side was all a type, might be a picture of a man or a horse or what. And they would put it on the press and press that in.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CAPRIO: It was very interesting how they make a plate, something like the engravers. You know, they'd—the engravers did that by etching. Well, we couldn't make no engraving but we'd make a duplicate. After we got that engraving, we could duplicate—cate that, you know.

LEVINE: I see. When did you meet your wife?

CAPRIO: Oh, well, in the '30s, you know.

LEVINE: And wh—and how did you meet?

CAPRIO: Well, when—in the neighborhood, you know. In the neighborhood. And we'd go to a bar to have a few bars or [unclear]—and the bar on—on De—on Broom Street there was—they had a side door and the—and the bar door, you know. The side door, you could walk in where nobody knew, you know, from the bar. They had tables there. You could order a meal, have a few beers. They had a jukebox there. And [clears throat]—and that's what you—you know, on a Sunday, kill time or go to a movie or—it was very, you know—very downplayed. In other words, it was—it wasn't high tone like today. You got to go to the—the prom and this and that and—

LEVINE: [chuckles]

CAPRIO: They had no [chuckles]—no proms then.

LEVINE: What was your wife's name?

CAPRIO: Frances. Same as her, Frances. [clears throat]

LEVINE: And—and you knew each other from the neighborhood?

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, was there a problem—any of that family—the fact that she was Irish and you were Italian?

CAPRIO: Oh, no. No. That—we intermarried a lot. There was Jewish married Christian and Christian married Jews. Now, it ain't the—in fact, the [clears throat]—my sister was married to a Jewish fellow. You know? And a friend of mine, Jewish married a Christian girl. You know, it was—it was intermarriage like nothing. It didn't mean a thing—a thing. [clears

throat] And even if some friend of ours got married—even a priest married them. They were married two ways, Jewish and Christian.

LEVINE: Oh.

CAPRIO: [clears throat]

LEVINE: So then, after you got married, did—did you—this was during the Depression. That must—

CAPRIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: —have been a hard time.

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, it was that. Sure.

FEHNEY: '33.

CAPRIO: So, it was still the Depression.

FEHNEY: [unclear]

LEVINE: Well, did you—did your wife work or did you—

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah. She worked for the Coast Guard. She was a—a bookkeeper, what you call a—

FEHNEY: Fiscal accountant.

CAPRIO: —a fiscal accountant. Oh, she—

LEVINE: And did you stay in the Lower East Side or did you then move out?

CAPRIO: Oh, yeah. We stayed until 1980 when she took very sick. Then we moved in with her.

LEVINE: I see.

CAPRIO: We bought a house together because she was very, very—she—like, I couldn't take care of her and she couldn't take care of herself. So that's how—what happened.

LEVINE: Well, when you look back on—when you look back on coming here and your family coming here, do you think that made a difference in your personality or—you were young, but, like your mother and father, did it

change them in any way, do you think, coming to a new place and starting all over again?

CAPRIO: No, you can—you know, you make friends. You [clears throat]—like everything else, you—[clears throat] from one place to another, you star—you make your own friends. No, I think they enjoyed themselves. [clears throat] In fact, when my mother and father were married 50 years, we wanted to send them—give them enough money—fare to go back to Europe and they didn't want to go. She said, "What's there?" Everybody they knew was here. They—so why go—go there? They didn't want to go.

LEVINE: Well, what do you feel proud of that you've done? What—what do—makes you feel satisfied? [laughter]

CAPRIO: Well, I think I had a pretty good life and I got a very good daughter here. Without her, I—I don't know what would happen to me because the way I am now, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: Without her is—

LEVINE: Yeah. Wh—what would you think were the worst times and what were the best times in your life?

CAPRIO: Well, [clears throat] when we—[clears throat] when we were kids, we used to have to go for coal in the wintertime. If you're rich enough, you buy a bag of coal, you know. But we used to—the—the coal trucks would drop coal that was so loaded, they'd drop it on the street. We'd pick them up, you know. There was a coal yard around, not too far from us. And we had our own—get wood for the stove. We had an icebox, no refrigerator. You had to go and get ice. You had an iceman come and deliver ice, coal, you know. And you had to take the pan from out of the—out of the bottom—

LEVINE: Ice racks?

CAPRIO: —of—of the icebox. You got to make sure that it didn't overflow or go on the floor. It was tough, you know, as living. But we didn't mind it, you know, we lived near the Williamsburg Bridge. And they'd say, "How do you live there? The trolley cars and everything going over the bridge?" You get used to that noise. In fact, that noise puts you to sleep. You know? [clears throat] So we didn't mind it. You know, looking back, you say, "Wow, that was tough times." But we didn't mind that time. That's—that was life.

LEVINE: Right. And how about the best times? What—what—what can you think were the best—was the best time in your life?

CAPRIO: Well, [clears throat] with the friends that you had, you know. Go swimming together and playing together and I think that was the best times. And, in fact, I look back, I—see, I miss those fellows. You know, I miss the times.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you ever have contact with any of them from the old—

CAPRIO: No, I don't know if there are any of them alive, even.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CAPRIO: [clears throat] I know some died young. I noticed that in my time in life that 80 percent of the people die when—in their 50s, you know.

LEVINE: Really?

CAPRIO: But 80 percent and there's only a few people that live long. Some live too long. Some live like—you know, like me, in the 80s.

LEVINE: How is this time in your life?

CAPRIO: Not bad. You know, even though I'm—I'm tied down in bed with this walking. I can't walk without, you know, help. And I have a—a bag here to—I have an infection in my urine. But I don't mind it, as long as I'm able to—as long as I have her and I'm able to maneuver, you know, go here, wherever we want to go.

LEVINE: And you're in a nice place.

CAPRIO: Yeah. Yeah. And we have nice friends here too. We have a little get-together here once in a while with the neighbors and—so life—yeah, I think that life has been pretty good to me, considering, you know, she lost—I lost my wife June the 22nd and she lost her husband July the—July the 2nd—

LEVINE: The same year?

CAPRIO: Ten—ten days apart.

LEVINE: Wow.

CAPRIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CAPRIO: So that's how we—we come to get out of there, make—not so much—the taxes went up so high in there and—and so we finally come down here. And we didn't make no mistake. Very good.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay. Well, we've got about a half a minute. Is there anything more you can think of that maybe we didn't mention? How—how do you feel about being an American versus being an Italian?

CAPRIO: Oh, great. Great.

LEVINE: Do you see that as—

CAPRIO: Great.

LEVINE: —different or—

CAPRIO: Well, it's a good thing I'm here, you know. I was in the Navy when I came—probably I'd been prisoner of—if I was in Italy, I probably would have been a prisoner or something, or dead. But I was in the Navy here in the Pacific on board a carrier. So I was three years there and [unclear] nothing but water for three years.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CAPRIO: So I'm glad that [chuckles] I'm on land here. [laughter]

LEVINE: Okay, I think we'll stop right there. I want to thank you so much.

CAPRIO: Okay.

LEVINE: A wonderful interview.

CAPRIO: [chuckles]

LEVINE: And [clears throat] it's—it's September 28th. I've been speaking with Gerard Caprio, who came from Italy in 1912 when it was just a baby. And with me is Frances Fehney, his daughter. And this is Janet Levine signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]