

**EI-121**

**MARION DA RONCO**

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**INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.**

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**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 5/1993**

**ITALY, 1920**

**AGE: 9**

**SHIP: ?**

**PORT: CHERBOURG**

**RESIDENCES:**

- **ITALY: VIGO**
- **THE US: HURLEY, WI**

**SIGRIST:** Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, February 25, 1992. We are here at Ellis Island with Mr. Marion Da Ronco, who came from Italy in 1920 when he was nine years old.

**DA RONCO:** Good afternoon. I'm glad to be here.

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SIGRIST: Can you give me your full name please, and your date of birth.

DA RONCO: My name is Marion Da Ronco, born March the 2nd, 1911.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

DA RONCO: In Vigo, Italy.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

DA RONCO: V-I-G-O.

SIGRIST: And whereabouts in Italy is that?

DA RONCO: That's up, oh, I'd say about, along the Austrian border on the northeast corner of Italy on the hip, on the northeast corner in Italy.

SIGRIST: Can you describe this town to me, please?

DA RONCO: Well, it's what they call, that town is like the center of one, Colore. That's a land all around, you know. It's the Providence of Belluno. But that was right in the center of that providence.

SIGRIST: What was the province, sir?

DA RONCO: Beluno.

SIGRIST: Beluno.

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DA RONCO: That's the province of Beluno.

SIGRIST: Was this a big town?

DA RONCO: No, it's just a small town. It's just small towns all around through the Piago Valley, where the Piago River is. And, well, I don't know how to explain it because this town is up high. There's nothing but Alps around there. It's all, it's right in the middle of the Alps, the Venetian Alps.

SIGRIST: What did the town look like? What kinds of houses?

DA RONCO: Well, the houses were all made of slate rock, and they're still there. We were back there twenty years ago, and the same home that we lived in is still there. It was nice to see it. It was nice to go back. I took my wife back with me, but where I went when I was a little boy, everything is there. The forts that they built during the First World War, the barbed wire that they had along the hills is still there, too. I don't know. It's something to go back to see that again.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the house that you grew up in for me?

DA RONCO: Well, the house that, most of the houses are there. On one side they have where they kept the hay for the cows. And the barn was down below, and on the side of it is where the home is, where they lived at.

SIGRIST: How many rooms in the house?

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DA RONCO: Well, when we left there we only had two bedrooms, no stove. It was open fire, you know, with the kettle and that. And that's all there is. This home belonged to somebody else. We were boarding it.

SIGRIST: I see. What was the major industry in this town?

DA RONCO: No industry. There was no industry whatsoever there. All the men had to go out in the cities. Most of them were carpenters or masons. They had to leave their home to make a dollar.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, let's talk about your life, specifically. What was your father's name?

DA RONCO: My father's name was Frank.

SIGRIST: And was he from this town?

DA RONCO: He was from this town, yes. No, he was from a different town, what they called Tre Ponte, but it means Three Bridges. But he left my mother when, oh, I'd say, oh, I think I was only about a year-and-a-half old. He never come over here with us. It was just me and my mother and my two sisters. They come here.

SIGRIST: Your father was already here.

DA RONCO: No, no. No, no, no.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see. When you say he left your mother, he just left the family.

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DA RONCO: My two sisters went into the town we were staying. They asked him if he wanted to come to America with us and he says, "No." So we took the last, my older sister was here already. She's the one that sent us the tickets to come over to America.

SIGRIST: I see. So your father didn't live with you and your mother.

DA RONCO: No, no, no.

SIGRIST: Did you spend time with your dad as a kid?

DA RONCO: I don't know what he looks like. I've never seen a picture of what he is.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk about your mother, then. What was her name?

DA RONCO: My mother's named Regina.

SIGRIST: R-E-G-I-N-A.

DA RONCO: Yeah. Well, in Italian it's Regina.

SIGRIST: Sure. What was her maiden name?

DA RONCO: Martini.

SIGRIST: M-A-R-T-I-N-I. Was she from that town?

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DA RONCO: Yes. She was born and raised. Not from that town, but she was born in the following town. It was only maybe about a mile away from it, a larger Colore, a larger Italy. And, I don't know, no, for me there was no industry whatsoever around there. I know that most of the people, the men had to go out of there to work and then they come back during the wintertime.

SIGRIST: I see. So there really just was nothing, the town was residential. People lived.

DA RONCO: That's all. Just residential. That's all there was.

SIGRIST: What did your mother look like?

DA RONCO: Oh, I can't explain that. She was just as straight as a stick could be. And she worked hard all her life, too. To raise us, me and my two daughters, my two sisters. The other one was here already.

SIGRIST: Did she work in Italy?

DA RONCO: No, no. She just worked the fields, gardens. Planting potatoes, corn, and all that stuff. She raised it all. We had two cows. We had two sheep for wool and we had one goat for summer milk. Because during the summertime a man used to come and pick up all the cattle and he'd take them up in the mountains and feed them. And then from there he used to make cheese and that and he'd bring the cheese back to us, see? The only time we had the cows was during the wintertime. The summertime the only thing we kept was the sheep for the wool. She

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spun all the wool herself. She worked. I can say she worked.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about what it was like being a little boy in this town. What kinds of things did you do when you were growing up? For fun, say, what kind of games did you play?

DA RONCO: No games. There's no games. We just travelled around with kids. We were kids, and that. Going down the river and that. Looking for, most of the time, like when there was rain storms and that, we'd go in the rock piles and pick up these snails, I mean the big ones, and take them home. Then my mother used to cook them. You don't believe that, do you? They were white. They were pure white. When they come on the rock, they were about that long. ( he gestures ) But as soon as you touch them, they were down in the rocks.

SIGRIST: How did your mother cook them? What did she do to them?

DA RONCO: I couldn't tell you. Honest to God, I couldn't tell you that. The only thing I could tell you was she baked potatoes, or make polenta. I don't think you know what polenta is.

SIGRIST: Cornmeal.

DA RONCO: Cornmeal. Now you know that? ( he laughs ) That's right. That's what it is. That's all we had.

SIGRIST: So that's the kinds of things that you ate on a daily basis.

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DA RONCO: That's right.

SIGRIST: And you said that you were raising your own vegetables.

DA RONCO: Our own vegetables, oh, yes. Our own potatoes. Everything was raised, our own.

SIGRIST: As a child, did you have responsibilities out in the field helping . . .

DA RONCO: No. I tried, but I was too young at that time.

SIGRIST: Did you have any chores that you remember that were yours in the house?

DA RONCO: No. The only chores I had, when my mother used to milk the goat I'd take the goat and lift her up so she could milk it. ( he laughs ) That's the truth.

SIGRIST: Were the animals pets? Did you look at them as pets, or did you look at them strictly for food and . . .

DA RONCO: Strictly for food. That's what it was. Especially the sheep and that.

SIGRIST: So you didn't name the animals.

DA RONCO: No.

SIGRIST: Nothing like that.

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DA RONCO: No. I couldn't tell you that.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about your religious life in Italy. Was your mother a religious woman?

DA RONCO: Oh, yeah. She's Catholic. Oh, yeah, they're both, all Catholic.

SIGRIST: So what do you remember about your religious upbringing in Italy? What kinds of things did you have to do?

DA RONCO: Well, one thing, every Sunday was mass in the morning. Afternoon was vespers. I had to go back to the church again. That's all I can remember. I went through the second grade over there before I come over here.

SIGRIST: Oh, well, talk about school. What do you remember about school in Italy?

DA RONCO: Oh, not much of that. Just one room right in the little town where we were at.

SIGRIST: Were your sisters older than you?

DA RONCO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Well, could you give me the names of your sisters?

DA RONCO: Well, my first, her name was Antonia. She was the oldest one. We

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called her Tonina. Then there was Joanna. We called her Jenny. And Lena was Ursulina. But in between there I had a brother, but he died of meningitis. He was about twelve years old.

SIGRIST: Oh. Do you remember when he died?

DA RONCO: Oh no. I don't think, I was about a year old. That's all I was when he died. I don't remember him. I can only go on what my sister and my mother used to tell me.

SIGRIST: What do you suppose that was like for your mother? Did she ever talk about that?

DA RONCO: No. She never, ever talked about her husband, never. My aunt, if I ever learned anything it was through my aunt. She's the one who used to talk about him. Or my first cousins. Dan Darren or, and Jean Darren, all them there were first cousins of mine. And they, one of them worked with my father. He almost pulled one ear, that's how mean he was. He almost pulled the ear off of him when he was fourteen years old. That's before he come to this country. He ended up the same place where we are. All around Hurley, there.

SIGRIST: Was that difficult for you as a kid, growing up? To your father being someone you really didn't know?

DA RONCO: You know, I never even noticed about that. It's the later years I've been thinking what kind of a life would I have if he were to come over here. Him drinking and that, he was a heavy drinker. But he used to travel all

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over Italy looking for work and find work. But when he used to come home, like they would say, he'd hide his money and then come home, you know. It was rough.

SIGRIST: Yeah, interesting.

DA RONCO: It was rough.

SIGRIST: And it's interesting that it's now, you know, you're sort of thinking about this.

DA RONCO: Oh, man. When I look back and think what we went through, there are very few families. The only thing I can thank is my older sister. She sent us the money to come over here.

SIGRIST: And which, what was her name? Which one was she?

DA RONCO: Antonia.

SIGRIST: She was Antonia. I want to ask about other family members in this town. Did your mother have other family members who lived nearby?

DA RONCO: Oh, yes. Oh, sure. She would, I think there was seven girls in that family. One, two, three, four with my mother are here in this, buried right here in Hurley there, and the rest are over there.

SIGRIST: Were there grandparents that you remember?

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DA RONCO: No. No, I never remembered my grandparents. I think they were dead before I even realized about them.

SIGRIST: So your mother basically had her sisters.

DA RONCO: Oh, we lived, when we came here we lived, one time we were here for one sister. Then we went for another one, then we went for another one. I can't say I could have a home, because I never could call a home.

SIGRIST: Because you were always moving.

DA RONCO: Moving from one to the other, see.

SIGRIST: And in Italy the sisters . . .

DA RONCO: All together.

SIGRIST: They were all together.

DA RONCO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about, oh, the way the town was situated. You said the Alps were all around you. Now, was there a church at one end, or . . .

DA RONCO: Every town has a church. Where I was born it was just a little town, a little, like a little location off of this Vigo, it was about, oh, I'd say about seven, eight homes. They had a church. Every town you go through there they got a church. And today, every time you go through during

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the evening you could hear that church bell ringing, no matter what town you would go through. They were, they were all religious, they were all Catholics through there.

SIGRIST: You said your mother was religious.

DA RONCO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, I'm trying to see what you remember about home life. You know, when you think back, what do you remember about being at home? What sticks out in your mind about actually living in the house, or your mother cooking. You were talking a little bit about her cooking.

DA RONCO: There was nothing else to do, just sit there.

SIGRIST: Was your mother a strict person? Were there rules that you had to abide by in the house?

DA RONCO: No, no. We never had any rules. She had the rules herself. ( he laughs ) What she says, I can remember, I can tell you something else, too. During 1918 the First World War, we're under the invasion of the Germans I think from April to Armistice Day. That's when they left back. I can remember all of that. But they never bothered over there, them soldiers or that. Only thing, in the morning, they were the first ones to the church. They were Catholics, they had mass there. When they get through, then we went to the church. But anybody bothering people down there, nobody was touched.

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SIGRIST: During World War I were there shortages of any kind? Do you remember?

DA RONCO: Oh, yeah. There was the shortages.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little bit about that. What was it like to be in that town during World War I?

DA RONCO: How would you feel to be hungry, going from a fast, working in the fields, running home, looking for a piece of bread and there's no bread there? You know, during that time they ground cornstalks to make food with that. But, man, that was terrible. You eat that you were so constipated that you couldn't go. You finally have to go. They tried everything. They couldn't go. ( they laugh, Mr. Da Ronco adjusts himself in his chair)

SIGRIST: During World War I you said you remember there being soldiers in town.

DA RONCO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: But did they ever, they didn't bother you at home?

DA RONCO: No, they never bothered nobody. Nobody ever, nobody who had a family was ever bothered from them.

SIGRIST: Were there any kind of displays of munitions in town? Do you remember bombs or anything like that during the war?

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DA RONCO: No, no. The only thing we could remember, me and my two sisters, we were out pasturing the cows, and there was two airplanes up above fighting, you know. We could hear the bullets. We were under a big rock. There was me and my two sisters, and then there was another girl with us. We could see them up there, and we could hear the bullets hitting down below, and they were combatting up on top.

SIGRIST: Was that scary for you, or was it more kind of fascinating?

DA RONCO: Well, at that time I didn't realize it. Eight years old, you don't stop to think, but you remember it.

SIGRIST: Yeah, sure.

DA RONCO: You remember everything.

SIGRIST: Talk to me about your sister who came here first, Antonia, you said. She came to America.

DA RONCO: She came. Her aunt was here first. Then she come back, and then she picked her up and brought her to the United States. I think she was sixteen year. Fifteen or sixteen years old.

SIGRIST: Her aunt being your mother's sister.

DA RONCO: My mother's, she was the oldest of the family, on my mother's family.

SIGRIST: And she was the first one in America?

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DA RONCO: She was the first one in America.

SIGRIST: I see. So she comes back to Italy . . .

DA RONCO: She came back to Italy and then she picked up my older sister and brought her up home.

SIGRIST: How old were you when that happened?

DA RONCO: I think I was only about a year-and-a-half old.

SIGRIST: Very young.

DA RONCO: I think she started, she came here in 19, either 1912 or 1913.

SIGRIST: And what did your sister do when she got here?

DA RONCO: I, that's something I couldn't say.

SIGRIST: Did she get a job that you know of?

DA RONCO: She could have done housework, because she got married right after. I think four or five years after she got married, and she must have took care of her home, like my other two sisters when they first came here. They took care of homes for people who had, one had the bakery, and the other one had a tavern, one of these saloons in it at that time, you know. But they worked with them.

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SIGRIST: So those sisters also, did they come with you?

DA RONCO: Yeah. The two of them.

SIGRIST: They came with you.

DA RONCO: The two youngest, they come with me.

SIGRIST: All right. So Antonia is here from 1912, roughly.

DA RONCO: Somewhere, between 1912 or 1913. Just before the World War started.

SIGRIST: I see. And I assume that she's communicating with your mother when she came?

DA RONCO: Oh, yeah. Oh, steady, sure. They did communicate steady with them.

SIGRIST: So what made your mother decide to pack you all up and . . .

DA RONCO: Well, we didn't have nothing there. We didn't have nothing to live, or that. We had the chance to come through here. Sure thing she took it. But the biggest thing I think they wanted us over here, is she, my brother-in-law and her, they had a farm, a forty acre farm.

SIGRIST: Is this out in Wisconsin?

DA RONCO: Yeah. And they had seven, eight cows. They raised their own pigs, they

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had their own chickens. So with us over there, we could take over working and work that, see? That was the main idea that they got over there.

SIGRIST: So it would be nice to have the family, but it would be really great because the family can work, too.

DA RONCO: Yeah. That's it. That's the whole thing, see. Not that I'm grateful. I'm grateful that I'm in this country. Because when I come here last year, I went through here and there was tears in my eyes if I sit here.

SIGRIST: Sure. How do you think your mother felt about leaving this town in Italy?

DA RONCO: I think she was glad. To me, I think she was glad to come back over here, leave everything behind there. Because in 1930 my Dad wrote to my youngest sister Lena, and he asked about me. And she was ready to send the money over to get him over here.

SIGRIST: Lena was.

DA RONCO: Yes. She had the money, all set to send the money over, and she got word that he passed away.

SIGRIST: I see.

DA RONCO: But that never bothered me because I'd never seen him. I never knew what kind of a man he was or anything. My cousin asked me, "Don't you feel sorry?" I said, "How should I be sorry. He never give me a piece of

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bread to eat when I was young, or growing up." But sometimes I think about this, I don't know.

SIGRIST: He's just kind of a dim figure, a distant figure for you. Do you remember your mother telling you you were going to America?

DA RONCO: Oh, yes. The time, when I give you the pictures there, that's the only time I knew that we were coming here.

SIGRIST: You were going to have your passport picture taken? Do you remember having the picture taken?

DA RONCO: I remember having the pictures, but I didn't know it was for the passport at that time, see?

SIGRIST: What did America mean to you? What did you know about America?

DA RONCO: America. How can I tell you that? What it means to me here?

SIGRIST: No. What did you know about it as a child in Italy?

DA RONCO: Oh, at that time! Oh, well, I wouldn't, I never heard of America over there because I was too young at the age, eight years old. I remember everything, but when I came here I started school right away. The following fall I went to school.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about leaving that town in Italy when you had to go?

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DA RONCO: I tell you, I never even thought about it. Honest to God, I never even thought about it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you packed, what you took with you?

DA RONCO: Oh, there wasn't very much. The only thing I think they packed was just clothes. That's all. That's all that was there to pack. See, we came here, my uncle came over.

SIGRIST: Your mother's brother?

DA RONCO: Yeah, my mother's brother. He came over, and he was the one who took us here.

SIGRIST: I see. So he escorted you to America.

DA RONCO: Yeah. He took us all the way through here, see.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, good. Let's start the journey to America here. You're in this town, Vigo, is that the name of it?

DA RONCO: No, we started in Laggio. I was born in Vigo, but when we started from my sister's, my mother's sister's house, I think it was either one o'clock in the morning or twelve o'clock, there was two carriages. One was from my uncle, his wife and there were two other kids with him. And one other one was me, my mother and my two sisters. And we travelled at, to Callaoso. That's quite a ways. I'd say about ten, fifteen miles we had to travel with a horse.

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SIGRIST: So you went from . . .

DA RONCO: Laggio to Callaoso.

SIGRIST: Laggio is L-A-G-G-I-O?

DA RONCO: L-A-G-G-I-O.

SIGRIST: Okay. And the town you went to was . . .

DA RONCO: Was Callaoso. That's the end of the railroad. That's as far as the railroad came.

SIGRIST: Was that a long trip by carriage?

DA RONCO: Oh, yes. I'd say about ten, fifteen miles. At least fifteen miles. One straight stretch, right straight through. Then we boarded a, that's where we boarded a train. From Callaoso we went to Padua, Italy. From Padua we went to Terrine, Italy. There we boarded a train there again, transferred there. From there we went to Cherbourg, France.

SIGRIST: That's a long trip. ( they laugh )

DA RONCO: There we spent a night there. The following evening the tide come in and they ferried us out to the boat. That was, I think it was seven, eight o'clock in the evening. That's when the tide come in. Because the boat was right out in the ocean. They couldn't come in with the boat.

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SIGRIST: What memories do you have of getting to Cherbourg? Of all this train ride and everything?

DA RONCO: Just watching the trains going by. That's all you could do. Steady trains, train go, go, go.

SIGRIST: Was it boring?

DA RONCO: I don't know. It was a ride.

SIGRIST: Was this the first time you'd been on a train?

DA RONCO: Oh, yeah. That was the first time I'd ever been on a train. I'd never been on a train before. That's the first time I ever seen a train I think was when we got, when we boarded that train down there.

SIGRIST: Were you frightened?

DA RONCO: No, I wasn't afraid. But just to think about all that long way to go.

SIGRIST: How long did that take from the time you left Laggio to the time you got to Cherbourg, how long do you think that took?

DA RONCO: I think it's a day and a half by the time we left, we left from Vigo, from Laggio, to Cherbourg, France. I think it was one day and a half.

SIGRIST: So you're traveling steady, you're not stopping.

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SIGRIST: Oh, yeah. No stopping, just changing trains, one train after the other, and had to keep on going.

SIGRIST: Do you remember if the train was crowded? Were there a lot of people going to Cherbourg that you remember?

DA RONCO: No. I couldn't notice that there, because we had our own seats and everything.

SIGRIST: And your uncle was accompanying you?

DA RONCO: Yes. He come over there and one woman was after him, we finally buried her. She wanted to come to this country, so she married her.

SIGRIST: I see. So he was an unmarried uncle.

DA RONCO: Yeah. He was even single when he come over, but when he left there he was a married man.

SIGRIST: So most of your mother's family is in America. She's sort of like . . .

DA RONCO: The majority, I think, the only one that was left over there was her brother and two sisters, that's all.

SIGRIST: So your mother had a real reason to come here then. I mean, most of her family was here.

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DA RONCO: Oh, I think so. I think so myself. She had a big reason to come over here. We didn't have nothing. We had land, all right. But you can't, all you can do is eat off the land and that. But when we come here we had a better choice of a living and that, see? Even for my sisters and that, see? And they did, too.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Talk about when you saw the boat, when you were being ferried out to the boat. Because this is probably the first big boat you've seen, right?

DA RONCO: Oh, man. And when you climbed them stairs going up, that's quite a step. I know they're kind of shaky. ( he laughs )

SIGRIST: That's right, because they tethered you out to the boat, right, so you had to think, oh, wow. Do you remember the name of the boat?

DA RONCO: I don't know the name of the boat, but I know it was the White Star Line. That was the line of the boat. One time I did know the name, but years passed by, you don't think about it. You forget that.

SIGRIST: What were your accommodations on the boat?

DA RONCO: I think we travelled third class on the boat. We were on the back end.

SIGRIST: So what does that mean? Did you have a cabin, did you have . . .

DA RONCO: No, no. It was a regular boat. You had your own rooms on there. To me, I think that's the third class. Then you had second class, and the

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first class was on the, on the bow of the boat. See, all the while we were on there we couldn't go any other place but stay on the back end. We had our own restaurant. We had our own rooms and everything in there.

SIGRIST: So they didn't allow you to roam around.

DA RONCO: No. The only time they opened it up, when we hit the harbor here and they lift off. And then we opened up, my mother took me by the hand, we went through the whole ship before they took us off the ship to come over to Ellis Island here.

SIGRIST: Did you enjoy the boat ride?

DA RONCO: Well, I don't know. I had my kicks.

SIGRIST: What did you do? What was there to do on the boat?

DA RONCO: Well, there was another kid about my age. You know when you get quartered like that, a little friction between, you know. He liked to fight and that. And we were looking for a rock to throw it at somebody. That's, I don't know. It's something to remember, boy, I'll tell you.

SIGRIST: Do you remember while the boat was going across the ocean, do you remember being up on deck at all?

DA RONCO: Oh, we were on deck all the time. All day long we were up on deck.

SIGRIST: What was there to do up there?

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DA RONCO: Nothing. All you got to do up there is just run around and watch my mother and my two sisters. The rest of them have seasickness on that sea.

SIGRIST: Did your mother get sick?

DA RONCO: Oh, both, they all got sick coming over.

SIGRIST: Did you get sick?

DA RONCO: No, I never got sick. I don't think I had time to get sick. One thing we used to watch, always, watch the dolphins following the ship. You could hear them jumping off out of sight. We watched them quite a bit during our passage in that.

SIGRIST: And you said you had your own dining room.

DA RONCO: Yeah. We ate, well, not only our own, but everybody on that class was on there.

SIGRIST: Was your mother sick enough where she had to be in her cabin? Was she in bed for most of the . . .

DA RONCO: No. Most of the time they were always up on the top deck. We were always up on top, never down below. The only time we went down there was to go to eat or when we'd go to bed.

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SIGRIST: What do you think your mother's thinking during this whole boat trip?

DA RONCO: Well, this, I don't know. I couldn't explain it. I can't explain what it was. I think one way she was glad. In other ways, I don't know how she could take it with her husband over there, you know?

SIGRIST: Was she really looking at America as sort of a whole new start?

DA RONCO: Right, yes. The whole new start of life right there.

SIGRIST: To just kind of leave behind everything that happened.

DA RONCO: She left everything behind, forgot everything, and went there. And she never, ever thought of ever getting married again. Never, ever. She was good.

SIGRIST: Well, we're going to pause right now and Peter will flip the tape and then we'll continue with the interview.

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

SIGRIST: We are continuing the interview with Marion Da Ronco. Mr. Da Ronco, can you tell me, did you see the Statue of Liberty?

DA RONCO: Oh, man, did I see the Statue of Liberty. We stood on the side there and

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my mother told me, she said, "Remember that thing there. For years to come, you will be thinking about it." And she was true. Everyone stood up and took their cap off when they went by it. It was something to see, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, as a little boy, do you remember seeing the New York skyline for the first time. I mean, this is all kind of a strange experience for you, right?

DA RONCO: Well, you could see all these buildings and that. But outside of that you could see the harbor coming in and that. Passing the Statue of Liberty and they were waiting for the tugs to come pick up to boat to push it in port. That's what they used to do. I don't know if they still do that today or not, but it at that time the tugs pushed the boats into the port.

SIGRIST: And was that what happened with your boat?

DA RONCO: Yes, that's what happened. They pulled along side and they pushed the boat right into the port.

SIGRIST: Do you know how long the voyage took?

DA RONCO: From France to New York was nine days.

SIGRIST: And do you remember what month you left in or what season it was?

DA RONCO: Well, it was in June. See, we landed, I think by the time we should have left Italy around, I say, nice, three, twelve days, the 8th or the 9th of June

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we left. Those are the closest figures I can think of.

SIGRIST: And you arrived in June, also.

DA RONCO: Right. In New York at that time.

SIGRIST: So the boat is brought up and docked.

DA RONCO: That's right.

SIGRIST: And then what happens to you?

DA RONCO: Then they opened up all the ship so that we could go through it. Then they ferried us over to here, to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: When you say they opened up the ship so that you could go through it, what do you mean exactly?

DA RONCO: They wanted us to see how the other part of the ship was, see?

SIGRIST: Oh, so they allowed you to just . . .

DA RONCO: Oh, yes. When everybody was already off the ship then because they were the first ones to go out. Then they allowed us to go through and see what it looked like.

SIGRIST: When you were on ship, was there any kind of prejudice against the third class by the second and first class passengers, or did you just never see

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these people?

DA RONCO: Well, it all depends. If you're going to travel third class, that's how you are going to travel, regardless what the others are going to travel, you see? Because I never heard nobody complaining travelling that class. So my uncle must have travelled that twice on the third class. See, maybe that was less money for the voyage, too, on the third class.

SIGRIST: Probably. And, of course, your mother has got three kids with her, too. All right, so you go through the ship and then what happens?

DA RONCO: Then from the ship we were ferried over here, over to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: What was that like?

DA RONCO: The ferry that we come through was open. It ain't like you see these ferries. You see, it was open. We come through on that one, I remember.

SIGRIST: You mean it didn't have glass on the sides.

DA RONCO: No, no glass. That's right.

SIGRIST: Was it crowded?

DA RONCO: Oh, yes. Oh, you bet that thing was crowded. You bet it was crowded. We went through that big room downstairs there. And from there we were all examined through these rooms up here and then we were

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boarded in the buildings back there. That I remember good, because I used to come down and play in that for a while, you know.

SIGRIST: Why did you have to stay overnight? You stayed for two nights?

DA RONCO: I don't know. I couldn't understand that one. When we went through, there was a lad with us. He was about twenty years old. And he had, I don't know if it was on his chin he had a pimple or on his forehead, and he was detained. But as we were going through there was a room. We could see the room way back, but he was there when we went through. He called down to my mother, he says, "Aunt," he says, "get me out of here." He said, "I don't want to go back." And he was crying. But when we got to the ferry he was there with us.

SIGRIST: So whatever it was wasn't that serious.

DA RONCO: I don't know if my uncle had said anything or that, but when we got to the ferry he was right behind us. He was on the ferry with us.

SIGRIST: Well, he must have been very happy. ( he laughs )

DA RONCO: Oh, man, was he happy. But, see, he didn't come to us up in Wisconsin. He went, he had relatives in Illinois, in Joliet, Illinois. That's where he stopped. And the other lad stopped there, too. He was my age, too. He stopped there, too.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what kinds of exams they did to you?

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DA RONCO: No. That's something that I couldn't say. I don't know, they looked at me and they said, "You're okay. Go ahead." ( they laugh )

SIGRIST: Do you remember, what do you remember about staying overnight? Do you remember where you slept? Do you remember what that looked like?

DA RONCO: Oh, yeah. We had regular, two bunks, four bunks that was in. There was one for my mother, one for me, then one for each of my sisters all in one room. And they were hard, just a couple of blankets and that. I don't know if there was, I don't know one night we slept there, but I don't know about the second night. I couldn't say about the second night. But one night I know sure we were there.

SIGRIST: Did they feed you when you were here?

DA RONCO: Oh, yeah, sure. We went through the, what you call it, and we ate. Not that you could brag about it, but at least we had something to eat.

SIGRIST: This was in the dining room?

DA RONCO: Yes, in the big dining room.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what that looked like?

DA RONCO: I know it was long tables, plates and everything was on there. That's all I could remember. Remember they got that, what you call it, that go through this way. What do you they call that?

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SIGRIST: Kind of like a little, um . . .

DA RONCO: You go back, you go through these . . .

SIGRIST: Like a turnstile?

DA RONCO: Turnstile, see? You go through that. I think we went through that when we hit the ferry, too.

SIGRIST: Sure, probably. What can you remember about, because you're with lots of other people, right? There are lots of people here. What did that feel like for a little boy to be with all those people?

DA RONCO: You don't feel it. You don't even realize what you're doing. You just following. My mother had me by the hand all the while. She never let go one time as long as we were here. Well, on the boat was different, but like through here she always held on to me, see? But outside of that, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Your mother must have had her hands full, actually, with three kids.

DA RONCO: No, no. Because Jenny was, I think she was twenty.

SIGRIST: Oh, so she was older.

DA RONCO: And Lena, she was sixteen. Fifteen or sixteen. There's about six years between us.

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SIGRIST: So actually your sisters, when your mother wasn't sick, your sisters could sort of fill in as surrogate mothers for you.

DA RONCO: Oh, yeah. I guess they filled in, yes. They took good care of me.

SIGRIST: Now, you said no one came to Ellis Island to meet you.

DA RONCO: No, not here, no.

SIGRIST: Right. So you were here at least overnight, and then what happened?

DA RONCO: From here, we left here, we went back to the ferry, and we took the train out from New York Central.

SIGRIST: And you went to?

DA RONCO: All the way to Detroit. We changed trains in Detroit down to Michigan Central over to Chicago. From Chicago, around the lake, they bussed us over to Northwestern Station. This was early in the morning. And from there we went to on the Northwestern Station. The train, we went to Hurley. We got there at five o'clock that evening.

SIGRIST: How did you know where to go? How did your mother know where she was going?

DA RONCO: Well, we had my uncle with me, and we followed him all the way through. He knew where to go. We followed him.

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SIGRIST: So what were your first impressions of America from the train? What, did some, anything strike you as being different or . . .

DA RONCO: The only time it be different when we hit town, when we hit the home where we were supposed to stay.

SIGRIST: And what was different about it?

DA RONCO: Well, I don't know. It's hard to understand, because the town, they almost looked, the homes are not the same, but this town is always the same. Kids are always wanting to treat you good, you know. They either tease you or get you in trouble, though I never did get in trouble.

SIGRIST: Did someone have an apartment waiting for you?

DA RONCO: We stayed over my sister's.

SIGRIST: Oh, that's right. You stayed with your sister.

DA RONCO: We stayed with all my sister all the while.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your mother seeing her sister for the first time?

DA RONCO: Oh, yes. Oh, gosh, yes, yes. There was crying and happiness for a while, then, I don't know. ( he pauses ) Just stop and think, and oh, my God, I tell you, it's a long, long story, if you want to go all the way through it.

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SIGRIST: But it was a happy reunion.

DA RONCO: Oh, yes. I tell you, I enjoyed being here.

SIGRIST: What, let's talk about, you know, your first year in America. Okay, let's talk about, for instance, learning English. How did you go about learning English?

DA RONCO: You know, the first thing, you know, you learn the good words, the cursing words. ( he laughs ) They were the ones they teach you the first. But you pick it up pretty fast. I went to school the following fall, and I'd say in about five, six months I was talking pretty good. I could get along well with all of them.

SIGRIST: What about your mother? Did she learn English?

DA RONCO: Well, she couldn't understand quite a bit of it, but I know she ever talked with it. When she was with my sisters, with the kids and that, she always talked Italian. She could understand them, but I don't know if she could talk well. My other sisters all could talk English, good English, but my mother never even thought about going to school to learn to talk English.

SIGRIST: What about just how your mother adjusted to life in general? You know, did she adapt to American foods and . . .

DA RONCO: Oh, yes, right away. Sure. At home we cooked the same foods that we cooked in Italy, we cooked at home, too.

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SIGRIST: And, of course, your mother has her family around her, right? Her sisters.

DA RONCO: That was the main thing. We were all together there.

SIGRIST: Was there a big Italian community in Hurley?

DA RONCO: Well, that's the county seat today, Hurley. But we were about eight miles west of Hurley is a little mining town. All I know are mining town.

SIGRIST: In that town, was there a large Italian community?

DA RONCO: Well, there were all nationalities. There were Belgians, there were Polish, there were Swedes, there were Finns. All miners, working in the mines.

SIGRIST: Is that why all those immigrants were brought out?

DA RONCO: That's, most of them all ended up there, like northern Minnesota and the upper peninsula of Michigan and northern Wisconsin. That was all iron ore mining at that time.

SIGRIST: So that's the major industry that's going on in this area is the mining.

DA RONCO: At that time.

SIGRIST: At that time.

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DA RONCO: The only mining you got today is in Minnesota, and in the upper peninsula in Michigan. Outside of copper mining, there's one copper mine. I worked there for ten years.

SIGRIST: Was your mother's sister's family, actually there are several sisters involved, aren't there. Were their families all involved in the mining industry?

DA RONCO: All of them. All but one. One, she married, he had a tavern. Jenny was married to one, he worked in the mine. My oldest sister, her husband worked in the mine, and he still had his farm with him.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things, you may not know the answer to this, but what kinds of things did they have to do in the mine? What exactly, do you know what kinds of jobs they had, specifically?

DA RONCO: Well, in mining, you'd have to have a pencil and paper to write down just how they mine everything. Iron mine was bull work.

SIGRIST: So this is all heavy labor these men are doing.

DA RONCO: All heavy. Well, you had eight-foot timbers to put up, you know, for head blocking the tops, you know. Copper mining was easy. There was all machinery. But iron mine is bad.

SIGRIST: Were there certain diseases and illnesses that were rampant in this town because so many people were miners?

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DA RONCO: Mostly the silicosis.

SIGRIST: Silicosis.

DA RONCO: The dust in the lungs. That's just like your copper, it ain't as bad as a copper mine, I mean a coal mine. But you call it a rock. If you worked in a rock, it's all about that rock that goes into your breathing. They call this, in other words tuberculosis, the same thing.

SIGRIST: I see. And do you remember people dying of this in that town, or people having this?

DA RONCO: Oh, yeah. Oh, sure. Quite a few. I spent forty years in the iron mine, underground. When the mine closed down we were down forty-two hundred feet underground.

SIGRIST: So you went into this profession yourself ultimately, as an adult.

DA RONCO: That's all you had there then. The iron mines, that's all.

SIGRIST: Was that your first job in this town?

DA RONCO: No. My first job was out in the woods, working in the camps in the woods, logging out in the woods.

SIGRIST: How old were you?

DA RONCO: I was eighteen years old when I went out there.

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SIGRIST: Again were there lots of immigrants or children of immigrants doing that kind of work?

DA RONCO: Oh, sure. There's more than as it is today, well, most of them now are all dying off. There's very few. There were, came over from the old country, most of them are all dead.

SIGRIST: I wanted to ask you, also, in school, when you were still in school in this town, were there a lot of immigrant children in school?

DA RONCO: Oh, yeah. Oh, you bet. I mean, they came from here. No, most of them were all born here. Some of them kids were born, like, in the Iron Belt there, when they came from school, they couldn't even talk English.

SIGRIST: Because they grew up in immigrant houses.

DA RONCO: Yeah. They grew up with their parents, and saw their parents talk their own language, see. And they had to learn how to speak the language English, the English language too, see. Most of them, all of them that started first grade and that, they didn't know a word about English.

SIGRIST: Interesting.

DA RONCO: I wouldn't say everybody, but mostly it was the Finns.

SIGRIST: What customs from Italy did your mother hold on to the most?

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DA RONCO: Knitting. That's the main thing, was knitting. Jenny, she was a dressmaker. Lena, she was knitting. My older sister, she was a dressmaker and knitting, too. But Jenny, she was the main one for knitting, making clothes and everything.

SIGRIST: And this is something that they had done in Italy, and this is . . .

DA RONCO: Oh, she done all her life in Italy. That's what she learned most in Italy. She went to school for that in Italy.

SIGRIST: Did she make money in Wisconsin doing this kind of thing?

DA RONCO: She was making it even when she was married. People used to come over and have her make coats and that. She had three daughters. She made the three daughters' wedding dresses. You should have seen her. She was good at that.

SIGRIST: And you said that your sisters adapted very easily to America.

DA RONCO: Oh, yeah. She adapted right away. They went out to work right away, and they worked with Italian people, see.

SIGRIST: So there was, you know, some Italians in this town.

DA RONCO: Oh, yeah. There was a lot of Italians. Like I say, there was all nationalities. The area was just all nationalities. Every town has the same thing.

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SIGRIST: What about religious life? When you came to Wisconsin, was there a Catholic church in this town?

DA RONCO: Oh, yeah. There was a Catholic church there, yes. I went to, there was catechism there. I received first communion there, confirmation there. I was pretty old, but I still received it.

SIGRIST: Well, good. We're going to start winding down now. I want to ask just a couple of questions. I want you to tell me a little bit about working in the mines, from your perspective. Tell me a little bit, say, about the first job you had in the mines.

DA RONCO: The first bad job I had in the mines was drilling and blasting. Drilling holes and blasting, making, well, what we called drifts. Making tunnels into the ore body. But then when you got through the ore body there was all different mining altogether, then, see. To explain it, we'd have to have like a map to get the right idea how everything is, how everything is done underground.

SIGRIST: Sure there are lots of different types of jobs.

DA RONCO: Different types of jobs, sure.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you started working in the mines?

DA RONCO: I was twenty-three years old.

SIGRIST: I see. And you worked there, you said, for forty years.

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DA RONCO: Yeah, until 1962 when they closed down. I was down in Detroit in 1928, '29, '30 and '31. I worked down in a quarry down there. And then I went back home and I got the job, and then I went to school. My wife and I got married in 1934.

SIGRIST: And what's your wife's name?

DA RONCO: Irene.

SIGRIST: Maiden name?

DA RONCO: Belgian. She was named Vanderchaegen. Always had a name about that long.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

DA RONCO: Vanderchaegen is V-A-N-D-E-R-C-H-A-E-G-E-N. It's long.

SIGRIST: Yes, and she's from that area.

DA RONCO: Yeah. She was born in the Iron Belt. She went to school there. We went to school together, same grade. Then when I come back from Detroit we started going together and then we got married.

SIGRIST: I see. Interesting. I have two final questions for you. One is was your mother happy, ultimately, that she had made this choice to come to America?

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DA RONCO: Well, sometimes she was happy, sometimes she was sad. It all depends on the confliction between the daughters and that, you know.

SIGRIST: Did she ever want to go back to Italy?

DA RONCO: No, no, no, no. She never wanted to go back. No way. No way.

SIGRIST: But she wasn't totally happy here either?

DA RONCO: Oh, yeah. I can't say that. She was happy, especially with my second sister Jenny. I could call that place a home.

SIGRIST: That's right, you said because you kept moving.

DA RONCO: I kept moving. When you have a little trouble with one, then you go to another one, see? Trouble with that, you go to the opposite way.

SIGRIST: That must have been very hard on your mother, though.

DA RONCO: It is, it was. That's why I say I couldn't call, I couldn't call none of the places my home. I had one of these, lad that came over here with us, I think it was 1927, he came up from Joliet and he looked for me. He wanted to stay with me. I told him, I said, "I can't invite you over." I said, "That ain't my house. You have to ask my sister if you can stay." But the following day he went back again. I never seen him since no more after that. He was my age, too.

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SIGRIST: He was the guy who had the pimple at Ellis Island.

DA RONCO: No, no. This was a younger one. He was my age. The other one, he was twenty years old. I never heard of him no more. But the one that was my age, he was about eight, nine years old like I was. And we always used to battle together. Even from the time in Cherbourg, we used to battle.

SIGRIST: The scrappers.

DA RONCO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, I guess, Mr. Da Ronco, my final question for you is are you happy that you're here?

DA RONCO: Oh, man, am I happy. You don't know how happy I am. Sometimes my heart goes over here, but my home is here. I was back there in 19, I think it was twenty years ago I went back there. That was my ambition to go back one time to see the land and see some of my relations over there. And come here, and then go to Honolulu and the Philippines. I've been over to Hawaii. That's what my ambition is, but coming here, too.

SIGRIST: But you said that when you went back to Italy it was like nothing had changed.

DA RONCO: No change, no. Them mountains don't move.

SIGRIST: Did that make you appreciate America more, seeing . . .

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DA RONCO: Oh, man. I guess it's nice to go over there, but here is home, here. My family is here and everything is here. Over there, I wouldn't want to go back to live there no more. No, no, no, no. I stay here. This is my home.

SIGRIST: Well, Mr. Da Ronco, I want to thank you very much. You've come a long way.

DA RONCO: I enjoyed it. I'm glad I came. Honestly, I'm glad I came.

SIGRIST: Good. It was our pleasure.

DA RONCO: Too bad I couldn't meet you last time. I inquired different when I was here last a year ago, but they couldn't tell me anything. But when you wrote to me, when you got the letter from my sister, my daughter there, I told her, I said, "We're going back again." Are they going to have any doings in 1992?

SIGRIST: Not that I know of. We'll talk about this in a minute, but not that I know of. Nothing's been planned that I know of. Well, again, I thank you, and this is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service with Marion Da Ronco.

END OF INTERVIEW