

**EI-1248**

**VITO DI SPIGNA**

**BIRTHDATE: OCTOBER 9, 1938**

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**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 63**

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**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.**

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**ITALY (ISLAND OF ISCHIA), 1949**

**AGE: 11**

**SHIP: THE VOLCANO**

**PORT: NAPLES**

**RESIDENCES:**

LEVINE: Today is July the 10<sup>th</sup>, the year 2002 and I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Vita—Vito De Spigna, who came from the island of I'Schia in Italy when he was 11 years old in 1949. He came on the ship, the Volcano. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, if you would please say again your birth date and where you were born.

DI SPIGNA: My birth date is October 9, 1938 and I was born in the town of Foreo [PH] on the island of I'Schia off the southern coast of Naples.

LEVINE: Okay. And did you live in I'Schia up until you were 11?

DI SPIGNA: Yes.

LEVINE: You did? Okay. And what was your father's name?

DI SPIGNA: My father's name was Vito also.

LEVINE: Okay. And your mother?

DI SPIGNA: My mother's name was Mariana [PH].

LEVINE: Mariana. And her maiden name?

DI SPIGNA: Dimeglio—D-I-M-E-G-L-I-O.

LEVINE: Great. And were—were your family on—on both sides from I'Schia, going back a ways, do you know?

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] Well, go—going back on my mother's side, my grandmother and grandfather on my mother's side were actually living here for a while in Brooklyn, New York. And [clears throat] my mother was born here. When—when she was one year's old, my grandmother and grandfather decided to go back to Italy. So she went back to Italy on the island of I'Schia and she lived there, oh, practically all her life. And then after World War II, she decided that she had too many children to support on the island. We were 11 brothers and 2 sisters and she thought we would have a better future here in America. So she decided to return here and, a little bit at a time, the whole family was transformed. From 1949 to about 1956, we were all here.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, [clears throat] now, did your grandparents on your mother's side, we—did—before they came to Brooklyn, New York—

DI SPIGNA: They were Italian citizens born in Italy. But they—

LEVINE: But w—I'Schia?

DI SPIGNA: I'Schia, right.

LEVINE: They were there before?

DI SPIGNA: Right, the same island. Right. Same town, same island. They just decided to go back.

LEVINE: Wow. Boy, that's quite a story. Well—and what about your father? Did he come here too?

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] Yeah, my father came here but on a separate trip though because the first ones that actually came was—was my mother, me and two of my brothers. [clears throat] And we didn't come all at the same time either. My—we were all supposed to come all together, November, 1949. But at the time they had—in Italy, they had some laws on the books where it was mandatory to vote. And the

last minute, they held—the decided to hold my mother back. Being that she was an adult and eligible to vote, they wanted to check out exactly who she voted for, whether she voted for Communist Party or the Democrat Party or the Republican Party or the Fascist Party. And they told her it would only be a matter—you know, a month or two before they finished that part of the investigation. But in the meantime, me and my two other brothers, Louis and Michael, were eligible to come here if she wanted us, to send us over here. So she decided to send us over here and we were going to spend some time with my aunt and uncle and live with them until my mother came over. But unbeknown to my mother at the time, it took the State Department two years to find out and complete this investigation. So she didn't come, actually, until 1951. So we were here living with my aunts and uncles for two years.

LEVINE: Wow. And where were you living those two years?

DI SPIGNA: I—I was living with my brother, Michael, with an aunt and uncle in Brooklyn, New York in the Red Hook [PH] section. And my youngest brother, Louis, he was living in Brooklyn in King—in a neighborhood called King's Highway, West 13<sup>th</sup> Street and King's Highway.

LEVINE: And who was he living with?

DI SPIGNA: He was living with another uncle, which was my—one of my mother's brothers. And me and my brother, Michael, were living with my mother's sister and her husband.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Wow. So just if—do you know any more about—I mean, what was it? Your mother had to vote.

DI SPIGNA: Yeah, it was mandatory—

LEVINE: And then—

DI SPIGNA: —for everybody to vote, if—even if you were disabled. The—they provided transportation for you. They came over to your house, picked you up, bring you to the voting polls, and then bring you back home. Everybody had to vote, regardless, you know. They didn't tell you which party to vote but it was mandatory for everyone to vote. So as a result of that, I guess when she started processing the—through the Immigration Department, they—they knew that she voted so it was just a—a—a part of the investigation that wasn't done from the very beginning. So they held her back to conclude that part of the investigation. I guess if she had voted Communist—you know, it was during the Cold War after World War II—I guess they would have held

her back, you know, significantly, but it took them two years for the State Department to be satisfied that she could come here.

LEVINE: Well, it's kind of different that—that somebody would—would investigate who you voted for—

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat]

LEVINE: —or how you voted.

DI SPIGNA: Well, that—

LEVINE: That seems—

DI SPIGNA: To the best of my knowledge—

LEVINE: Yeah.

DI SPIGNA: —that was the—that was the—that was the problem that held my mother back.

LEVINE: Wow. Okay, so she was back then. Now—and your father was back there too.

DI SPIGNA: Yeah, my father was back there too.

LEVINE: Now, it was your mother's family and your mother's decision, I guess, that—that the family would come too—

DI SPIGNA: Right. But she had to persuade my father also, you know.

LEVINE: How did he feel about it? Do you remember?

DI SPIGNA: Well, he was never really happy because he was a native of the island, you know, and his whole family was on the island. But he wasn't—you know, he was at work all—we'd—we—we made our living by growing grapes and having a—a vintage and there was so much land. And I think he—he read through the—through my mother's mind that there wasn't really enough there. And if we had—the whole family would have to stay there, that we'd wind up being separated, going all over—all over the place to work anyway in different countries, Argentina, Australia, Africa. My father m—he went to work in Africa when I was young, I remember, to supplement the family income.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DI SPIGNA: So, you have to remember, during—just before the war broke out [clears throat], I mean, history tells—I learned that over here in American history, when I took up world history—75 percent of the people in Italy were unemployed. To date, there's more Italians living outside of Italy than there're living in Italy. Whether it's Mexico, Argentina, Australia, Germany, they're all over the place.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. When your father went to Africa—

DI SPIGNA: He went there to work.

LEVINE: What did he do there? Do you know?

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] I don't know if he did that all the time but I remember when he had come back he was working, supposedly, at a theater as a ticket seller, selling theater tickets.

LEVINE: Hmm. Do you know which country in Africa he went to, by any chance?

DI SPIGNA: I think it was Ethiopia.

LEVINE: Ethiopia, I was just going to say. I think that—

DI SPIGNA: Right.

LEVINE: Did a lo—did other people from the island go too? Was that [unclear]—

DI SPIGNA: Most of the people from the island—I don't know if they went to Africa but I know a lot of people went to Argentina. My oldest brother went to Argentina to work. And a lot of them went to work on ships [clears throat] that, you know, they navigated the cargo ships, not passenger liners, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: And—

LEVINE: Like Merchant Marine?

DI SPIGNA: Merchant Marine, right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Wow. So when you think about those 11 years when you were there, wh—what are the things you remember most about it?

DI SPIGNA: Well, I—I remember—it was like a—a farm. I was like a little farm boy. You know, we never really had breakfast or lunch. We just really had dinner, you know. Our breakfast consisted of going into the vineyards and eating grapes and figs and apples and plums and peaches. You—and that was basically [clears throat] our diet. And once—once a day, we'd sit down and we'd—we would have dinner. Other than that, there were no snacks or no Burger Kings or McDonalds—

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DI SPIGNA: —or anything like that, you know.

LEVINE: Did you go to school?

DI SPIGNA: I went to school. Matter of fact, I got my first pair of shoes when I went to school.

LEVINE: Wow.

DI SPIGNA: We used to walk to school, about—I would say about three or four miles.

LEVINE: And do you remember the schoolhouse?

DI SPIGNA: Yes. It was right on—overlooking the ocean next to a church. And it was really a nice—really nice place. And when I went to school over there, when you started in the first grade, you got stuck with the same teacher all the way up to the fifth grade. So if you didn't like your teacher, [chuckles] you had problems.

LEVINE: Did you like yours?

DI SPIGNA: Yeah, he was pretty good.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DI SPIGNA: Matter of fact, his own son was in the—in the class, right. And I went up—all the way up to the—I did two months of the fifth grade. And he—his—his son got beatings right in the classroom. I mean, nobody else got beatings but his son did.

LEVINE: Wow, huh, huh. And were the girls in there too?

DI SPIGNA: No, this was just for boys. The girls went into a different building.

LEVINE: Was it a religious school? Was it a—

DI SPIGNA: No. No, it was a public school.

LEVINE: Public school. And how about comparing it with the school once you got here? How—how would you say it compared?

DI SPIGNA: I—I found the schools over there were more—more advanced because when I came here—I did two months of the fifth grade there. And when I came here—well, I had a—you know, a communication problem. But when I came here they put me in a class in the morning to learn English. And then in the afternoon, they put me in a regular fifth grade class.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DI SPIGNA: But I remember, in a regular fifth grade class, we were doing, like, mathematics or arithmetic. I was doing, like—compared to the other kids that were—were in the class, they were doing—they were doing, like, work that I did already mathematically in the third grade, sort of.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DI SPIGNA: So it was more advanced and I found that the teachers were more disciplined or—than over here.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. And how about religion? Was your family religious?

DI SPIGNA: Yeah, we were. We're Roman Catholics.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And do—do you remember any celebrations in particular that you had in Italy?

DI SPIGNA: Yeah, we used to cel—[clears throat] the island and the town where I came from, we had St. Vito. That was the patron saint of the town. And we used to celebrate St. Vito every year like we celebrate our birthday here. Over there, they don't celebrate your birthday. They celebrate your saint day.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: So [clears throat] it was a—you know, it was followed by a feast and presents and everything.

LEVINE: So were there a lot of Vitos in town?

DI SPIGNA: Yeah, a lot of Vitos. Right.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] One of the rituals that—celebration was that everybody—your name was Vito on that day, everybody would come over to you and grab you by the ears and shake the hell out of you. Pull on your ears.

LEVINE: They were pulling on your ears—is a good thing, I take it.

DI SPIGNA: Right.

LEVINE: Yeah. [laughs] Uh-huh. I see. So what—what kind of—what—what would—what would be, like the fes—like, what would you do? Would you have music? Would you have—

DI SPIGNA: No, basically, we'd just have a feast and they would have regular concessions, you know, along the main street in town. And they'd bring the saint out and have a big procession. And then they'd—you know, people would give—something like an Italian feast over here in America. And then they would bring the saint back and they'll throw confettis all over the place and all the little kids would be picking up the confettis. And then they'd go home and have dinner or you have something to eat at the—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: —the concessions or from the vendors that were along the main street.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: As a kid, that's what I remember. I guess if you were an adult, you know, you would go to a restaurant someplace.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Well, now, you became a police officer. What was the policing like in—in your—in your island? Do you remember that as a little boy?

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] Yeah. On the island, I remember. Yeah, over there, all the policeman basically are, like, federalized. You have no town police or village police or county police or state police like here. Over there, the police are like federal police. And that's probably most other countries in Europe. I was in Korea in the Army and it was basically the same thing. The police were actually the federal government and

they policed the towns, the states, the counties, everything. It was a little bit different than what the setup is over here. Over here, I guess we're more prone to have—we lean towards a home rule thing. You know?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: We want to rule our own town, rule our own county, our own village, let's say. As a result, we have a million police departments.

LEVINE: Right, right. Well, were the policemen that you encountered as a little boy—were they people from your area? Or—

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] No.

LEVINE: —they were brought in or—

DI SPIGNA: No, they were from all over. They'd transfer you all over. Matter of fact, my s—my older sister married a policeman and he was—he was maybe from about a three-hour train ride from Naples. So he came—he was—he wasn't born and raised on the island. To him, it was like going from the cold north of Italy down to the south part of Italy.

LEVINE: Hmm, yeah.

DI SPIGNA: And they didn't give him much choice as to where they went anyway, I guess.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DI SPIGNA: In those days. You know, I—I assume then they came out with a seniority system and they probably do much better now.

LEVINE: Well, were they—were—were the policeman looked up to in your town?

DI SPIGNA: Very much so. Right. [clears throat] They were the sole authority, so they were—they were the symbol of authority. Nobody else was around.

LEVINE: Well, I—I assume the priest was important.

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat]

LEVINE: Right?

DI SPIGNA: Yeah, there were—yeah, as far as the church is concerned, they were the authority amongst the church. Right. But the policemen were more respected, [chuckles] I think.

LEVINE: Than the—[chuckles]

DI SPIGNA: Right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And were there any other—other people in town that were either looked up to or—

DI SPIGNA: Yes, mostly the—[clears throat] mostly, the business people and the law—lawyers and the doctors. There was really no big hospital in—on island. Every—if had a—need an operation or a major illness, they would ferry you over to Naples over there where they had the hospitals. Naples was the biggest city. Other than that, you're—everything was really actually imported on the island. You know, most of the goods. The only thing you had on the island was agricultural, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. So, like, were there a lot of home remedies used for, like, if—

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat]

LEVINE: —if you had something wrong with you?

DI SPIGNA: Yeah, well, they had all kinds of remedies, especially the old folks. They had all kinds of remedies for a cold or a fever, a sore. I really don't remember the specifics of them. But they did have a lot of home remedies. I mean, all of us were born, actually, at home. They had—they really didn't have doctors delivering babies, you know. You had a—

LEVINE: Midwife?

DI SPIGNA: —woman come over to assist in the birth.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: And that's it.

LEVINE: Was it like a midwife or was it like a neighbor?

DI SPIGNA: A [clears throat] midwife.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Uh-huh.

DI SPIGNA: But mostly, neighbors. They—I mean, they—it wasn't hard to find. You could find a—amongst five neighbors, you could find at least one or two midwives, you know.

LEVINE: Who knew, uh-huh.

DI SPIGNA: Right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Wow. Let's see. And what—what did you do for fun? Do you remember, like, games or sports?

DI SPIGNA: Yeah, well, we used to—we used to—well, the adults mostly played bocce ball, you know. And we—the kids got to play bocce balls after the adults got done. You know, they went to sleep during the afternoon, had siesta time. And the boys would play with the bocce ball. Another boys' game—oh, girls too, I guess—we used to call it—it was something like baseball or, you know, play with ball—with a ball and a bat. Used to call it mazzo a [PH] pizzo. And it was like a—a big stick and a small stick. You—you'd throw the small stick in the air and you hit it with the big stick. And somebody would catch it, right, and you'd be running around. They'll tag you as you run around.

LEVINE: With bases?

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat]

LEVINE: You ran around bases?

DI SPIGNA: It wasn't really bases. It was like a circle.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DI SPIGNA: But you had to make the full circle. You had to—

LEVINE: S—say it again, the name of it.

DI SPIGNA: Mazzo a pizzo.

LEVINE: Can you spell?

DI SPIGNA: Yeah, it's—mazzo's the big stick. M-A-Z-Z-O. And pizzo is P-I-Z-Z-O

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

DI SPIGNA: Another game we used to play is, if we get enough guys—not so much the girls, mostly a boys’ game—get enough guys together and you line up in a circle. And whoever was wearing a belt would take off his belt and he would walk around. Everybody would stand in a circle with their hands behind their back. And the guy with the belt will walk around behind you. And if he gives you the belt [clears throat], right, that means you have to turn around and start hitting the guy on your right hand side. And the guy on your right hand side, he’d be—he’ll have to run around the full circle. And if he was a slow runner, he’d be getting a beating with that belt, you know, until you come to the place where he was standing to begin with. That was another game.

LEVINE: What was that one called?

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat]

LEVINE: You probably haven’t thought about that game for a while but—

DI SPIGNA: No. [laughter] I really don’t remember, to be honest with you.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DI SPIGNA: But that was a popular game because sometimes we used to do that. We used to have the same game in school in the summertime. The teachers sometimes would take us out in the field for recreation, and I remember that was one of games that we used to play.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DI SPIGNA: It was a lot of laughs, you know, make people laugh.

LEVINE: Did—do you remember that time fondly? I mean, do—those 11 years?

DI SPIGNA: Oh, I—

LEVINE: The early years?

DI SPIGNA: I remember the—I remember like it was yesterday.

LEVINE: And d—did you think you had a happy childhood, would you say?

DI SPIGNA: Oh, very much so. I mean, we didn’t have much toys. It was—it was—it was a different life, you know. It was a different era. It was a different culture. But as a kid, you know, you—you remember all these happy things, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: Well, actually, as you get older they say you tend to remember all the good things. You don't have any bad things. But as a child, you know, there wasn't really that many bad things, you know. I guess if— if I grew up there as an adult I probably would have more negative memories, but as a child, I didn't have any bad memories at all. I remember walking on the beach and you could see for miles. You know, nobody on the beach,

LEVINE: Hmm.

DI SPIGNA: Was just farms and you think you—you owned the whole island, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DI SPIGNA: And some of my older brothers went back. They tell me that it's all built up now and you have to find a public walkway to get to the beach, which is kind of ludicrous to me, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Maybe it's better you don't see it. [laughter]

DI SPIGNA: That's—that's what I keep telling 'em. [laughter]

LEVINE: Well, did you ever go to Naples when you—before you left for—

DI SPIGNA: No, the first time I went to Naples is when I had to board the boat, the Volcano.

LEVINE: Ah.

DI SPIGNA: And my [chuckles]—my mother's oldest brother was living in Naples, and he was the captain of the ferry. They used to go from the island to Naples. So for the fir—we went to board the plane the—the day before we went to Naples and we stayed with my aunt and uncle. And my mother was with us, and my father and I never forget, I had to go to bathroom, right. And on the island we used to go to bathroom in the woods, you know. And I had told my mother. I whispered in her ear that I had to go to the bathroom, you know. And she showed me where to go and, you know, and—and I saw a toilet bowl and a sink. And this was all new to me, you know. And it's really kind of an experience, you know. And then I had to ask for the toilet paper. I don't even know whether they called it that. I mean, we never really

used toilet paper as kids on the island, to be very honest with you. We used to grab the big fig leaves and use them.

LEVINE: Ah. [chuckles] So—so—

DI SPIGNA: It sounds so backwards, I know, but—

LEVINE: Well, that was a—

DI SPIGNA: But that was—that was—

LEVINE: —simple life, huh?

DI SPIGNA: That was—

LEVINE: Yeah.

DI SPIGNA: That was a kid's life, you know.

LEVINE: Wow. So do you remember—like, did you know anything about this country? D—were you thinking or feeling anything when you knew you were—

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat]

LEVINE: —going to come here?

DI SPIGNA: No. The only thing I learned about this country was basically through my mother. She—she really started b—prepping, you know, for a couple of months there before we made the trip. And she started preparing us for the trip psychologically. I mean—

LEVINE: How did she do it?

DI SPIGNA: I mean, I only realized that after—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DI SPIGNA: Afterwards, you know. And she told me that in America, you know, they have all kinds of free chocolate and candies, and the streets were lined with money and coins and all this here. And it was like a big fantasyland. You know, how could you reject something like that, you know? So she created this picture in our mind and this is what America was to me, you know. So [clears throat] I was anxious to—to come here when—with—with that in mind, you know. But it was really

a shock [chuckles] after I got here. Later on, when I went to college, I wrote a paper for English. And a matter of fact, I brought it with me.

LEVINE: Oh, great! That's wonderful.

DI SPIGNA: And it was—the teacher wanted a childhood experience in a descriptive essay form. Right?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: So I—I wrote that for college and I—and I wrote about my trip to America. And that—almost everybody that read it—I mean, ev—everybody fell in love with—this is looking at America through an 11-year-old's eyes, you know, and the entire trip, the voyage coming over and how I got seasick. And—and when I came here, like, everything was a first, you know. The big, tall buildings were a first. The subways were a first. Snow was a first, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: And this is an experience that an 11-year-old is experiencing for the first time.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DI SPIGNA: And my teacher fell in love with it. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, wow. Wow. Well, I—I hope I can get a copy of that for your file.

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] Yeah, I can—

LEVINE: If you don't mind.

DI SPIGNA: I have a copy over here you can have.

LEVINE: Great. Okay, I'll copy it then. Okay, well, just before we leave the island, let's just say—do you remember your grandparents? Do you have any memories with them?

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat]

LEVINE: How they were with you?

DI SPIGNA: I only remember my grandmothers. My grandfathers died very young. They didn't die young, actually, but one of them died young. I never knew them. And the one on my father's side, he died when—I

understand, when he was 75. But to be honest with you, I don't remember.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. But your grandmothers, you remember them?

DI SPIGNA: I remember both of my grandmothers.

LEVINE: And what do you remember about them?

DI SPIGNA: On my mother's side, my grandmother, her name was Guyatano Di Mayo [PH], and she was a very tall woman, tall, skinny woman. All my uncles on my mother's side, my mother's brothers, they were all tall people. And on my father's side, my father's mother was very short. And most of the—most of my uncles on my father's side are kind of short too.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did they wear black? Were they—

DI SPIGNA: Yeah, they wore black on the—they wore black for at least a year when they were mourning someone. That was the culture.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DI SPIGNA: And after a year, then you don't have to wear black anymore.

LEVINE: Was there anything else that they did that you remember that was kind of a cultural thing that—that was part of that place?

DI SPIGNA: The grandmothers?

LEVINE: Or even your mother. Anybody that—any kind of either custom—

DI SPIGNA: Not—

LEVINE: —dress, attitudes?

DI SPIGNA: The only thing that I remember is, as far as my grandparents, like when—when [clears throat]—when people die over there on the island, I was told, anyway, that—I remember seeing—I went to visit my grandfather in the cemetery. And he was in the—he was in the cloister. You know, he wasn't buried in the ground.

LEVINE: Right.

DI SPIGNA: And I was—I was told that that's not really my grandfather in there. It was just my grandfather's bones. And then it was explained to me that

on the island, they bury you for five years, and after five years they sort of exhume you and they just preserve the bones. And they put the bones in the cloister.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DI SPIGNA: And they say they did that for—basically, to preserve space.

LEVINE: Oh. Was there a photo of him? Because I know sometimes—

DI SPIGNA: I do have a—I have a—a computerized photo. I—I don't have it with me.

LEVINE: No. But I mean, like, on his—on his—

DI SPIGNA: No. Just—just his name, the date, the date that he was born—the year that he was born and the year that he died.

LEVINE: Hmm, hmm. Let's see. Okay. And how about your mother? If—can you remember, like, what she was like, her temperament when you were little, growing up?

DI SPIGNA: Oh, well [clears throat] the only thing I remember, basically, my mother, she—half the time, she was always yelling at us and—because she used to accuse us of never listening to her. But she used to call names. You know, you can picture this woman with 13 kids, you know. She always used to call Vito and—

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DI SPIGNA: But Vito wasn't there. Michael was there, you know.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DI SPIGNA: She never got the names right, you know. I personally think she would have been better off if she'd designed a numbering system.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DI SPIGNA: But [clears throat] we used to have a lot of laughs because she would never get the right names. And then she'd finally say, "You!" You know.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DI SPIGNA: Whoever was there. And we used to laugh. But she was—she had a big, tough job of being a homemaker, you know, cooking every day and—and make—trying to make ends meet. She used to raise chicken, used to raise rabbits and sometimes used to raise pigs, you know. And that was basically, all these things, this was to supplement our diet, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: And I remember sometimes, she used to go to—have to go to the well to get water because our well used to go dry. And she—she has to we—had to walk two, three miles and carry the water to the house. When I got a little bit older, in the summertime when our well went dry, she used to send us to the well. And I never forget it; I had to bring the guy who owned the well who had water, I had to bring him two gallons of wine and he used to give us a gallon of water.

LEVINE: Oh, wow.

DI SPIGNA: Some exchange that was, huh? [laughter]

LEVINE: Okay. We're going to pause here while Kevin turns the tape.

DI SPIGNA: Sure.

LEVINE: And then we'll continue.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: Okay. We're continuing here. How about other chores that you did as a little boy before you came here?

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] My main chores be—when I was on the island was to go out to the fields and pick grass and took out big, tall grass in bundles. Like over here, you would—farm boy would go out and draw hay with a tractor. Over there, you go out and you picked the—the grass by hand so you could bring it back home and feed the rabbits and the—the horse. We used to have a—a mule, actually, with a wagon. And all the young ones, like the—my age, that was our responsibility, to bring home enough grass. And sometimes, we used to go mushrooming and pick chestnuts into the woods. And basically, that—those were our chores, feeding the rabbits and the chickens and the horse.

LEVINE: Hmm. And where did you fall on the line of children?

DI SPIGNA: I [chuckles]—I think I'm number nine.

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh.

DI SPIGNA: All right. There's four younger brothers.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DI SPIGNA: Younger than I am.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So—all right—so some of your brothers and sisters were—

DI SPIGNA: Much older.

LEVINE: —much older.

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] Right.

LEVINE: Yeah, right. Okay. So you went to Naples. And were there things in Naples that struck you as new and different?

DI SPIGNA: Oh, yes. The whole city, you know. To me, it was like one big crowd, you know. The only thing that resembled so many people in one place was the town's piazza, the—the plaza where people used to gather there and—in the afternoons or in the evenings. That was about the only thing. But the—the cars and the traffic and the big, tall building, that was just a new experience to me.

LEVINE: So you hadn't seen cars on the island either by then?

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] No, the only thing I remember seeing, basically, was buses. There used to—

LEVINE: On the island?

DI SPIGNA: Yeah. There used to—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DI SPIGNA: —be buses.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DI SPIGNA: Not too many cars.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DI SPIGNA: Was mostly horse and wagon.

LEVINE: Hmm, hmm. So let's see. So did you stay in Naples?

DI SPIGNA: We stayed in Naples overnight.

LEVINE: Oh, because your mother ca—did your mother go to Naples with you?

DI SPIGNA: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

DI SPIGNA: Yeah, we stayed in Naples overnight with my uncle and my mother and father. Then the next day, we—we boarded the ship.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And let's see. And had—do you think—well, you mentioned a little bit about the ship. You were seasick.

DI SPIGNA: Yes.

LEVINE: Right. And was there anything else that happened aboard ship that you remember, particularly?

DI SPIGNA: Well, the only thing I remember, basically, is that—I, basically, remember the sh—the trip through my younger brother. He was the only one who didn't get seasick. Me and my older brother, Michael, were the ones that got seasick. And my younger brother, he used to—he used to go to the dining room and bring us oranges and lemons, which were supposed to have been good for you if you get seasick, because we didn't make too many meals [chuckles], me and my brother. [clears throat] And every time we went up there, we went up on deck, most of the times it was bad weather to begin with. This is the—the month of November.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DI SPIGNA: I think we left there on November 16<sup>th</sup> and we didn't get here until November 27<sup>th</sup>. So it was kind of winter and I remember it took two days to go near the Rock of Gibraltar, through Gibraltar, which was really bad weather there. As far as the ship was concerned, all I remember was the smell of diesel and the smell of food and some—sometimes, somebody—somebody cooks, some employees over

there. They fished off the boat. I don't know how they did it but they caught some fish. That's all I remember.

LEVINE: Hmm. How come you three were chosen to be the ones to go, you and your—your two brothers who did come?

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] Well, there were—us three was—the reason we were chosen in that age bracket and not so—it wasn't really much of a—a choice, they had a—the State Department here [clears throat] had a law on the books at the time, just before World War II broke out, that any American citizens who were born overseas, which was my—my mother, right. She was one year old when she went over there, or I should say when my grandmother took her over there. She—during that—during that period of time, me and my two brothers were born just before the war. And that made us eligible to become American citizens through my mother. They call that a derivative citizenship. So as a result, we had—we had a choice, you know, being Italian citizens—actually, we were both Italian citizen and American citizens because of [clears throat] my mother. After the war bro—broke out, they did away with that law but, during that period, regardless, me and my two brothers were born. So we could claim American citizenship through my mother. So my mother was an American citizen and us three actually were American citizen. We came here with an American passport. That was the easiest way and the fastest—

LEVINE: Hmm.

DI SPIGNA: —way to process through Immigration, except for that my mother's investigation wasn't through and she—and they wanted to find out who she voted for and she was delayed for two years. There wouldn't have been no other problem. The rest of the family had to process—my other brothers and sisters and my father actually had to process through Immigration as Italian citizens. So they had to go through the entire gamut of the immigration process and that's why it took longer.

LEVINE: But didn't you have older brothers who would also have fallen under your mother's—

DI SPIGNA: No. [clears throat]

LEVINE: No. Oh.

DI SPIGNA: Because they only—they only had that law on the books for a certain period of time.

LEVINE: Oh, oh. I see.

DI SPIGNA: It wasn't, you know, up until—

LEVINE: Right.

DI SPIGNA: —World War II they had it on the books all the time. It was just for a certain period of time in the '30s. I don't know the exact year but I know my brother, Michael, was born in 1936. I was born in 1938 and my brother, Louis, was born in 1940. Only us three were eligible. So it had to be somewhere in the late '30s—

LEVINE: Yeah.

DI SPIGNA: —up until 1940, maybe '41. Who knows?

LEVINE: Well, how did you feel about finding out that your mother wasn't going, and leaving your mother?

DI SPIGNA: Oh, we—we were disappointed but, you know, she assured us that she was going to be on—

LEVINE: Oh.

DI SPIGNA: —on the next ship, [laughs] on the next trip, which would have been a matter of, you know—

LEVINE: Yeah.

DI SPIGNA: —three, four weeks.

LEVINE: Right, right. Okay. So you remembered coming into the New York harbor?

DI SPIGNA: Actually, to back up a little bit.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DI SPIGNA: She actually believed this, that, you know, that, how long is it going to take for them to check out something like that?

LEVINE: Yeah.

DI SPIGNA: You know, so she figured that she would be in America within a month and she was going to be right behind us. I mean, had she known that it would have been two years, I'm sure she would have kept us back, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah. But—but the plan was that your father would stay there—

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] Yeah, my—

LEVINE: —and with the other children.

DI SPIGNA: —father had to stay there anyway because he wasn't eligible to come over.

LEVINE: Right. Okay.

DI SPIGNA: Right. The only pe—the only ones in the family that were actually eligible, if you follow the immigration process, was my mother and my—

LEVINE: And the three of you.

DI SPIGNA: —me and my two brothers, right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Okay. Okay. So do you remember coming into the New York harbor when the ship came in?

DI SPIGNA: Oh, definitely. Right. [clears throat] I definitely remember walking up on the—on deck over there. And I looked up and I saw what they—to me, what looked like manmade mountains, you know. They looked tremendous, you know, big, tall buildings and I was—I was in awe, you know. And I had also remembered the—the ship. I had make—mentioned in the—the article that when the ship was in the ocean, looked like a little guppy. And then when it came back into the New York harbor in front of the landscape, you know, it came to its original whale size.

LEVINE: [laughs] Okay. So you got there and you came into a pier.

DI SPIGNA: Right. We were told—seven hours later, we were told—we finally got off the ship and we were told that our luggage was going to be on a pier on the—the last name—you had letters, under the letters of the last name. So our last name was Di Spigna so we went on a pier and we started looking for the letter “D.” I mean, there were huge letters, maybe about 10 foot wide and 10 foot long, hanging from the ceiling, so you really couldn't miss it. So when we finally got to the letter “D,” we stayed there and it was just a matter of minutes when my aunt and uncle came over. And my mother had provided us with pictures of my aunt and uncle. And we were to study the pictures and make sure that we—it was our aunt and uncle that was going to take us home and

nobody else, you know. So we took out the pictures and we started looking at these people, and they started laughing and everything. So then when we were satisfied that they were my aunt and uncle, we put the pictures away and we hugged and kissed them and they said, "Come on. We have to go and take the subway," you know.

LEVINE: Well, you had never seen this aunt and uncle. Or you had?

DI SPIGNA: No.

LEVINE: No. And—and so how old was Michael?

DI SPIGNA: He was two years older than me. He was 13.

LEVINE: And—

DI SPIGNA: Louis was two years younger.

LEVINE: Oh.

DI SPIGNA: He was about nine.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DI SPIGNA: Nine and a half.

LEVINE: So then you took the subway. And what—what did you—how was that—

DI SPIGNA: We took the subway trip and [clears throat] I'll never forget. We went into what I call a tunnel and went in the—in the subway station and heard this big noise, you know, rumbling on. And my uncle told me, "Here it comes." And he grabbed me by the hand, you know, and [clears throat] these boxcars went right by us, you know. Finally, they came to a stop, and my uncle took us into the car and said to sit down right away because we're about to move, you know. So we sat down and you couldn't hardly hear yourself talk so every—every time the train came to a stop my uncle would hold so many fingers up, indicating how many more stops before we get to—to the house. And this is how, basically, we communicated, you know. And while I was on the subway, why, I got another first for me. A passenger that come into the car from the other car, right, and I was all excited, you know. And my—and I'm—and I'm pointing at him and—and I'm hitting my uncle on the side, you know. And I'm pointing at the guy, and my uncle grabs my hand and pushes it down, and he says, "Don't point at him," in Italian. "Don't point at him." It was a black man. And I had

never seen a black man before. And we spent the rest of the trip staring at this black man. [clears throat] And then we finally came to the stop where we had to go, and we got off the train and we head towards the other end of the station there, at the end of the platform. And I—you could see there was lights—some light coming through. So we knew—I knew we were going outside. And we get up outside on top of the stairs and it was all white. [clears throat] And my uncle said, “That’s nava,” [PH], you know, which means snow in Italian. I said, “What’s that?” You know, and it was cold, you know. I says, “What’s that?” He says, “You’re going to see a lot more of that.” He said, “We get a lot of snow over here. It’s not like Italy where you come from, nice and warm and everything.” And as we approached the house there, he says, “That’s the house over there.” He says, “Two years ago, we had a big blizzard,” and he’s pointing to the top of the windows. We used to—he used to have an apar—walk-in apartment in a three-family brownstone. You walked down about three, four steps. And he’s pointing to the top of the windows. He said, “Two years ago, the snow buried the windows.” [laughs] And that was the blizzard of ’40—1947. [chuckles]

- LEVINE: Wow. Had your—how long had your aunt and uncle been in this country? Do you know?
- DI SPIGNA: Oh, they were here a long, long, long time. I—I really don’t know how many—
- LEVINE: Uh-huh.
- DI SPIGNA: —years but they were here a long time.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh, so—
- DI SPIGNA: Because already they spoke English and everything and they never really went to school here for it, you know. They learned it, I guess—
- LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.
- DI SPIGNA: —when they were at work.
- LEVINE: Yeah. So in a way, they became your mother and father—
- DI SPIGNA: For two years.
- LEVINE: —for two years.

DI SPIGNA: Two years, that's wh—that's the way we were living, like my mother and father and—

LEVINE: And how were they to you?

DI SPIGNA: They were pretty good. They were—my uncle was sort of a disciplinar—good disciplinarian, you know. He was tough. And—but other than that, they had no kids of their own.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DI SPIGNA: So basically, this was an experience for them also. You know? So I guess everything that they pictured their kids should have been, this is what they wanted us to do.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: We'd—we were pretty—as far as I'm concerned, we were pretty good kids too. We went to school, came back home, did homework. After school, we sold the shopping bags. Later on, we shined shoes, you know. We tried to help out with the income and everything.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Were you ever a newsboy, by any chance?

DI SPIGNA: Not while I was living with my uncle, no. We used to basically—I remember on Saturdays we used to buy shopping bags, the ones with the handles, that paper bag with the handles. We used to buy 'em for two and a half cents and sell 'em in—in the neighborhood. There was a big street over there where you had street vendors there selling fruits and vegetables. We used to go there and, on the average every Saturday, I used to sell about 250 bags. Yeah.

LEVINE: And how much did you sell them for?

DI SPIGNA: Five cents each.

LEVINE: Hmm.

DI SPIGNA: Must have made, like, 50 percent profit, 100 percent profit, actually.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So you went to school soon after you got here?

DI SPIGNA: Yeah, we went to school within a week, basically. Just a matter of registering. And my older brother, Michael, he sort of got left back in Italy, not because he was a bad kid or anything like that. But he had gone away with my married sister, where she used to live in—in a

place called Avalino [PH]. And he missed, like—he missed, like, half of the year's school. When he came back, they put him in the same class as me, so we both wind up in the fifth grade when we're here. And both of us were in the same English class in the morning. And then in the afternoon we went into the third grade but we were in different classes there. And in the morning we were the—actually, the class that we were in were all foreign kids, you know, whether you came from Italy or whether you came from Sweden or Germany. Nobody really spoke English. The only one who spoke English was the teacher and she would not speak to you in Italian or German, even if she did. Everything was in English. And she basically started us like she started the kindergarten class, you know. Go through the alphabets and get a book and go through magazine and under the letter "A" you cut out every item that you can find under the letter "A," like airplane, airport, "B," like boy, basketball. Things like that, and that's how we started out. And then in the afternoon after lunch, we usually went to regular class. I mean, you know, we had a communication problem. But slowly, we picked up a little bit at a time and after a while, you know, we didn't have to go to the English class anymore. We just—we got assigned to a regular class the whole day long.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And did you h—ever have a—a teacher that particularly took you under her wing and helped you?

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] I think they—I think they were all—they were all helpful. And they were all—ah, they—they were all—[clears throat] actually, they would all empathize with you. They'd try to—they'd tried to help you in every—every which way, you know. But at the same time, you know, they had about 30 other kids to deal with, you know. So they didn't really have much time to be one-on-one teachers, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: But they—they did their very best. They did good.

LEVINE: Yeah. Were they mostly unmarried women at that point in time?

DI SPIGNA: Who, the teachers?

LEVINE: Teachers.

DI SPIGNA: I [clears throat] really—I doubt it very much because most of the teachers that I remember, they kind of were up in age, you know, 40, 50s, you know.

LEVINE: Mmm.

DI SPIGNA: I—there weren't too many young teachers that I remember. I—

LEVINE: But I mean spinster ladies that never married. That was true at one point.

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] I really wouldn't know.

LEVINE: You were—didn't even think about that, huh?

DI SPIGNA: No.

LEVINE: Okay, so—let's see. So how long did you stay in school then?

DI SPIGNA: I stayed in school [clears throat] through high school, basically. And after high school, I had—in high school, actually, I had taken up plumbing. I went to a vocational school. I had three years of plumbing and, after that, I went to work in construction as an apprentice plumber, went into the union. I spent, actually, five years of an apprenticeship program as an apprentice plumber. But during the five years, in—in the interim, I went away in the Army for two years. And if you had gone in the Army, in the service, you only have to do four years of an apprenticeship rather than five. So when I came back, [clears throat] only did two, basically, two more years of apprenticeship. And then I became a journeyman plumber and, the same year, I got married. I was 25 years old and I moved out from my mother and father's house and got my own apartment.

LEVINE: We—how did you meet your wife?

DI SPIGNA: Ah, [chuckles] actually, I met my wife—actually, I knew about my wife before I really met her. It was kind of weird but I was in Korea. I had a couple of friends, I used to hang out—very close, three or four friends. And one of my friends started writing to me about these two girls that he had met at a dance, you know. And one of them actually, later on, actually was my wife. So he started telling me about them, how he liked them. So he dated my wife and then he started dating the other one. Right? So when we came—[clears throat] when I got discharged and came back, we had gone to the same church dance on 61<sup>st</sup> Street and 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The name of the church was St.—was Regina Pades [PH]. So lo and behold, while we're hanging around the dance there, he points out to the two girls that he had dated, and it was my wife and her girlfriend dancing over there. He said, "Do you want to do and dance with them? Let's go and break them up and we'll dance," you know. And he said, "That's Lillian and the other

one's Lorraine." He says, "You want to dance with Lillian?" He said, "I—you know, I tol—I told her all about you and everything." So I said, "Okay." So we went up to the dance floor and I tapped her on the shoulder, said, "Hi," and we started dancing. And I said, "My name is Vito. Does that ring a bell?" And she said, "Yes, that rings a bell." Said, "Barney told me about you. You were in Korea," blah, blah, blah. And this is basically how we met.

LEVINE: Hmm. Yeah.

DI SPIGNA: We dated for about three years and, after three years, we—we got married.

LEVINE: And what was your wife's full name? Maiden name?

DI SPIGNA: Her maiden name was—first name was Lillian. Her maiden name was Bucci—B-U-C-C-I. Her mother and father also are from Italy in a town called Bari. That's—

LEVINE: Ah.

DI SPIGNA: —north of Naples.

LEVINE: Right. The chocolates. Is that the one?

DI SPIGNA: No.

LEVINE: No?

DI SPIGNA: That's Bachi [PH]. [clears throat]

LEVINE: Isn't there a Bari—

DI SPIGNA: Name is Bari. B-A-R-I.

LEVINE: Okay.

DI SPIGNA: The chocolates are—you are thinking about the Bachi chocolates?

LEVINE: I think there's another chocolate but [chuckles] I wouldn't swear to it.

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] There probably is.

LEVINE: [chuckles] All right. Well, okay. So then, just—well, just to back a little bit, how do you think about your military service now, looking back on it?

DI SPIGNA: [unclear], oh, it was a great experience. I—actually, I was—I had—at the time that I went in, they were really drafting people left and right. I had volunteered to push up the draft, right, so actually, I volunteered for the draft. [clears throat] I didn't want to volunteer and do three years. I only wanted to do two years and get it over with. But being that I was in an apprenticeship program with the plumbing industry, I figured, 'Let me go into the Army and get it over while I'm making a little money or less money, rather than after I become a journeyman and I'll be making top money, and then go into the service.' I said—I figured that would be a waste, you know. And I figured, 'Why don't I go in the Army?' I might as well try to pick up part of the trade and continue learning the trade while I was in the Army. So I had done sort of—kind of done that in basic training. You know, the sergeant in basic training, he had me do this. He—he teamed me up with a plumber that was responsible for maintaining the barracks. And I did that and I got out of a lot of things that, you know, really wasn't important training. But after I got out of basic training, I had to volunteer to go to plumbing school. Normally, the—after basic training, the second eight weeks are supposed to be the training for eight weeks are actually going to do for the rest of your career while in the service. So I volunteered to go to plumbing school. [clears throat] So I get my orders and my orders read "PMGS, Fort Gordon, Georgia." So I said, "What's"—I figured PMGS must be—stand for Plumbing Maintenance General School. That was a surprise to me. It wasn't plumbing maintenance. It was Provost Marshall [PH] General School, [chuckles] which was the military police school. [laughs] So then I really learned that, whatever you volunteer for, you'll never get in the military. As any rate, I went to military police school for eight weeks and then they stationed me in Fort Lee, Virginia. I was there for six months and then I got shipped to Korea, which was only an 11-month tour. Most people who got drafted, there wasn't enough time to do a tour in Europe, which was normally 18 to 24 months. So if you got drafted, and the chances are you'll wind up Korea or Japan. So I wound up in Korea.

LEVINE: Hmm, uh-hmm. And d—and you think it was a good experience because of the military police part of it or—

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat]

LEVINE: —because of what?

DI SPIGNA: Well, it was just a—just a good experience because you really got to see what—basically, what the military was like. And the discipline in

the military was a good experience as far as becoming—adulthood. You know—

LEVINE: Yeah.

DI SPIGNA: —as far as entering adulthood. You can't really beat the discipline. As far as the military police experience, I really found it very rewarding while I was there and [clears throat] the only disadvantage that I didn't like was that it wasn't anything like a regular job, nine to five and then you go home, and you have weekends off, you know. We—we used to work three days on and three days off, and every three days you'd change shifts, go from the day shift to the p.m. shift to the midnight shift. So [clears throat] I didn't like that part at all. But you know, I did it and I swore that when I got out I was going to go back to the plumbing industry and become a plumber. And that was going to be the end of that, you know, work Monday to Friday, nine to five—actually, it was only—it was only a seven-hour job. I used to work from 8 to 3:30, half-hour lunch, which was great. I used to love it, get the holidays off, get the weekends off. What else could you ask for?

LEVINE: So why did you do something else then?

DI SPIGNA: I [clears throat]—I did that. I came back and did plumbing and I became a journeyman plumber. And after the World's Fair (I don't know if you recall) in 1963—the World's Fair in Queens, construction sort of really bottomed out, you know. And things got very slow in construction. And I had just gotten married and, if I really wanted to continue to work, I would have to go to other states to work because there wasn't enough work here in [clears throat] the City of New York where my local had jurisdiction, which was Brooklyn and Queens. A lot of people were leaving to go to Connecticut, Texas, and to work out of state. And I felt I'd just gotten married. I don't want to do that. So I started taking—I took the test for—to become a city plumber. City plumbers, you know, very rarely are you going to get laid off. It's a civil service job and I figured I would have it made. So I took the test for New York City plumber and I thought I—I knew everything that there was to know about plumbing. But I missed the test by two points. I was—I really wasn't experienced in test taking, you know, wasn't really acclimated to taking civil service tests. So I couldn't work as a New York City plumber. So after that, I started taking every test that came along. I wind up taking the building inspector's test, the building maintenance test, the policeman's test, the transit police test. The only test I really never took was the New York City Fire Department. That never came up. At any rate, at the time, they were building up the Transit Police Department. So within six months, they called me for the Transit police. And I went to work as a Transit police

in the subway. But there wasn't much money there. You know, at the time, they were paying, like, \$7,200 a year. And in the same year, 1965, I only worked seven months in construction and I made 13,5 in construction. I said, "I got to get off this job." [chuckles] So to make a long story short, I spent the first five years trying to get off the job. But construction still didn't pick up so I stayed with the Transit police for five years and, after that, I had taken a sergeant's test while I was there. And after five years, they reassigned me from the subways to, actually, Stewart Airport in New York as a firearms instructor. And I was close to the house. I really got to like that job so I spent four years at Stewart Airport. And then I made sergeant. I came back to the city and, by that time, I was really—I was becoming acclimated in the department. The money was getting better. The benefits were fantastic. I never got laid off in nine years. So I stayed with it and I studied for lieutenant. I made lieutenant. And actually, I had studied for captain. I had passed the captain's test. But I got a real low score and I was, like, on the bottom of the totem pole, and I never really got called for captain.

LEVINE: Okay. Could we just pause here because we need to change the tape but I want to continue.

DI SPIGNA: Yeah, I'm sorry.

LEVINE: No, don't be sorry.

DI SPIGNA: I'm rambling and ram—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

LEVINE: Okay. We're beginning here on tape two and I'm speaking with Vito Di Spigna and we were talking about your police career at this point. And—and I don't think you had quite finished, but you were talking about how you worked up to a point.

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat]

LEVINE: And then—

DI SPIGNA: Right. I was—I had—I was talking about my police career because I basically sort of got forced into it because my—what I really was doing was I wanted to be a plumber. And construction had died down and I stayed with the police department where it was—it was a more secure job and there were better benefits. And I don't want to go through the

hassle of getting laid off on construction every now and then. So [clears throat] I put in a total of about 27 and  $\frac{3}{4}$  years in the police department and—before I retired, which was in 1990—90—I'm sorry, 1993.

LEVINE: Hmm. And I—how do you feel? Do you feel like, y—you glad you made the switch or did you miss being a plumber or—

DI SPIGNA: I missed be—I missed being a plumber because this was like—this was my—I'd prepared myself in high school. I prepared myself after high school while I was in the—in the military, I tried to prepare myself to be a plumber. Matter of fact, when I came out of the military and went back into the trade and was in the apprenticeship program, I had really studied hard, and I had—had a state contest at the time. And actually, I came out, like, number three in the state contest. The first and second winner got to a runoff and they went into an international contest. So I really studied hard. So basically, when I got laid off from the plumbing job, it was real—it was a real big disappointment. And I think that, you know, everything went through my mind that this was going to happen throughout my whole career. Every time that construction was going to be slow, I was going to get laid off. So that's why I decided to enter something more secure, not necessarily being a policeman, because I didn't like the shifts and the days I get off. You know, a policeman works basically 24 hours, you know, whereas a plumber was working Monday to Friday. But all in all, in the final analysis, I'm glad—I'm glad I stayed with the police department because it provided food on the table. I never had to worry about layoffs. I never had to worry about paying the mortgage. And I al—altogether, wor—really worked out for the best.

LEVINE: Well, what would you say were the—were the joys and the—and the—and the disadvantages of—of—of police work?

DI SPIGNA: Well, the disadvantages are, clearly, the—the hours. [clears throat] You know, the—you're—you're working, basically—you're—not that you're working 24 hours in a day, but you can work any of the 24 hours. There's no such thing as you're going to be working steady days or steady midnights. And [clears throat] that's the definite disadvantage, and the holidays. You know, came down to—time to the holidays, naturally, the entire police department can't have off on Christmas. The entire police department can't have off on New Year's Eve. So that—those are the definite disadvantages. The advantages were the protection of a civil service job, whereas it was very—you know, it's almost—virtually impossible to—to get laid off, although the policemen did get laid off in 1975. They had a major budget crisis within the city and they did lay off policemen. But that's a real rare

thing, you know. So all in all, security wise, you really couldn't compare civil service [unclear] in comparison to private industry.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, hmm. Well, when you—when you look back on coming here as an 11-year-old, h—how do you think that affected the person that you became or your—your personality? How—what impact do you think switching cultures and starting over and that immigration experience had on you?

DI SPIGNA: Well, the initial impact was [clears throat] I really had a—a hatred for the change, because I really left the—the tranquil island of where I came from. To me, it was—when I came here, it was—all it was was big noise, too many people, too many buildings. Everything was like a—sort of a—a race, you know. [clears throat] The culture that I came from was—I associated that with tranquility, serenity, qu—animals and interacting with the nature and the fruit trees. That was my world, you know. So basically, when I was removed from that and placed in sort of a—a noisy environment, I had nothing but hate for it. And the other shock was that my mother wasn't there, my father wasn't there. My other siblings weren't there. That was the other shock. Then I found out the reality of the situation where there was no chocolates on the streets to be found. There was no money to be found. You had to work for every little thing. You had to work at jobs that really—these jobs didn't exist on the island. But just looking at the adults working made me think, you know, 'This is the future I have to look forward to and work like these adults?' To me, it was really a—a culture shock with a major impact. But as I went to school and learned and this is what everybody else did, you sort of become acclimated, you know. And you really realize that, what reality is, that everything you do you have to do for yourself and you have to get the money yourself. You have to figure out how to get it. You have to figure out how to buy the food because there was no such thing as going out in the field and picking the fruit off the trees or anything like that.

LEVINE: Hmm, hmm. Were you—was it your mother and father's idea that—that you and your brothers and sister become Americanized? Did they—

DI SPIGNA: Yeah, I think it was—that that was definitely their idea and basically, the—the motive there was to give us more opportunity than what we had on the island.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: I mean, and at that point, I didn't understand any of these things, you know. Only when you—you be—you start to reach adulthood that you

recognize all this. I mean, if I was in my mother's place and my father's place, I would—I would have done the same exact thing. Had my father and mother decided not to do this, the chances are the family—the family unit would have been broken up. It would have been forced to break up anyway, and they would have probably wind up in different countries.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: I mean, I had already seen my—my oldest brother, he went to Argentina to work. My second oldest brother, he went in the Italian Navy and he was about to make a career out of that. So the family had actually already—the family unit was already starting to break up when my mother actually started the momentum to bring everybody over here to America.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. And what would you say are your greatest satisfactions that you—that you had in your life?

DI SPIGNA: In America?

LEVINE: Anyplace.

DI SPIGNA: Well, there's—I mean, the number one satisfaction is having—getting married and having [clears throat] kids. That—to me, that was the number one satisfaction. But you really don't have to be in America to do that. It's just—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: —out of adulthood. But the main satisfaction to associate with that is that I'm glad that I was able to do that in America with the rights that we have here in America, with the freedoms that we enjoy. And my kids and my grandchildren wouldn't have to be subjected to—I wouldn't say oppression or anything. We didn't live in oppression. But the different cultures dictate the pol—just the difference between the police departments we have here and the police departments you have in other countries. They're totally different. In other countries, their police department is basically semi-military. And their obligation is basically to protect the existing government. So they're like—more or less, like soldiers, not really the policemen that we know here in America.

LEVINE: How—how would you characterize the policemen here—

DI SPIGNA: Well, the policemen here is basically—is—serves the community, you know. He's not obligated to service the federal government. He gets paid by the community. The FBI is the one that works for the federal government. CIA works for the federal government. Secret Service works for the federal government. We have New York City Police or town police and they're obligated to the city. State troopers are obligated to the state. Village police are obligated to the village, you know. And this—basically, different. It's not like, you know, the—a Korean national policeman, he's really—he's really not obligated to the village where he lives or the county where he lives or the—the area where—the regional area. You know, his obligation is basically to the—you know, the government of South Korea.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Yeah. So now that you're retired and your children are grown, what—what are you looking forward to now?

DI SPIGNA: Well, right now, I'm really looking forward till my grandchildren get a little bit older, so that I can sort of interact with them a little bit better and—rather than being the—the child—the children that they are now.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: I'm looking forward to them being a little bit older so I can do more things with them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how—what was your reaction and response to September 11<sup>th</sup>?

DI SPIGNA: I'll be honest with you. I was watching it on television [clears throat] when—before the second plane hit. My first reaction was that, you know, it wasn't—and it was an accident to begin, and I was hoping it was an accident. But when the second plane hit, right, [clears throat] I knew it was no accident—hit the second building was no—no accident. And I was really mad when the tower starting collapsing because I didn't—I didn't picture that they were collapsing as a result of the plane crashes or as a result of the fuel from the plane burning. I had pictured that someone had planted bombs, you know, time bombs. And these bombs were designed to go off after—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: —an hour and after the emergency police and firemen and everybody—they were designed to go off at a certain period of time. And I was really mad because I said to myself, 'Why the hell don't they get the bomb-sniffing dogs to go in there and sniff out these bombs? Why did they go in there and,' [clears throat] you know, 'so they can

get killed like that?’ I was really—I mean, I thought they did a very stupid thing, unbeknownst to me that there was no bombs involved at all.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

DI SPIGNA: That was my first stupid reaction on my part. I didn’t realize what really was going on. Then when things really settled, that the plane went to Washington, [clears throat] and the plane went down in—in Pennsylvania, my memories went back to 1993 when they first planted a bomb in the World Trade Center. Right? And I was mad at that time because they introduced these so-called terrorists at the time to the American justice system. And I said, “We’re go—we’re going to do the same thing to these people when we catch them, whoever is responsible, and introduce them to the American justice system.” To me, that was the most ludicrous thing that we could ever do. You know, at that time, I said, “You know, we should get the military and give the military permission to do whatever the hell they had to.” And I’m glad that Bush took that attitude and then we didn’t take the same attitude that we had towards—the bombing of 1993. That’s the way—had we handled the incident in 1993 the way we handled the—the incident in September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, maybe we—hopefully, we probably would have avoided September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

LEVINE: Hmm, yeah. Okay, well, is there anything that we haven’t covered that you can think of that you would like to say?

DI SPIGNA: [clears throat] All I—all I’m s—I’d really like to repeat is that I’m—I’m glad that my children were born in this country, and my grandchildren and future grandchildren are able to be born in this country rather than any other country. Even though I love Italy and I love the island, there is no country like this country that would offer opportunities for a child or adult or anybody. There is no other place on earth that I can picture or ever read about, and I’m glad to be part of this country. That’s all I can say.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, that’s a beautiful statement. And I’d like to close here, except I would like to do a P.S., if we could—

DI SPIGNA: Sure.

LEVINE: —of the—of the story that you told on the break about your c—your brother.

DI SPIGNA: Ah [clears throat]—

LEVINE: [chuckles]

DI SPIGNA: We got—we got in—

LEVINE: How you—

DI SPIGNA: When we first came here—

LEVINE: Yeah, right.

DI SPIGNA: And my mother had it all planned as to who was going to live with whom. My—my mother had a sister here and my mother had a brother. And she—the way she planned it is that I was going to live with my uncle, her brother, and my older brother, Michael, and my younger brother, Louis, were going to live with my aunt. Her idea was that my brother, Michael, could watch the youngest one, Louis. [clears throat] That was the plan, anyway. That was the pattern. But when we went to visit my uncle, the one I'm supposed to li—live with, my Uncle Michael, in King's Highway, he was one of the rare families that had a—a television at the time in 1949. He had a big 10-inch screen television in this six-foot console, which he had told us he had paid \$300 for. And my brother, Louis, fell in love with it and he wouldn't move away from the television screen, and he didn't want to come back home with us to begin with. So we left him over there but it wasn't supposed to be a permanent thing. The permanent, kind of was that I was the one who was supposed to live with my uncle, the one with the television and my brother, Michael, and Louis were going to live with my other aunt and uncle, who didn't have a television. But to make a long story short, my brother, Louis, the youngest guy, he fell in love with the television. He didn't want to leave so he stayed there with my uncle, and me and my brother, Michael, stayed with my aunt.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Okay. That's great. All right. Well, thank you so much for a wonderful interview.

DI SPIGNA: It was my pleasure and thank you very much for having me.

LEVINE: You're very welcome. I've been speaking with Vito Di Spigna, who came in 1949 at 11 years old from—from Italy. And this is Janet Levine on July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2002 signing off for the National Park Service.

[END OF INTERVIEW]