

MARIA AQUINO THOMPSON

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HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Maria Thompson's sister, Enya, was interviewed on EI-1182

LEVINE: Okay today is February 13, 2001. I'm here in Lakeworth, Florida with Maria Aquino Thompson. Who came from Italy in 1924 when she one and half years of age.

THOMPSON: That's right.

LEVINE: We think on the Contarosa. At the time of this Mrs. Thompson is 78 years of age, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay will you say please what your name would have been on the ship's manifest when you came to Ellis Island.

THOMPSON: It would probably be the same because I was named Mary, but Mary in Italian is Maria. So most likely is still Maria on the manifest, and my sister was--uh Vinchensia[ph] isn't that beautiful?

LEVINE: Yeah that is beautiful.

THOMPSON: I love that name.

LEVINE: And Aquino is A-Q-U-I-N-O, right?

LEVINE: Okay, uh and you were travelling with your mother?

THOMPSON: My mother and my father--

LEVINE: and your father, and your sister.

THOMPSON: And my sister. Now I do know that my grandmother went to Italy with them, whether she came back--I think she did--come back with them that's the only reason I was born there. It was a long stay.

LEVINE: Okay. Well let's get the whole story but first maybe if you just say the names--the other names that would be on the ship's manifest with your own.

THOMPSON: Carmella Aquino--

LEVINE: That's your mother.

THOMPSON: No-no that's my grammy--

LEVINE: Your grandmother.

THOMPSON: My mother was uh--Lina[ph] Aquino .

LEVINE: And your father?

THOMPSON: My father was Thomaso. It may have been Thomas, I don't know. But uh--
-but my mother was Lina Dee[ph] my father was Thomas S. Aquino.

LEVINE: Okay, and you were born where in Italy?

THOMPSON: Well, uh--it's always been Naples but there was a place called Villa Aprile
A-P-R-I-L-E now I don't know if that was in Resina, but it was not exactly
in Naples it was somewhere around--

LEVINE: Naples.

THOMPSON: Naples.

LEVINE: Okay. And that's where you were and your family was until your family left
for the United States?

THOMPSON: I believe so, yes.

LEVINE: Okay, now what were the circumstances under which your family
happened to be there then?

THOMPSON: Well it was a kind of business trip, plus second honeymoon for my mother
and father, and my grandmother went because she was not well and she
wanted to climate of Italy. So, they all went to Italy, and every time they
wanted to come back Grandma said, "No, I have to stay a little longer."

[chuckles] They ended up staying three years and their good catholic Italian parents had two children. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Well, Let me just ask you first. Was it your father who had come from Italy to the United States?

THOMPSON: Yes, well the business was in New York.

LEVINE: What was the business?

THOMPSON: A big business, a big importing business. And it was John Aquino--and by this time it was John Aquino's sons because Grandpa had died.

LEVINE: And what was the business? What were they importing?

THOMPSON: Wines, mainly wines. I believe that now in the--what's left of it in California. I think there's something of the Aquinos still--Broome Street or Spring Street or something like that, I don't know. I remember going there as a little girl you know, and smelling the wonderful smells in that big warehouse, the big wine--uh barrells and everything and I remember that very very well.

LEVINE: When did your father come to the United States?

THOMPSON: I don't know I really don't know. I do know that he was uh--here for quite awhile because uh--he and my mother they met and they were engaged and got married, and all of this--this is years it takes for this sort of thing to happen--in Italian families you know, and of course uh--[chuckles] My mother was one of a number of daughters grandpa didn't want to let any of them go--[chuckles] but uh--you can see why.

LEVINE: Because your mother was actually born in this country.

THOMPSON: Yes yes.

LEVINE: Of an Italian family.

THOMPSON: Oh yes, yes [chuckles] Well we think it's all Italian. Somewhere--maybe [not understood] Austrians slipped in, but I'm not sure about that part.

LEVINE: Well, what was your mother's maiden name?

THOMPSON: Sorge S-O-R-G-E.

LEVINE: and Where in New York was her family? Where did she grow up?

THOMPSON: In uh--in the early part of Harlem, when it was all Italian. They had the most beautiful brownstone house. The--I have to tell you this--this was not a family of poor immigrants this was a family--of very well to do people you know. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Now your talking about your mother's family here?

THOMPSON: Both of them.

LEVINE: Both of them.

THOMPSON: Both of them. Oh yes.

LEVINE: Had your mother's mother or father immigrated from Italy?

THOMPSON: Oh yes, they did.

LEVINE: Oh they did.

THOMPSON: They came over--well let's see, grandpa was here first, Grandpa Sorge came first, and I believe that he was single when he came. And I'm not even positive about this, but I think that it was an arranged marriage, and grandma was sent over from Italy as a very young woman. She must have been about ten or more years younger than grandpa. And they were the most beautiful most wonderful people you would ever want to meet. The most--ideal couple they should be set up on pedestals for everybody to see.

LEVINE: Wow.

THOMPSON: So they were just wonderful. They worked together, they worked very hard together. Built up a wonderful business, and they imported a lot of Italian goods.

LEVINE: Oh, so they both were in the import business.

THOMPSON: Oh yes, yeah.

LEVINE: Okay, we're going to pause here for a minute.

LEVINE: Yeah we were talking now about your mother's side of the family and the fact that they also imported Italian food things.

THOMPSON: More food stuffs than the Aquino's. The Aquino's were mainly--oh maybe olive oil, also tomatoes, but you know it was a restricted--mostly wine. They imported the wine--so.

LEVINE: Now where were they located? Were they in what was little Italy at that time? Or Were they located in Harlem?

THOMPSON: No, you mean the Aquino's or the Sorge's?

LEVINE: Well both actually.

THOMPSON: Oh my--for a long time the Sorge's were in Harlem, and on 117th Street because my sister and I, it was so safe then it really was so safe. When we were just little children--when I say little children I mean nine--ten years old. We would travel, we lived in the Bronx at that time, way up in the Bronx, and my mother had no fear about letting us travel on the subway down to Harlem to grandma's house, and then somebody would take us to the subway station, and we would come home. That's how safe--and I think that's where--I just uh--all I remember is that brownstone. So either uh--if they lived some where else I didn't know about, but I remember that from when I was very very young. We were always down there. Um--still there by the way--you know the big house--

LEVINE: Really?

THOMPSON: Oh yeah you can tell grandpa's house from all the others because there was a whole row of brownstones, but grandpa's had this big high wrought iron fence. And grandma had planted a little garden in the front, so it was uh--different from everybody else's.

LEVINE: Now do you know what part of Italy your mother's family came from?

THOMPSON: I can tell you things that I remember people saying, and I remember my mother once mentioning that Avalino[ph] was uh--was--uh--whether it

was grandpa's home, or not. I don't know. I really don't know. The Aquino's my brother said are from a place called Aquino. Which is still--

LEVINE: Near Naples?

THOMPSON: Yeah, it's not far from--it maybe further up in the mountains I don't know so there's that uh--with the Aquino's, but with the Sorge's I really don't know.

LEVINE: Do you think both sides, your mother and your father's side did they--did their parents, and their parents, and their parents were they all coming from Italy, or do you know if anybody way back came from somewhere else?

THOMPSON: The only one that may have come from somewhere else is my mother's mother--Now there's a story--I'm sure you know that there are stories connected with everybody, all the immigrants. But there is a story that Grandma Sorge was an orphan, that a relative of the Sorge's took her in--in the very Northern part of Italy, which by that had become a part of Austria, and mother would sometimes she would say, "You know grandma was from here." And then she would say, "Grandma was from Austria." And now maybe grandma came from Avalino[ph] where there was a part of the sorg--or part of some family and she lived with them because she was an orphan, and then she came here to marry grandpa.

LEVINE: I see.

THOMPSON: I mean there is a confusion there, I don't know how such a think can be straightened out. Cause so many of the relatives are gone now, the older ones you know, and uh--it bugs me to think I'm one of the older ones now. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Well you don't look old, and you don't act old. So I don't know. Okay uh-- so lets now talk about um--how you happen--so your father was on a business trip--probably for the wines, right?

THOMPSON: Yes, that what's he--that was his part of the job, the others his brothers stayed in New York. You know the other Aquino sons, they had different jobs. So his job was to do the travelling, and check on the quality of grapes, and tomatoes, and olives. So that's why they went.

LEVINE: So that's why they went, and your grandmother kept delaying the return?

THOMPSON: [laughs] Yes.

LEVINE: Okay, meanwhile you were born, and your sister.

THOMPSON: That's right, and he did not go to the American Embassy which would have been--which would have solved everything. He completely--never even thought of going there. And registering our births because that would have been a big factor, we would have had dual citizenship instead Mussolini said, "Come home--" [chuckles] you have to come to Italy.

LEVINE: Well let's say why did your mother and father decide to leave to come back to the United States when they did?

THOMPSON: Well my father had to come back because of the business, I mean it reached a point where he had to get back. My mother was so homesick for her family and it had gotten so bad that my grandfather sent my aunt Annette over to Italy--go over and see if everything is alright. It wasn't the case of taking a plane you know, she had to get on a ship and go check up on what was going on, and then come back and report to grandpa.

You know Lina was alright, but seeing her sister made my mother even more homesick. She wanted to see her mother and father.

LEVINE: Right. So you got on the ship--you your mother, father, and sister got on the Contarosa[ph] we think, and you came--and then what happened? What were you told happened?

THOMPSON: Well I was told, and it was a law at that time--uh that said that if you married a non citizen you lost your citizenship. A woman, not a man, but a woman now exactly if this is true I don't know. I mean this is what was told to us, so my mother was considered a non-citizen. My father only had his first papers, he was not a citizen, and I think the business of the quota came into play too. You know with Mediterranean, Greeks, Italians, and uh--the quota was filled.

LEVINE: Do you remember when in 1924--you might have arrived?

THOMPSON: It was in July.

LEVINE: July.

THOMPSON: Yeah.

THOMPSON: Okay, and uh--so anyway uh--because my mother and father you know had their homes here, there was a business that had to be taken care of it was a very thriving business, and produced a lot of taxes you know, but I don't mean to be crass but uh--the children would have to go back to Italy. And true, there were relatives there, but not mother and father, not grandma and grandpa whoever was there they were going to send us back, so my mother refused to leave Ellis Island we were--had to stay

there you know, and she refused to leave her babies alone, and of course I don't know who did it, but somebody in the family must have gone to the newspapers. And before you knew it I guess all the papers were carrying this big story. You know, you remember the story of the little boy going back to Cuba.

LEVINE: Right.

THOMPSON: This was--no television of course, but really big news, and I just wish I had some of the clippings to show my children.

LEVINE: Yeah, I should try to look into this. And that would have been right around then, July 24.

THOMPSON: See this is the only reason I know because I remember the--I remember seeing the Journal American, other members of the family says No, it was the Herald. Both the Herald and the Tribune came together, at some point--I don't know when. And somebody said it was the Herald-Tribune, somebody said, "No just the Herald." And then there was another newspaper it was The Sun, the evenings--How old are you?

LEVINE: [laughs] Not puttin' that on tape.

THOMPSON: [chuckles] Because I don't think anybody remember The Sun.

LEVINE: I remember that there was a Sun, I don't know whether I actually knew it when it was coming out, but I know that there was--

THOMPSON: Yeah, there was a Sun.

LEVINE: Okay so, so your mother said No, we won't send our children back?

THOMPSON: She was gonna stay with the children--she did stay with them--with us on Ellis Island, and we were there for uh--I don't know between ten days and two weeks. And this is when uh--I think my Grandfather Sorge, her father put up a big bond to uh--prove that they would not become--that we would not become wards of the state, but this was evidently not enough--not the money was not enough but the idea of it was not enough. So--we were going to go back to Italy, no way. [chuckles] I'm telling you my grandmother would not--I mean my mother she would have swam across the rest of the Hudson River before leaving us, and uh--but uh--I think it was then that uh--sometimes--you know I used to have it all straight in my head and then parts of the family started contradicting oh no mom you've got it all wrong--oh no Marie it's not like it was like this. You begin to wonder now--what happened--who's right--who knows the story who doesn't know the story.

LEVINE: Well did anything come of having it in the newspaper?

THOMPSON: Oh yes, because, well see this--I remember this very clearly. There was a picture of my mother and this I believe was in the journal--holding both of us, because we were pretty young. There was a little picture of her, and right next to her was a picture of LaGuardia. He was not mayor LaGuardia and it said "Mrs. Aquino and her champion" see and uh--exactly how it all started, I know he was a representative in my grandfather's district he was also a lawyer he had gone to Cornell a year from--to learn immigration law, because he was appalled with some of the things that were happening to immigrants coming through uh--they lost their own names--they were given different names you know--

LEVINE: Do you think your grandfather knew him?

THOMPSON: He--the only way he would know him would be from the fact that he was a representative from the district.

LEVINE: But he might have contacted him as a representative in the district?

THOMPSON: As a lawyer, because we--mother needed a lawyer, so and he was a lawyer so--he evidently had a lot to say about immigrants [chuckles], and he could speak a number of languages so that was very good, he was interpreter--it mentioned that on the plaques.

LEVINE: Right, right, right. Now so did he ever come to Ellis Island that you know of?

THOMPSON: I don't know, I really don't know. I do know that he went before congress and asked that a bill be put up or passed something--allowing us to come into the country--my sister and myself, and of course we brag about it but it's so many years ago I think that uhm--people just listen and um--don't hear to much, but we are in this country because of LaGuardia getting a law passed in congress. Which I think is a wonderful to be able to talk about. So that's how--

LEVINE: Well that must also be on the books--

THOMPSON: That should be on the congressional records somewhere.

LEVINE: So, you say you stayed ten days or two weeks before it got sorted out.

THOMPSON: Yeah, I don't know exactly how much, yeah. And then uh--I don't know what happened with that bond business uh--for that time it was a tremendous amount of money. Somebody said it was a hundred thousand dollars, somebody said it was a quarter of a million dollars, two

hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and so I don't know what it was, but it was a large sum of money that was put up to ensure.

LEVINE: That is a large sum--

THOMPSON: Oh yeah.

LEVINE: So do you think it was partially that your mother and father's family were quite well to do that they were able to make the kinds of connections and get--

THOMPSON: No, I don't think so I don't think that it was a matter of making connections, I think it was a matter of ensuring the government that we would not become wards of state and therefore that's why the money was brought into it. Nobody was given any money--none of this transpired it was I think public opinion may have had a lot to do with it, because it was big news. It was heartbreaking news, you know years ago after a good sex story, a human interest story is what caught peoples attention and when it involved two little children you can imagine what it was like having to course any Italian gathering would point to all [not understood] you know--look Bambino! So I'm sure that had a big effect on people but uh--I mean it--I love thinking about it--I can just picture my mother [not understood] she has some funny stories, she said there was one woman who claimed to be a countess on Ellis Island. She was being held for some reason, and would you believe that woman had the nerve to wash her feet in the basin where we washed our faces. [laughing] You see but that's the sort of thing that [chuckles] I get one of the biggest kicks out of and just funny thing.

LEVINE: Is there anything else you can think of that your mother told you or that your father told you about that period, that Ellis Island period?

THOMPSON: Well I know it was very distressing, I don't uh--you know it really was not that much provided much joy, but no there isn't really an awful lot except trials and tribulations, and being happy to get back into New York.

LEVINE: Well it sounds like your mother just put her heels into the ground and said "No".

THOMPSON: Oh that's right.

LEVINE: So why don't you talk about your mother a little bit, what was she like?

THOMPSON: [laughs] Well Stephanie can even tell you what my mother was like--I--I'll give you a story--I often hesitate telling this story and, you'll see why--she was told she had lost her citizenship--She could not vote, this is what she was told. She proclaimed to us, "Nobody can tell me I can't vote." And she marched off and voted every single time there was an election, she was not supposed to vote[chuckles] but of course later--I don't when they rescinded that. But that woman never gave up her vote, that's the kind of person she was--I told you she could drive an ambulance--I told you she had her own--

LEVINE: Say that on tape, what you mentioned--that she was going--this was now World War--

THOMPSON: World War I, she was not married of course, and she uh--had uh--she was eligible to drive an ambulance because it was one of her father's truck drivers who taught her how to drive, so that was a big thing--she could drive just about anything. And so--she was gonna go to France and be an ambulance driver there, but my father I think he was a little afraid that number one, she'd get killed. Number two, and even maybe more

important he might lose her. [chuckles] So uh--he laid down an ultimatum and she liked and loved him enough to stay home and not go to Paris.

So--

LEVINE: Well can you think of any attitudes that she had that she tried to instill in you and your sister? It sounds like she was sort of a feminist before there was--

THOMPSON: I wouldn't be surprised, but she was still very feminine.

LEVINE: Oh yeah, uh-huh.

THOMPSON: But uh--you know she would--it's hard to there a lot of other stories I could talk about. You know she had a proposal from a mobster who had the nerve to write a letter to grandpa to say he wanted to go out with Lina, and he was interested--seriously interested. He was furious, and of course [not understood] and nothing came of that, but um--

LEVINE: Can you remember any experiences with her, growing up in New York? After you got to the point where--

THOMPSON: Well no, no, I'll tell you why because when we were old enough, both my sister and I--what sweetheart--were sent to boarding school, we went to school in New Jersey. We wanted to go--she wanted to send us to St. Elizabeth's but by the time we had come along--were old enough they had dispensed with the grammar school. They just had high school and college at St. Elizabeth's, so we went to the Ursulan[ph] Academy in New York, and then from there we went to a school in New Jersey that had opened up and had more room so--

LEVINE: How did you feel about that? Going off to New Jersey?

THOMPSON: Well we were together and we were very close even then, we were very close and to this day we are very close, and I love my sister dearly and I know she loves me too, and uh--um--it wasn't long after that there was a depression.

LEVINE: How did that affect your family?

THOMPSON: Pretty badly, all members of the family were financially depressed, really and truly--I mean we had--we didn't go to Boarding school anymore--we uh--again I have difficulty saying it--we no longer had a chauffeur-- we no longer had our home, and you know help around, and it was uh--you know a big change. A really big change. And uh--some relative of my mother's was fortunate enough to have gotten a big uh--not a commission but did you ever hear of Letchworth[ph] Village? It's in--near Havastraw, New York upstate.

LEVINE: What village did you say?

THOMPSON: It's called Lettsworth[ph] Village. But its um--it's a home for retarded children--retarded adults, but it was not built uh--when let me see I don't even remember what year it was built--but my father was uh--taught many trades, his father insisted that all his children learn lots of trades, and my father could cook, my father could sew, my father could be the business man that he was, he didn't know stocks and bonds too well [chuckles] but anyway. So when we lost everything, uh my father didn't volunteer but asked this other relative about uh--housing for the workers at the village. They say village, but it was really you know a big sprawling hospital complex, and home complex. Lots of grounds and everything, and uhm--I forget his name and all I know is the last name was Clemente, and uh--they were building this whole place so they needed a boarding house for the workers, they needed someone who could provide lunches-

-not free, but sell lunches and things. So my father took that--I mean there were seven children, not just my sister and myself but five more children were born, and he had to provide for five children. So we moved up there into this big boarding house, and he rented rooms out and he did all the cooking himself, and uh--that's how we lived until the Depression eased a little bit [not understood] until the village was just about finished, and all that work was done. But my mother was a real trooper going from private schools and everything else, and my father too, I mean uh--

LEVINE: So about how long did you stay there? Letchworth[ph]?

THOMPSON: Letch L-E-T-C-H-W-O-R-T--Letchworth yeah W-O-R-T-H Letchworth Village, I think it has a different. I don't think it's called that anymore, but um--I don't know. There's a--there's a little town called Garnerville right next to Havastraw, and um--I mean its uh--you know the mountains, but we had a wonderful time we really did. I mean it sounds depressing, but uh--it was an experience.

LEVINE: It was after the stock market crash for how many years? You were there just when they were building it?

THOMPSON: We were there only during the building because then all the workmen went to their various hometowns and everything, so that's about it--

LEVINE: A few years?

THOMPSON: No more than three, I'm trying to remember now. We started back to school in a public school because it was closer than the parochial school, and we spent about one year in the public, and at most a year and a half to two years in the catholic school. [laughs] That meant either taking the bus all the way to Havastraw[ph], or walking. Very often we walked to

save the nickel, that's how bad things were, but enjoyed walking at that time so--

LEVINE: And what was your family like during those years?

THOMPSON: I remember having a wonderful time up there, I remember my father working too hard, and my mother sometimes getting very sad, but I mean that's understandable you could just tell by her face--but even they had--enjoyed each others company at that time and uh--uh--we all like each other, as children we liked each other a lot and--we got along pretty well we fought and everything, but uh--[chuckles] we had so much more fun really and truly--I can remember lots of fun that we had so, not to bad you know.

LEVINE: So then what happened after that?

THOMPSON: Then we came back to New York City, and uh--we got a little house we really didn't fit in it with all those children, but we managed and my father got a job.

LEVINE: Where was the house?

THOMPSON: In Riverdale. This was uh--when things were really bad, and houses were going for next to nothing.

[END SIDE A, TAPE ONE. BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE ONE]

THOMPSON: Rent a house in River--I don't remember how much but uh--oh you couldn't find a room in New York now for what we got a whole house for. And he got a job, uh--with uh--Nicholas and Son, they were liquor importers and he was their salesman, because he knew just about all the

places to go to, so he was an asset for them, and this was in the 30's-- and it was still tough, I mean it was very tough we didn't have anything to speak of and um--my mother learned how to cook [laughs] which was so alien to her.

LEVINE: You mean he always cooked at home?

THOMPSON: Oh I'm tellin ya, well she cooked but what ever she cooked was very simple. She couldn't make a soup she couldn't [chuckles] he did that. Sundays was daddy's day, we knew we were going to have a good meal. [chuckles] There was going to be macaroni and roast and everything [laughs]. Then--[not understood] so mom sat and played the piano.[laughs] You're making me remember things--

LEVINE: Well what ever comes to your mind just say it, because it's all very interesting.

THOMPSON: We had no furniture left except for one thing, the piano. [chuckles]

LEVINE: The Piano.

THOMPSON: Because nothing else would fit I mean the piano was one of these concert grand steinways and she loved that as much as she loved her children. So wherever we went if nothing else fit that was okay, just make sure the piano [chuckles] Oh my.

LEVINE: So your father then was the salesman, does that mean that he travelled?

THOMPSON: No it was in New York, because New York was the best place for-- especially at that time for nightclubs, and speakeasies you know it was still around. And uh--so he got to go--he really didn't do to much of that

when he was with the Aquino company, but he knew all the places and name because they had good wines and things at that time. And uh--so he would come back with wonderful stories--

LEVINE: I was just going to say did he have any stories about the speak easies?

THOMPSON: No, no he didn't but there used to be jokes about uh--[not understood] I know I remember one time--I don't what brought it up, but I heard them discussing some kind of uh--I don't know whether it was peaches or apricots in some kind of liquor. That they thought might be profitable at that time, but what came of it I don't know. I don't think anything. But uh--they were going to do it you know under the table or in the tub. I don't know.

LEVINE: Now what were you, were you like in highschool by now?

THOMPSON: No, no still in grammar school. I went to um--as I say the school is in Garnerville and then--and then we--wait a minute I forgot we lived in uh--one area for a very brief time went to St. Raymond school, a catholic school, which we all hated. We couldn't wait not only to get out of that school, but to get out of the neighborhood, and I haven't--can't remember where it was. Maybe because there was a cemetery close by--I don't know [chuckles]

LEVINE: Was it in New York?

THOMPSON: Oh yes, in the Bronx. And then after we moved to Riverdale. And we stayed there, that's right and then we went--all of us went to St. Margaret's Catholic School, and by that time I was in uh--seventh grade--I guess so--No, sixth grade. Sister Ignacious, right. Uh--That was my sixth

grade teacher sister Ignacious, and then Sister Theckler[ph] then Sister Lucina[ph], and then I graduated from catholic school.

LEVINE: Did you have the a sense of what you wanted to be when you grew up?

THOMPSON: Yep, I sure did, but I never made it. Well when we first moved to Riverdale—the airplanes were beginning to fly pretty regularly overhead, and I just loved—I loved airplanes so much, and especially the clipper would come by—the PanAmerican clipper you know you see the pontoons and everything it was the most exciting thing that could have happened to me, and all the people they'd hear the plane and come running out—the kids especially. So I knew I never would—didn't think I would ever be able to fly a plane and I had heard that they had stewardesses on—the planes—I said, "That's what I'm going to do." And for years—it must have been three or four years that was my aim I was going to be a stewardess and then what I find out—at that time you had to be a nurse, an RN to be a stewardess. I said , "That's it not for me." I said—I threw it out the window. I wouldn't be a nurse for anything [chuckles] So—

LEVINE: I'm surprised your mother didn't encourage you to fly—

THOMPSON: Well—

LEVINE: Actually fly.

THOMPSON: No, never came up—really never came up that I can think of. And then I used to—of course I loved—things—I loved people like Jascha Heifetz and uh—[sighs] all the other great violinists in those days—but there was no money for any kind of lesson or anything. I was not interested in the piano, not at all. I had lessons in boarding school, but my sisters did

alright. I just didn't care for it, but I would have loved to play the violin. I couldn't even tell anybody cause they'd make fun of you if you said you wanted to play the violin.

LEVINE: Well it must have been quite a change for your family, because they were well off, and then all of a sudden they had to—

THOMPSON: It was very very difficult. My grandpa Aquino of course he died—I never knew him. He was practically on his deathbed when my mother and father were planning their wedding, and he made them promise—on his death bed he made them promise not to put off the wedding. If he were to die, don't put it off. My mother told me that. And she said, "Oh he was such a wonderful man." What they did do is they cut back they did not have a big wedding at that time, but—anyway yes your're it was a very difficult, and you know especially my mother's brother was in college, he was going to Manhattan College, he had a beautiful cabriolet—accord[ph] I mean uh—he had everything—everybody had everything and then grandpa started losing his houses. He had a whole row of brownstones you know of brownstones that owned that he had been renting out, but gradually things started going, and so it was uh—very difficult.

LEVINE: And also your mother with seven children to raise—with out help.

THOMPSON: Yep, that's exactly right. But of course my sister and I were old enough and we could you know do some things we didn't uh—we weren't expected to do that much.

LEVINE: So how long did you stay in school, and what did you do?

THOMPSON: Only high school I never went to college, as a matter of fact uh—let's see, my sister pat—she didn't go to college maybe she took some courses,

but she went to work after high school for uh—Citibank, or National Citibank I don't know, and uh—she became a bonded runner, she was one of the first female—this was during the war uh—because that—the war broke out not to long after that and uh—my brother John went into the Marine Corps, he didn't go to college. My brother Tom did go to college he went to Colombia. And uh—my brother Gus later on of course—he went to medical school, he's a doctor. And my sister Angela she didn't go to college, she didn't like school at all. [chuckles] And my sister Loretta did—go for classes, became manager of a bank, and one of the first managers in the Bronx. So uh—everybody did pretty well. I went off and got married.

LEVINE: When did you get married?

THOMPSON: In 1942.

LEVINE: Oh okay. Well how did you meet your husband?

THOMPSON: [chuckles] It's so silly. We um—uh—either did [not understood] this time my father had died, he really—you know what he did during the war—that man couldn't get a job. He had no trade like a machinist or anything like that.

LEVINE: You mean your father?

THOMPSON: My father yeah. So he got—he still had to provide for children you know not me but, the younger ones. I found out later he took what ever he could. He became a watchmen—all these other men were jumping out windows because they lost everything, and my father went and got a job as a watchmen at a plant. Guts, right? Boy when I think of it, well anyway. [chuckles] We lived in apartment house[ph] uh—at the time at different

play grounds the big bands would come—I mean you know the great bands and—they would put something on the floor of the handball courts so that you could dance, and they were free—at the playgrounds. And so we would go up there, and this one time there was raining. And when it rained—it [not understood] there was no—nobody would come. So a group of us were waiting in one of the hallways of the apartment building, and every so often somebody would go out—still raining?—still raining. So we'd all get back and we'd just be talking fellas and girls you know, and then I remembered something—I remembered that this one girl Harriet who used to—I told you this haven't I? Used to hang out with us sometimes she wasn't there and I remembered she had told me, um—somebody and his father had moved in to the apartment where she was living, and they had the extra bedroom. I said, "Boy I'm going to go see who this guy is that she's talking about." So it didn't look as though the rain was going to stop, So I said, "Goodbye." To all the kids and went upstairs to the apartment—pretending I wanted to see Harriet, but I didn't really I just wanted to see who the guy was, and they were making grilled cheese sandwiches I was invited to have one, I said "No thanks." I've got everybody downstairs I'm going back down, but that's how I met him. So, he was going to college at the time, and I was working at the public library. Which reminds me some public libraries, I either heard on television or read—I think I did hear—some public libraries still have microfilm, and I know that the old newspapers were on microfilm.

LEVINE: On microfilm, that's right.

THOMPSON: Yeah

LEVINE: Yeah, that's true.

THOMPSON: So uh—how long they keep them I don't know, but they should keep them forever. That's a good source of history.

LEVINE: Well um—how did the second world war effect you personally.

THOMPSON: Well of course it started—you know in '41 and uh—both uh—I'm divorced now both my ex-husband and my sister's ex-husband both—we were all you know we used to double date the four of us. And we were all good friends—so what'd they do both them, enlisted immediately. They were both too skinny [chuckles] and uh—so what they wanted they couldn't get so they had to settle for what ever they got, and Bruce went into uh—the army. I think so—I'm trying to remember—Bruce's son—yeah, Bill.

LEVINE: Bill is your?

THOMPSON: He was my brother-in-law. He has since died, and we had a good time together all of us—but anyway. By the time January came, after 1941, it was January 1942. We had all been out—a big crowd of us went out—went to Times Square. But it was not you know the same thing—it was the last really—the last Times Square that we thought we would be seeing for a long time. So we all went out to dinner—went to Times Square then my sister and Bill, and Stephanie's father and myself. We broke off from the rest, and we took off and went down to the Wall Street area—and uh, none of us drank much. You know we were not drinkers, and the big deal was that we all got on the Staten Island Ferry, and we went across for a nickel—and Staten Island was so beautiful there was nothing—absolutely nothing except a little wooden stand where you could buy some hot coffee, or put candy bar. So we hung out there for a little while, and when the ferry came back we got on the ferry and went back to the Bowery and everything. Then we walked up to the Wall Street area again, everything was empty. By this time it was two—three o'clock in the

morning. And they talk about the caverns we would stand if there was nobody, we would stand there and the four of us would just shout, "Happy New Year!". And it would echo off the buildings you know. And we'd go on a few blocks and we'd yell, "Happy New Year!". And by the time we traveled all the way up to the Bronx it was six o'clock in the morning, and here we are—Oh dear god, don't let daddy be awake—please don't let daddy be awake. We we're sure that things were going to happen, so we got in and we tip toed in, we got in as far as the living room all four of us, they didn't want to come in. We—come on, come on, it will be alright. They were sure they would be beaten up by my father. [chuckles] And we hear a noise in the kitchen, and uh—we didn't know what was going. He was in the kitchen waiting [laughs]. So we tip toed and we peeked in—Oh Janet it was my mother, you know what she was doing?

LEVINE: No.

THOMPSON: She was fixing the most beautiful breakfast, and she looked at us and she said, "Well everything alright?" I swear that—I'm telling ya—we couldn't talk, and the fellas were dumbfounded, and she said sit down, sit down, made us go into the dining, and brought this wonderful breakfast in for us. I'm telling ya, [getting choked up] makes me want to cry.

LEVINE: Well that's a beautiful memory really.

THOMPSON: [weeping] I wish she were here. She would love this.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well you're lucky to have had her. How long did she live?

THOMPSON: Into her nineties. [not understood] Could you get that picture of Nana at the party, at Bruce's wedding. [someone in the background] At Bruce's wedding?

THOMPSON: Matthew's wedding.

LEVINE: You got Bruce on the mind.

THOMPSON: Yeah I do have—I guess.

LEVINE: So that was really something, did they go off to the war?

THOMPSON: Yes, they certainly did. Yeah. Well my—a Stephanie's father uh—
joined—uh went into the air force—the air corps. It was the air corps then. But they had
to go through training uh—he wanted to be a pilot, but he didn't quite make being a
pilot. As a matter of fact he landed—

LEVINE: Oh that's lovely. What a beautiful shot. [Janet is handed a picture]
[someone in the background] That's the wedding picture.

LEVINE: Oh.

THOMPSON: Your wedding picture?

[Chatter that can't be understood]

LEVINE: This is your picture when you got married?

THOMPSON: Yes, yeah.

LEVINE: Okay we're resuming here, I just want to um—we were talking about after
the wonderful surprise breakfast that your mother prepared it was soon
after that your ex-brother-in-law, and your husband went—

THOMPSON: Went into service, yeah. So but he didn't make it through pilot school, and he—but he was a mathematical genius there was no getting away from that, and he became a navigator. And he really was so good, that they didn't—they kept him, and uh—he went to Washington to learn some things like uh—what was—LORAN—Long Range Navigation. This was a very secret thing, but he was accepted for that. So, he learned all that and he became an instructor at the airbase. So we stayed in Louisiana for a number of years, and uh—I forget exactly when he got out and uh—cause poor Bruce he—Bill rather he saw an awful lot of action uh—and my brother John saw a lot of action, and thank god Tom missed a lot of it, and my brother Gus he got into the airforce, and he was teaching—I forget what he was teaching but um—

LEVINE: It was Korea, Oh Gus was in Korea.

THOMPSON: Yeah he was too young for World War II.

LEVINE: Do you remember when World War II got over? Do you remember when you heard the news?

THOMPSON: Oh sure I do, very clearly because my daughter was born April 1945. The war was over—well let me see—we we're sitting at the kitchen table, and Stephanie was in the playpen and it came over the radio—and uh both of us—we just—you know this was the war in Europe not Japan—and not the pacific. We were stunned we didn't know what to do—you know so we went up to my mother's house, but she only lived a couple block away and uh—all of sudden from all the apartment buildings. All these papers coming down—everybody's tearing up telephone books, and all the paper is coming down and everybody was just yelling and it was just so wonderful. It was not like Times Square of course. My own neighborhood, but even so it was such a terrible terrible war, and so long, and so many

of the fellas I had known when I was just a teenager had died, or were—I really don't like to think about the war—I really don't—It really hit home you know. You know my mother, my poor mother. She used to listen the Italian station on the radio you know, and she's listening and of course what they did is they spoke Italian a lot on that station, and they would uhm—make note of all the Italian Americans or American Italians—however you prefer, and she's listening and they're talking about John Aquino who was in—wounded and it's pretty hard to listen to, and of course the telegram came for her about it, so—

LEVINE: This is your brother?

THOMPSON: My brother John, yeah. Yeah he was in the pacific. He was in some of the worst of the fighting, in the pacific.

LEVINE: Well um, do you think when you look back on the whole what your family went through, getting you back into the country, and the depression, and the war. Is there anything you can say about how it affected either you or other people in your family? Or what from it you, your sort of philosophy of human nature?

THOMPSON: That's hard to say—I think different people see different aspects in their own way—and you have to—that's the only way you can live by developing your own sense of values and that sort of thing, and um—as far as—my mother did not sit down cry when she lost everything. She just insisted that her piano go with her wherever she went, so you learn from that—that you take what you can. If you don't have it, you don't have it, and you make due and you just go on. I became a birdwatcher [chuckles] to me they are now the most important things in my life—not counting my children of course, I mean they're the most important. But I mean that's the sort of I would go and find a place and when I didn't have to do

anything—take care of any children or my mother, I would find this place of solitude when I was about twelve—thirteen years old take a book, and read the book and watch birds. And that uh—was to me one of the greatest that could ever have done, because it did me a lot of good. I mean besides going to church, because I still enjoy that, and I like talking to god and things that—I'm not crazy I really do enjoy that sort of thing, and um—so there was that, and then I mean my father had so much gumption—I just uh—I wasn't even home when he died you know. I was in Texas and there was no way I could get home because all the planes were being reserved for military personnel who had to move quickly from one place to another. Couldn't get a seat—I'm talking about commercial planes—

LEVINE: He died during World War II?

THOMPSON: Oh yes, and I think that the fact that my brothers were in the war uh—uh—you know contributed to his massive heart attack. Um—cerebral hemorrhage I'm not sure exactly what it was cause I wasn't there, I just got word that he had died, but—

LEVINE: Well what has brought you a lot of satisfaction in your life? I mean you just said that taking a book and watching the birds was a solace to you. Is there anything else that you've done, or you feel proud of?

THOMPSON: Well, I enjoyed working at the library, I didn't have a very impressive job, but uh—it was a job that I enjoyed doing. I like that, and then I really enjoyed my children—I can think of so many wonderful things—I had no great desire to uh—do much of anything—I really didn't enjoy cleaning a house—I didn't like cleaning, but I enjoyed my children. I enjoyed watching them I enjoyed talking to them I still do enjoy it. Stephanie will

tell you I will talk her ear off sometimes she's gotta get to work, and I'm just talking, talking, talking [chuckles]

LEVINE: By the way I don't think you mentioned your husband's first name, and your children's names.

THOMPSON: Oh [chuckles] my husband—my former husband name is Eugene—Eugene Thompson.

LEVINE: And your children?

THOMPSON: Stephanie Diedra[ph], and uh—David Brian, and uh—Mark Richard, and Claudia Robin—oh boy [chuckles] Christopher—is that what you said and Lawrence David.

LEVINE: Wow. And do you have grand children?

THOMPSON: Yes, I do. Stephanie has three daughters. My three grand daughters. My son Mark had um—one daughter—his wife took—just left him—not just—but left him quite a few years ago , and took their daughter—and he was searching all over never did find her, and my daughter Claudia has two daughters. I have six grand daughters. But now I have two great grandsons. So theyre making up—Stephanie's children are making up the lack of grandson's. But that's alright I had four boys and two girls so—

LEVINE: Okay well we're near the end of the tape is there anything that you might want to add to anything you've said or anything you want to say in closing?

THOMPSON: Well I must tell you one thing—um—we—we needed—my husband and I—my former husband and I went to Bermuda and in order to get there

and come get back into the United States—I was not a citizen. I had to go and get what was called a re-entry permit, so there would be no difficulties coming back into the country. It was then and there I decided this is ridiculous I have to go for my citizenship papers you know, and I immediately took off if I had my little box I could tell you what date. I immediately took off got my citizenship papers it was fairly easy, because the judge said, “Did you go to school in New York?” I said, “Yes, your honor.” All the time I said, “Yes, everyday I went to school in New York City.” So he said, “What are we asking you these questions for.” He says just get back on line you don’t have to answer—So I was so proud, but then getting my citizenship papers even though I always considered myself a part of this country—irregardless of where I was born. It was the best thing that could have happened to me, and if anybody—somebody just recently said, “No matter what no matter what the conditions.” Oh they were talking about women. Oprah Winfrey, the best place in the world for a woman is the United States of America. Regardless of anything that you might have to say against the country—I feel the same way, and I feel very strongly about it, and I think that—the—just—a—all the business of Ellis Island should point that out even more strongly to anybody. So you’re a nice representative of Ellis Island too.

LEVINE: Well thank you. Well I want to thank you for a lovely interview. It’s been a pleasure.

THOMPSON: Oh for me too.

LEVINE: Good, I’m sure that we just got the tip of the iceberg, but there’s lots of more stories, but at least this will be your record at Ellis Island and for posterity.

LEVINE: Well let me just sign off, I'm signing off now and I've been speaking with Maria Thompson—Maria Aquino Thompson and this is Janet Levine signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]