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LUCIANO FRANCIONI

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LEVINE: Today is June 19th, the year two thousand. And we're here at Ellis Island. And I'm here with Luciano Francioni, who came here from San Marino in 1969, when he was twenty-one years of age. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and Paul Roper for the National Park Service is videotaping the interview at the same time. Okay, could you please say your birth date?

FRANCIONI: June 6th, 1948.

LEVINE: Okay, and within San Marino, where were you born?

FRANCIONI: I was born outside San Marino, in the country of Italy in general, because my father was already an immigrant from San Marino. He moved to Genoa, Italy. So where I was born, and then I moved back to San Marino after fifteen years.

LEVINE: I see, so were you in Genoa for your first fifteen years?

FRANCIONI: Yes, but I was always with the family, traveling back and forth. We have some deep roots, even in San Marino. Only at the time there was no way to get decent employment, so we had to live outside of it.

LEVINE: Okay, so your father's name—what was your father's name?

FRANCIONI: Lino, L-I-N-O.

LEVINE: Okay, and your father left San Marino for work, is that what you--?

FRANCIONI: Yes, he was fourteen years old.

LEVINE: So he was not yet married to your mother?

FRANCIONI: No.

LEVINE: And he went to Genoa?

FRANCIONI: They met in Genoa. My mother also was from a San Marini family. They immigrated prior to that to Genoa as well.

LEVINE: I see, so in Genoa, were there San Marinese, kind of a section, or a group?

FRANCIONI: Yes, they were like a small colony, as a matter of fact, because as you know, San Marino is a very small country. It's only twenty-four square miles. And there are eighteen thousand people living there, and more than twenty thousand living outside of it. There's just not enough room for everybody, so sooner or later somebody has to move out.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, I see. So what was your mother's name, and her maiden name?

FRANCIONI: Jolanda Carlini. Jolanda like J-O-L-A-N-D, and Carlini, C-A-R-L-I-N-I.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and was your mother—was the marriage between your mother and father arranged by their families?

FRANCIONI: No, no. We were just one step ahead of it! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Okay [laughs]. Okay, so they met in Genoa?

FRANCIONI: Yes.

LEVINE: And then did you have grandparents at all, that you knew, as a little boy?

FRANCIONI: Yeah, they were in Genoa, on my mother's side. From the other side, they were in San Marino. So when went back to San Marino, I had one set of grandparents; when I was living in Genoa and growing up, I had another set.

LEVINE: Do you have any memories of your set in Genoa?

FRANCIONI: Well, I left Genoa, I was fifteen years old, and over thirty-six, thirty-seven, years ago. And I went back there a couple of times, but I don't have any more relatives in there. Everybody's in San Marino. Whenever I go to Genoa, I just go see the old places where I grew up. But there's nothing there no more; everything is finished.

LEVINE: But how about when you were a little boy in Genoa, with your grandparents? Do you remember times with them, like what they did, or what they were like?

FRANCIONI: Oh, yeah, we used to live in the same house. We had like a small flat, one-level story building, divided in half. They were living in the front of it; we were living in the rear of it.

LEVINE: When you say they, it was your grandmother, your grandfather—any aunts, uncles?

FRANCIONI: No, no, I only had a couple of aunts, but they died when I was very young. And I hardly met my uncles, because when I was born they were already pretty old, and they left.

LEVINE: Yeah, now what did your father find for work in Genoa?

FRANCIONI: My father went to work in the constructions. He also lied about his age in order to get a driver's license. Of course, he couldn't get one. But in a few years after World War Two it wasn't very hard to find some kind of a truck to drive. They weren't asking for many papers. If you see they are old enough, nobody would stop you. And Genoa, of course, they bombed during the war, so it had to be rebuilt. And the kind of work he found was in construction and rebuild of the city.

LEVINE: I see, I see. So, I'm sorry, maybe you said it, but what year did your family move to Genoa? Your father, I should say.

FRANCIONI: My father moved to Genoa in 1937.

LEVINE: Thirty-seven, and--?

FRANCIONI: My mother was already there.

LEVINE: Was already there. And they married, do you know what year?

FRANCIONI: Oh, yeah, they got married April 19th, 1945.

LEVINE: Oh, so they married when the war was over, then? Uh-huh.

FRANCIONI: Yes, a few months.

LEVINE: Yeah, I see.

FRANCIONI: Matter of fact, my father even contributed to the war and he fought against the Americans! Shame on him! [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs]

FRANCIONI: Because even though, being from San Marino, we weren't Italian, we didn't have any kind of documents. So my country citizens, they're not obliged to obey to any Italian laws, because we are not Italian. But you are found in the chaos after the war or during the war, without any papers on you, they just arrested him, and they dragged him to the front. They give him a uniform and a rifle, "Here, go fight!" So after a few months he just dropped everything and came back home. There wasn't to fight with.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and was that towards the end of the war, then?

FRANCIONI: It was 1943.

LEVINE: Forty-three.

FRANCIONI: He was in the Army Corps called Alpini, which are like the Alpines. There was a division specialized in the warfare in the Alps, because Italy of course is surrounded by the Alps in the north, as a frontier. And there was a big mess: before you were against the Americans, then you were with the Americans. Germany was kicked out. He didn't know what to do; he just dropped his rifle and went back home, and walked in the night, and hide in the day. He went to San Marino then again, as a refugee, until the war ended.

LEVINE: Oh, I see, so he stayed in San Marino then, and he was protected, was he, there?

FRANCIONI: Well, nobody could touch us there, because we weren't invaded by the Germans, because San Marino being a mountain over the Adriatic Sea, and they were going to control all the advancement of the Italian and English Army from the section of Eastern Italy, like the Montecasinos, like the little mountain on top. And we also were a refugee for the people to live in the surrounding areas, like two, three, four, maybe ten, fifteen miles around—they was to be rescued and taken care of by the San Marino government as refugees of war. We had more than a hundred thousand people from the surrounding area, seeking protection in San Marino during the war. And then when, after the war, everybody went back home, but San Marino was just part of Italy. There was no work. You couldn't find employment unless you were one of the few wealthy families that you didn't need to do any work. But there weren't many there. And when you are raising a family of—we used to take care of our own grandparents, too, you know, as a culture. So you're living in a house with just a bunch of beds, and to put food on the table for say, four people enough, and you're sitting nine or ten. So there's not enough to go around, so sooner or later somebody has to get out. That's what you do. Then wherever you can find work, and if you leave alone, you leave a family behind, and maybe if you're lucky you find a pretty good job in the surrounding country, and you start sending back money, hoping to contribute back to your own family, or even if you have started your own family of your own, like a wife and kids. Many families, they ended up that way, especially my grandparents from my father's side. He also was an immigrant. He went to work in a coal mine in France, in a place called [French], in the province of Nancy. He also was eleven years old.

LEVINE: Wow. So there's a lot of San Marinense lots of places.

FRANCIONI: We are scattered all over the world. We have four hundred fifty families only in the New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut area. And we get together here pretty often. We have our own club; we have our own consul here. He was supposed to be here today, but I guess he chickened out! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So if you were to say what the qualities, or the kind of character of the San Marinense person is, is that something that you feel you could comment on?

FRANCIONI: Well, I feel pretty proud of it. We have a record here. If you looked in the archive of the police department, or any FBI records, or any other law enforcement agency, you don't see one of my countrymen every being arrested. Just, it didn't happen yet. Maybe it could be the first [laughs], but it hasn't happened yet.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and what is the tie that keeps people coming back, even though, you know, family members have had to scatter, just for work and--?

FRANCIONI: Because eventually things got better there, too. The economy went better. There's also a large population that went even further south than New York. They went down to Argentina. I visited them last year. But I also scribble for the little newspaper that we print here in New York, on my community. So we went down there with the Consul, to introduce him to San Marinese that live in Argentina. And Argentina never had the boom of development like New York or the United States, and now those people, they are trying to go back, because they are living better in San Marino than in many parts of Argentina. And they wish they could go back. So eventually some people tried to return, to be repatriated. But then they always have the factor of the family ties. Like me—I've been lucky. In America, I've been working every day of my life, and I own two businesses. But I have two daughters now just got married, and I'm going to be a grandfather in a few months. If I had to go back and live there like a king, I can stop working today if I want, and I can live there pretty, pretty well. How am I going to stay there? So, my home is here now; my family is here. Even if I can go back there, I live here. Family is stronger than your own heritage.

LEVINE: If we could just back up to when you left Genoa and you went to San Marino—what was the change for you? How did you feel the difference, in moving back?

FRANCIONI: Genoa was a much bigger place than San Marino. It's not that I was accustomed to having a life of luxury, but there were things in Genoa that could not be found in San Marino, so many were like the old-fashioned kind of life. There was only one movie theater, and on Friday it was closed, because the priest didn't want anybody to go see a movie. And Genoa was like the more active life. It was like a much reduced-scale New York, but everything was there. It took me quite a while, even to learn the old dialect I never knew. I was raised speaking one dialect, the Genovese dialect, then I had to start learning the San Marinese dialect, it's like from Romania's. It took me a while to readjust myself, but then I got to like it, because the kind of living, the tenor of the people living there, they are more relaxed. They take those three hour lunches. They never rush. Whenever they feel like stopping work, and they stop. They see a tree, and the shade. They take a bottle of wine; they drink it. Nobody rushes you. But I wouldn't be able to adjust myself after living in New York. Every time that I go back on vacation there I have to look for something to do [laughs] that can tie me down.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, how about your mother and father? Were they very happy to be returning? Or did they return when you did?

FRANCIONI: Oh, yeah, they returned. We returned all together, because eventually my father wasn't able to do much work, because he had like an incident in his work, an accident, and he fell. He was in demolition. The construction company was demolishing an old building before they can rebuild it, and a wall fell on top of him. So he spent nine months in the hospital, and he had no insurance. So we start to live with my grandparents for a while, and then we had to go back in San Marino, because the hospital bills in Italy, they are much higher than in San Marino. In San Marino, they are almost free. They call it Mootwa [PH], mutual. The government paid for your health insurance. Even now, if you reside in San Marino, and you go for any reason to the hospital, there is no charge, as long as you are somebody who is living there. So my father, to continue his cure and rehabilitation, we had to go back in there. And then he eventually started to walk again, and then we found a job in there. I went to work, and I was thirteen years old. I was two months short of my fourteenth birthday.

LEVINE: What did you do?

FRANCIONI: I was a busboy. And then after seven years, I became a busboy in America, too! So I did some career! [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] I see, so you worked as a busboy until you came here?

FRANCIONI: No, I worked as a busboy, and then I was [unclear] to waiter, in like a tourist place, yeah. It's not actually year-round. You find work for six months a year, and the other six months, you start to do your best. Then I became, I took another test; I became a police officer. But police there are different than police in other places; they don't carry guns. They are more like traffic cops. So I worked in traffic enforcement. Then I met my wife; we got married, and her brother was already living in New York. He went back there to get married with his girlfriend, and we went to—we made a double wedding. We went to Naples on a honeymoon together. And we were sitting in a hotel right across the street from the American Consulate. And then he said for a joke, "Why don't you try to go in, put your papers in? Maybe one day you can come to America, too." So, I went in there, I put down my application. After three months, I was here! I sold everything I had, and I still was short of money to buy two one-way tickets, so I had to borrow more money.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FRANCIONI: Then I came here, find a job as a dishwasher.

LEVINE: Now your wife—was it important to you that she was from San Marino? Was that something, the kind of wife you wanted?

FRANCIONI: Well, there is no racial differences in Italy and San Marino, even though one is inside the other. But it just happened to be there; I just happened to see her, and there was nobody else. We got married, and we came over. We started a family here.

LEVINE: How did you—you say you sold everything?

FRANCIONI: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything you brought with you?

FRANCIONI: They gave us as wedding present, they gave us a small TV set, a small refrigerator. I had an old, beat up car. What else did I sell? Whatever furniture we had, we sold everything out, and we went to a travel agency, and we said, "Can we have two one-way tickets?" They gave us a price. I counted my money; I was short of eighty dollars! I mean, the equivalent of eighty dollars. So I went to my wife's cousin, and we bought those two tickets. When I came to Kennedy, thank God they gave me coffee on the plane! I wasn't able to buy a cup of coffee—didn't have [unclear].

LEVINE: And who—did someone meet you?

FRANCIONI: I was hoping that someone would meet me. There was my sister-in-law. She came to pick us up with her husband. They lived in Bayside. We spent the first night with her. We slept in the children's bed. Then the following day my brother-in-law came to pick us up, and he's the one that found me a job as a dishwasher, because he was working in a restaurant already. My first night from, I started at four P.M., until two A.M. the following day, and they gave me four dollars and fifty-five cents! [Laughs]

LEVINE: So, what did you do then, in order to survive?

FRANCIONI: The first thing I did, I was hoping that someone came to pick me up, because I didn't know where I was. He just took me to a restaurant; they gave me a pair of shoes and a pair of white pants, and they put me at the sink.

LEVINE: Hm-mm. You must have had a lot of thoughts that night, while you were doing the dishes?

FRANCIONI: Well, you're there; there's nothing else you can do. I did it for two and a half months. Then I learned a couple of words in English, and I saw that it wasn't so hard to be, again, a busboy in America, so I went. I carried

the bread and the water, and cleaned the tables. Then after another couple of months, I find a person working for somebody, too, who owned a restaurant. And he used to employ a lot of people from my country. And there were six of us. So [unclear] there, and we were working as a team, so one didn't have to do much talking, and that was me, until I learned a few more words, like now. And then, now I've got my own restaurants. Matter of fact, I own a gas station, too, and they pay me rent.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh, so it was kind of other people from San Marino who kind of helped you over the gap, and getting--?

FRANCIONI: Yeah. We have a small community here. It's not that we have each other, but when you have a day off on Sunday, or on vacation time, you keep in touch with the rest. We kind of almost know everybody else. What's sad is because, is the fact that you can't hide—in the beginning, in the early days, all you do, you meet specially for christenings, or weddings. Now we meet for funerals. We keep on being less and less.

LEVINE: What do the—are there any organizations, or what kind of—do you have like a social club?

FRANCIONI: Yeah, we have a social club in Astoria, on Steinway Street. We just renovated [unclear] a couple weeks ago. And we have, like, a grand gala once a year. It's called St. Agatha Feast. St. Agatha was the saint protector of San Marino, and usually is within the first week of February. That's when everybody come out of the woods, and attend to it. We have a Consul; we have Ambassadors. We have Ambassadors in Washington, Detroit, Consuls all over the country. We are pretty well-organized now. We keep in touch with the country back home, thanks to the internet and fax machines, and telephones now. Those days, we didn't have any phones. When I was writing to my family, I had to wait for a week for them to receive my letter, and wait another week for them to send me one. Now, I pick up the phone and talk to my mother; it's nothing. Those days, [unclear]. And then we had to send package. I remember, just to go to the Post Office and get boxes, whenever we'd been using them more, and put everything in the box, and wrap it with a sheet or a cloth, and then sew it to make it nice and tight, and then send it back home. That's what we've been doing for a lot of years. But in the first days, of course, you're pretty feel, pretty uncomfortable. They don't know a word that you're saying, and then after ten days that I was here, on the 17th of August, I received a letter from a place called—what was it? [Unclear] to go to see Fort Hamilton, Captain—Captain Something, I forgot his name. I had to go to Vietnam. That was my—my welcome, after ten days! I was called, Selective Service! I show up in there, I said I go to my brother-in-law, I had him read it, because I didn't know what it

was. He said, "You have to go see it to go in the Army." The Army? Where's Vietnam? "It's south of China." [Laughs] Pretty far from here. I went there, and I passed that, too. Of course, they thought I was a retarded moron or something, because I didn't know a word they were saying. And they told me I was a 4-F. After two weeks, I received a paper: I didn't have to go anywhere. And now, things have changed. My feelings for America are like my mother's. But at the time, after ten days, I wasn't loving America as much as willing to go die for it. So I said, "If I have to go, I'll go back home." But again, I didn't have any money to go back to.

LEVINE: And you didn't have to go, huh?

FRANCIONI: No.

LEVINE: So, do you think you could have been as successful in businesses as you are here, if you had been back in San Marino?

FRANCIONI: Not really. Not really, because San Marino now, things have changed. Education is very important. At the time, there wasn't any available, unless you—if your father was a lawyer, you become a lawyer. If your father was a farmer, you become a farmer. Here, it's different. Here, as long as you're willing to do your job, and the work, and you don't bother anybody, you can be a success no matter what you do. You can sell rags in the street. If you pay attention to what you do, and if you're willing to succeed, you'll make it. School, I went to fifth grade. My daughters, one is a teacher, and one is an office administrator, and she married a doctor, so—if I was there, my daughter wouldn't be a teacher, unless somebody had died and leave me a ton of money.

LEVINE: What are some of your greatest satisfactions, as you look back on the things you've done?

FRANCIONI: To be here today.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FRANCIONI: To be me. I think that [unclear].

LEVINE: Yeah. How about heroes, people that you looked up to along the way, either people you knew personally, or people you just knew about, that were kind of inspirational to you?

FRANCIONI: I had some people inspire me. One was my ex-boss, the one that gave me a first break. His name was Rochel [PH] Paolini. He was the one that had the restaurant. He only hired people from San Marino. He

heard that I was around, so he told me if I want to try it. And I worked for him for eleven years. He wasn't obliged to give me anything, but he did. Then after I left, and I told him that I was going to try to go into business on my own—I own a Dunkin Donuts now, that's my third—when working on my first, he told me, "Good luck, and if you need anything, just look me up." And before you know it, I needed something. My place burned down before I opened it up. And even before I called anybody, he called me, and said, "Come back until you're ready to open again." Nine months later I left him again, and I reopened. That was my hero. I also have a brother-in-law who died of cancer. He was also an immigrant who came from there, and he walked in front of the school a couple of times, all of his life. He taught himself to read and write. He came here, of course, before the war, and he became a millionaire. He had eight kids; they all went to college. He's got a doctor, an architect, one who's an engineer, one who's a therapist, one who's a chiropractor in Boston, near Boston. So he was okay. I said, "If he can do it, I can do it to, and what's going to stop me? I'm in America. Can't do it anywhere else."

LEVINE: How did he do it? How did he make his million?

FRANCIONI: He was in construction, too. He became a contractor, and he never lost one—he never lost one minute of it all his life. He only produced.

LEVINE: Well, how do you think coming here, and starting over, starting from nothing, and building a life here—how do you think it has affected you as far as your character, or the kind of person you are, the way you do things? How do you think that immigrant experience has left its mark on you?

FRANCIONI: It didn't make me a coward. I can do anything. I can build something. I can go to college. I know how. Whatever I set my mind to do, unless somebody kills me, one day I'll do. I'll succeed, because I feel like a winner. I think that's pretty much.

LEVINE: Is there anything else? How about your family? Do you have a desire to bring other family members here, to this country?

FRANCIONI: Well, my family is not that numerous. I only have one sister, and she's a widow, too. She lives in San Marino. And all I've got left is my mother; they live near to each other. And I have nobody else to bring here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FRANCIONI: But now they live pretty well, and things are better in San Marino. The government, they run the country pretty—pretty well.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and how do you--?

FRANCIONI: What's beautiful about my country, if I can interrupt you, is because we never—that's why we are so attached. Because when the Italians came here, and the Polish came here, Germans came here, eventually they had to become naturalized Americans, and lose their own citizenship they had before. We never did that. We have double citizenship as long as we live. I can go back next year and vote in my country, San Marino, and I vote in New York. I have two passports. I never lose my citizenship. I can commit a crime here, have a judge confiscate my passport—I'll leave tonight with the other one!

LEVINE: So in other words, would you say that it's typical for the San Marinense to not want to become as assimilated in this culture as other groups wanted to be American? Do you think it's different?

FRANCIONI: No. No, to be American, everybody came here, no matter where they are originally from. Even for San Marino, even though we didn't have anything to lose, we all became Americans. I don't know anybody who isn't a naturalized American citizen now.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and how do you reckon with, you know, being San Marinense, and being American? How do you think about those two parts of you?

FRANCIONI: Well, the American part of me can kiss the ground where he walks now, because all I have, I got it from here. If I had something there, I wouldn't be here. But still, my ancestors, my parents they are there. One is buried there; all my ancestors are there. My youth is there. So you can't forget that. And it's always inside of you; it's part of you. You can't ignore it. There's the American me, and the San Marinense me. We try to keep alive our small community here. We try to keep in touch with each other, even between here and Detroit, between here and Texas. Houston, we have a large population there, too. We have some in Florida. We are scattered all over the place. And we communicate with all the families here, and all the families in some other place, part of the country. Because, being small as we were, we were a very tight-knit community—the families, too. Because there's not a wide range of last names, and sooner or later, if you go back on your trees, we all came out of the same—all the branches came out of one tree only. Those two [unclear] Garcia, they could be my third, fourth, fifth cousins. Who knows? Matter of fact, they know where I was from, too. One is from the village that I came out of. And we are like, maybe third, or fifth, or fourth cousins here, if we keep on looking back.

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

FRANCIONI: --the first republic ever established, in the year 301. We're like, if I can make a little story a little bit longer. In that year, this guy was persecuted by the Roman Emperors. They didn't like it because he was a Catholic, with a saint. They made him a saint. And he was running away from Rome, and he found shelter in the country near Yugoslavia, Dalmatia. From there, he walked back in Italy, and he found this rock, this mountain, San Marino, and started to establish himself there with a bunch of followers. Then he performed a miracle for a very wealthy woman, and she gave him that mountain because he saved her daughter's life. And those few people that followed him, those are our ancestors. One could have been her relative, and one mine, and one the other girl's. So we all come out of the same tree.

LEVINE: What are the cultural things that you carry on in this country? I mean, is it food? Is it--?

FRANCIONI: We do our own cooking. We do our own styles. We have picnics, and July fourth we celebrate both our countries. We rent a place in Lido Beach. Of course, we sing "God Bless America" as soon as we walk in. Then we do our thing, and we cook our own food. Even during the year, we have a club. Almost every, twice every month during the winter months, we do our own feast, our own parties. We try to keep in touch with each other.

LEVINE: What's the food that you most often do here that's San Marinense?

FRANCIONI: The typical would be a lot of pasta, freshly made, with meat sauce. Then we have another kind of flat bread, like a pita. It's called—they know it, too, [unclear]. And usually it's made hard, like a pita, very flat, and you put in the middle a couple of slices of prosciutto—prosciutto ham? Cured. And then you eat it. Pretty good. It doesn't have any extra spices or nothing, but when we get together, that's what we eat, to keep our heritage in contact. But we also like hotdogs and hamburgers, [laughs] so [unclear]! We are American!

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

FRANCIONI: We go to Yankee games, too! [Laughs]

LEVINE: How about music? Is there a specific kind of music that you--?

FRANCIONI: Yeah, if you go to any one of our—my countrymen's house, we all have records or CD's that we brought from there, with the typical music, like waltz, tangos—not Argentinean, Italian tangos. And we play that sometimes. And even in the car, I run those tapes in it. But we also play Bruce Springsteen, which I like! So we have no problem being American; we're just as much as anybody else [laughs].

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

FRANCIONI: The language wasn't very easy to pick up, but eventually you pick it up.

LEVINE: Yeah, did you learn it just in the course of your everyday job?

FRANCIONI: I learned it doing the job, and I learned it reading the papers. I didn't make the mistake of reading Italian material when I got here, because it wouldn't do me any good. I knew already Italian, so I said I better learn some English. So I never listened to Italian news, Italian television programs, never read an Italian paper. Even if I didn't know what I was reading, or what I was listening to, if I kept on doing it, one word at a time. Then I taught myself how to read, and I can write, and I can spell. As a matter of fact, I was helping my daughter during high school years, correcting homework. And as I mentioned before, I am one of the editors of a newsletter that we print, and we distribute it all over America, for the San Marino people only. And we went it back in there, to let them know what the American community is doing here, too. And I write both in English and Italian on it.

LEVINE: And how would you say your life is now, at this point in your life? You've got some businesses going. Your children are grown?

FRANCIONI: Oh, yeah, one is twenty-nine, one is twenty-six. The twenty-six is a teacher, Catholic school. She teaches fourth grade. My older one, she got married a few months ago; now she says that I'll be a grandfather in a few months, too. She just bought a house, that I helped her to, in Roslyn Harbor. She married a doctor. But he doesn't know how [unclear].

LEVINE: He doesn't know what?

FRANCIONI: [Laughs] How to hit with a hammer! Me, I'm pretty handy around my house. I fix my own things. I think I'll maybe learn one day!

LEVINE: Well, do you think you're going to keep going, I mean, business-wise? Are you feeling your--?

FRANCIONI: My business-wise, now I'm in the middle of remodeling my third shop. I'll be adding another franchise in it. I'll be closed for a couple of months. When I reopen, I'll probably sell it, and then I'll retire. I'll just be collecting rents from a couple places that I own, in real estate. I own a mechanic, an auto body shop and mechanic, and if I sell my two businesses, then I can just wait for the end of the month.

LEVINE: And what will you do in your retirement? What do you anticipate?

FRANCIONI: Well, I don't know, the last vacation I took was 1986, so maybe I catch up with those! [Laughs] I catch up with those.

LEVINE: Okay, well is there anything else you can think of, relative to coming to this country, raising your family here?

FRANCIONI: You mean the early days?

LEVINE: How about your wife? We haven't—what is your wife's name?

FRANCIONI: Marianne.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

FRANCIONI: Fabbri.

LEVINE: Fabbri?

FRANCIONI: F-A-B-B-R-I.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and how has she—what has her experience been? Was she sorry to leave her family?

FRANCIONI: No, no, because she had more family here than over there. She had two brothers here, a brother and a sister, and a bunch of nephews. And we always kept on going back and forth almost every year. But in the first years, we couldn't go, because financially it was practically impossible. But now we go back and forth almost every year. And she found a job as quickly as I did. She was working in a factory that was making clothing, clothes for women, in Corona, in Queens. And she was finishing dresses, like cutting threads around buttons. And the first apartment that we had was like a room and a half. But she was making enough money to pay rent, and the money I was making was going to be saved. So we had to pay the debt that we had to take when we came over here, so once that thing was over, I said, "Now we start from zero." Now she's my partner; she owns half of everything I have. We own the business together. We work there; every single morning we leave the

house together, and we go home together. And she is my landlord, too. I need to pay rent—a shock! [Laughs] In the first years, it wasn't—the first months, it wasn't very easy, because you find yourself in the middle of nowhere. You don't speak much of the language. I have a small anecdote that sometimes I keep boring people with. When I came here, I forgot to bring a comb, to comb my hair. And I didn't know how to ask for it. So after three or four days, I was walking down on Lexington Avenue and Forty-Fifth Street. There was a five and ten, Lamston's. As soon as I walked in, they had a table in the middle full of combs. I bought two dozen! [Laughs] Just so I'd have some around the house! I didn't know how to ask for these. And there was a couple of funny things that happened, sometimes when I do think about it--1969 of course was the Mets, the Miracle Mets? I was walking down on Fifth Avenue from one place of work to another, as a dishwasher. All of a sudden people started dumping all kinds of garbage all over me, a whole bunch of paper and trash! [Laughs] I just started to run; I thought the people were going mad. When I finally got to the job, I told my colleague there what happened to me. I said, "I was walking the street, and people started dumping trash." "Don't you know? That's because the Mets won the World Series!" But for someone who never saw a baseball game before, that was pretty strange to look at! But, I wasn't dumb enough. I even learned Spanish. The lady here, she speaks it, too. We have a conversation. That was thanks to my dishwashing colleague. We used to go home together on the subway, and he didn't speak any English. He didn't speak Italian; he only spoke Spanish. And he taught me to read, and even write, and speak Spanish, out of the newspaper, [Spanish]. I can go to any place. Matter of fact, I went to Argentina last year, and I practiced as much as I could.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FRANCIONI: I'm not dumb. Personally, I don't think that education is not—it's important, but not indispensable. If you're not stupid, you don't need a college degree. Third grade should be enough! Then you go to college! [Laughs] I told my two daughters, "If you don't go to college, I'll break both of your legs." They went to college [laughs].

LEVINE: How about first impressions? Just thinking about those first days and months, weeks that you were here.

FRANCIONI: Magnitude.

LEVINE: What were the things that struck you as really different?

FRANCIONI: Everything was so big! You luck up, you never see the sky. Where I come from, buildings were like one or two, or three stories. Even in

Genoa, there wasn't many skyscrapers, being a big city for Europe. But in San Marino, a four story building, they call it a skyscraper there. Here, I walk in the middle of Manhattan, and you look up, and you can't see the sky! [Laughs] That's big! Transportation: mostly we had to walk from one place to another, because I told the girls, one night when I wanted to go to a place to dance with my at the time girlfriend—she's my wife now—I had to take two buses. There was only one, because they were both leaving at the same time. When I took one, I would have missed the other. Here, you can go anyplace you want. You buy one fare, and you travel all night, all day. Magnitude. Opportunities also. You lose one job, where I was coming from, you'd be out of work. You lose one job here, you walk next door, you find two. There was no need. At that time, 1969, there was pretty high unemployment, like almost four percent unemployment. I found a job the day after I landed at Kennedy. There was no unemployment; there was people who were willing to work, there was a lack of it. Jobs were plenty. Of course, nobody wanted to wash dishes, but if you wanted, the job is there! And even now, in my establishment, I have a sign on the window that says, "Help Wanted." Nobody comes in to apply. And they complain that they don't have any work. Now, I've got a hundred twenty-four employees that say they work for me. I never see them working but they say they do! [Laughs] They do work; I pay them.

LEVINE: Is there anything else you can think of, relative to coming here, that maybe we haven't talked about?

FRANCIONI: To coming here? Well like, something that you see in the movies first, and then all of a sudden it's in front of your eyes! You can touch it. I grew up, like, with a myth: you go to America, oh, you see big cars, people that eat on paper plates. They say that they don't drink wine. Some time you want to go take a look at it. So you start watching American movies, in the early days. And I said, "This might be a really nice place." When I came here, my brother-in-law told me, "Take the Flushing line, and go down to Grand Central Station." I didn't know where it was, but I knew how to get there. I'd never been here before. I knew about the train, I knew about Grand Central Station. I got out, and then he said, "I'll meet your underneath the Chrysler Building," and I knew what the Chrysler Building looked like, because I'd seen it in the movies so many times. Then one day he took me to the top of the Empire State Building. I looked down, and [unclear] Madison Square Garden. So I didn't have any problem adjusting myself in here. But like I said before, I tried to become American as quickly as I could, because if you bring your country with you, you never leave. You're in Rome, do like the Romans. But the first days, they're not that [laughs] comfortable, and not even happy memories, because you are alone. You don't know anybody. You take whatever people give you, and you go out all day

looking for either a better place to work, if you don't like the job you do, because I wasn't very much in love with the dishes and the soap and the grease. But during my day off, I used to go out to see if I could find something else, to improve my situation. And the sadness gave in when the sun goes down, and you see that you have done it for that day, and you'll do it for the next day, to keep on coming back up, until you finally make it. And also, you see, when you work, and you don't have a stable situation, a secure financial, that's what you worry about: not being able to come out of where you are, out of the ghetto. I used to live in Corona; we used to find dead people on the stairs. It wasn't a very wealthy neighborhood, and you wanted to get out of there. And you tried to do, do your best, and tried to come up the ladder. The rest wasn't very happy, but I got here today. I pulled through.

LEVINE: Do you think you were a particularly ambitious boy in Genoa, or when you went to San Marino? Do you think you had a drive to achieve?

FRANCIONI: To become somebody?

LEVINE: To become somebody?

FRANCIONI: Of course. Everybody did, everybody does that.

LEVINE: Everybody?

FRANCIONI: I think everybody, when he grows up. When you ask a little boy, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" they tell you, "Fireman." They want to be policeman; they want to be an actor. Nobody tells you they want to be a dishwasher. So my dreams sank right there, because I didn't want to be what I was.

LEVINE: Did you have an idea what you did want to be?

FRANCIONI: Well, I wanted to be some kind of a hero, whatever I saw on television. My all time favorite star was John Wayne. He could be second to God to me at the time. If John Wayne is there, America might be a nice place. He was always a good guy. So I wanted to be somebody important, even, no matter what field. Just something more than what I was, important. And when you come here, and you find that you are far away from being important, you better work at it. And that's, I think, what I did. Especially when you see people that, they are very well-dressed. I used to go in the subway, used to take the IRT from one place to another around five-thirty, when people come out of the offices. They had business suits, striped gray suit with an attaché. They looked like people—they must have gone to college, I said. Me, I wasn't dressed up

that well. But now, I can go to college too, if I want, or in this time. Now I've got the time. First I've got to go to high school! [Laughs] First.

LEVINE: Well, you can do it, you know.

FRANCIONI: Oh, I can do that. If I have to be eighty years old, I'll go through it. But I might have the time now. But in the beginning, there are a few things that sometimes you don't really remember, sometimes you don't want to remember. Like, when you have to apply for a job, even the lowest one, and you don't get accepted, because you can't fill out an application. They fill out a mark on the corner, like S, Stupid, or D, Dumb, because if you can't fill out an application, how can I employ you? How can I give you a responsible job if you don't know to write your own name? So you take whatever they give you. That was my first impulse, to get out of what I was. And the first opportunity that came to my place, I jumped at. And of course, when you lack education, you're like going to a place with a bunch of doors. And if you have a diploma, you can choose which one. If you don't, there's only one open, and if you don't get in fast, it slams in your face. Then you've got no place at all. Now, I can open a few doors.

LEVINE: As an employer, do you employ immigrants, at this point?

FRANCIONI: I employ mostly immigrants.

LEVINE: So you're on the other side now?

FRANCIONI: I like to give them some kind of opportunity that people gave me. Most of them are immigrants. Of course, in New York, you can't help it; you have to employ everybody, because everybody's here. So I have a very mixed cultures. I have people from India, Pakistan, Filipinos, some American, some Irish, some English. A hundred twenty-four people, I have a pretty mixed salad [laughs]. [Unclear], and if I can help somebody getting a first place, like they did for me, I'd do it for them, too. I have one, I picked him up, because he came from Manila, from Philippines, with not much in his pocket. Now he manages for me. As we speak, he runs my store. It's a million dollars a year business, and he runs it for me right now.

LEVINE: Okay, well I think that's a good place to end, kind of full circle, and I thank you very much.

FRANCIONI: Full circle, yeah.

LEVINE: For a most interesting interview.

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FRANCIONI: I thank you for the opportunity.

LEVINE: Okay, I've been speaking with Luciano, now called Lou, in America, Francioni. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW