

**EI-1279**

**JOSEPHINE PETTI**

**BIRTHDATE: DECEMBER 4, 1915**

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**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 87**

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

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**SICILY, 1931**

**AGE: 13**

**SHIP: AUGUST**

**PORT: NAPLES**

**RESIDENCES:**

LEVINE: Today is June the 14<sup>th</sup>, the year 2003 and I'm here in the Ellis Island Studio with Josephine Petti, who came here in 1931 when she was somewhere around 13. She came to the United States on the August ship.

PETTI: August.

LEVINE: August.

PETTI: August, yeah.

LEVINE: And left from Naples. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay. If we could start the tape, please, by saying your name as it would have appeared on the ship's manifest.

PETTI: Josephine—Josephine—Josa—Jusipine Sabella [PH].

LEVINE: Sabella. Okay. And again for the tape, please, your birth date.

PETTI: My birthday was December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1915.

LEVINE: Okay. And where did—where were you born in Italy?

PETTI: I was born in the town of Blufi.

LEVINE: And that's B-L-U-F-I.

PETTI: I, right.

LEVINE: And it's in Palermo? Or it's—

PETTI: It's near Palermo.

LEVINE: —near Palermo, I should say.

PETTI: But because Palermo was—all the offices, like when a baby was born in the town, they had to go to Palermo to register.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Uh-huh.

PETTI: And then the pro—providence of Palermo, Blufi, [unclear].

LEVINE: Okay.

PETTI: In other words, Blufi [unclear], Provincia [PH] Palermo. That's the whole thing.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, did you live in Blufi up until you left—

PETTI: Yes.

LEVINE: —Sicily?

PETTI: I was born—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: I was born in Blufi.

LEVINE: Okay. And so you actually probably have a lot of memories because you grew up there.

PETTI: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Yeah. And what was your mother's name?

PETTI: Rosa.

LEVINE: Rosa. Do you remember her maiden name?

PETTI: Not really. Rosa something.

LEVINE: Okay.

PETTI: Rosa. No, no.

LEVINE: Okay. And—and your father's name?

PETTI: My father was Giuseppe [PH] Sabella.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, did you have sisters and brothers when you were still in—

PETTI: I—I had a brother.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then—

PETTI: And then my brother came with me to America at the same time.

LEVINE: Okay. So your brother was older or younger?

PETTI: Older.

LEVINE: Older. And his name?

PETTI: He was—he was 18 years old.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: Seventeen, eighteen, something like that. Because he just [unclear] the—the tr—you know, the—the draft—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: —to be a soldier. He just made it.

LEVINE: He just got out, you mean, before he had to go in—

PETTI: Yes.

LEVINE: —to the Army. Uh-huh. And what was his name?

PETTI: Guyadano [PH].

LEVINE: Guyadano. Okay.

PETTI: Over here, it's Tommy, we call him.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Guyadano Sabella.

LEVINE: Now, wh—what did your father do when he was in Italy?

PETTI: My father died. He was 28 years old.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETTI: He died in the war.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: And when my mother got the news that my father died, I was born. I never knew my father.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. Uh-huh.

PETTI: I wish I knew him.

LEVINE: Right. Do you remember any stories that your mother told you about your father [unclear]?

PETTI: Well, not my mother but the people, when I was growing up, they said my father was out of this world, beautiful man.

LEVINE: In what way? What did they say about him?

PETTI: Beautiful, nice disposition. He had a—brown hair and brown mustache. And he worked as a—you know, in Italy they have a—these places that rich people, they have these places that they hired people to go over the property and, you know—

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Like an estate, a—

PETTI: Estate. They—but they hire these people to—to work in the farm.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: And my father was one of them. They used to go on a horse and go each places, find out how they're doing, you know, when they have the harvest and to—to see how much on a horse with a—with a cape [unclear] inside with a hood on a horse. They used to go from places to places.

LEVINE: So here is what—I guess the equivalent would be, like, a—a foreman, who went around to—

PETTI: Right.

LEVINE: —see—

PETTI: Right, right.

LEVINE: —how everything was going.

PETTI: And check everybody.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: And he—he has schooling. You know, he had been to this country.

LEVINE: Oh, when did he come to this country?

PETTI: I don't know. But I have a picture of him that he was taken to this country. He—he was here five years.

LEVINE: So would he have come to this country before he was married?

PETTI: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you have any stories that anybody told you about—

PETTI: No.

LEVINE: —what he did here or what—

PETTI: No.

LEVINE: Anything about that?

PETTI: The only thing I heard, that he came here to make some money, and he stood here for five years and then he come back and he married my mother.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you can—you can—you can image—imagine him on a—on a horse with a—with a cape and—

PETTI: I have a beautiful picture of him—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: —taken over here. And I had it en—enlarged and I gave one to each kids.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: And one of my grandson looks like my father, I think. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. How about—

PETTI: Really, he looks like my—my husband, my grandson, but I see the picture of my father and I see him, something in the eyes that says, “Gee, I think he looks like my—my father.”

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh. How about your mother? What was she like? How do you remember her, in thinking back now till—to when you were in Italy, a little girl growing up?

PETTI: I have a picture of my mother, my brother and me. I look like a colored girl. N—no [chuckles]—in Italy, a man used to come, put a tent on the wall and took a picture of us. My mother was heavy. She was a beautiful looking—anybody that is heavy is beautiful; the skin is beautiful.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: And she had li—light hair but she was one piece, you know.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

PETTI: That I remember.

LEVINE: Wait, what did you say? They put a tent on the wall?

PETTI: Yeah, a photographer would come for the—from another town, let’s say. We call piazza [PH], you know, another—and they would put a tent on a wall, you know, with some kind of design, and then they’d take a picture of us. So you have a background.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. So it was a picture of something, like a ceiling.

PETTI: Yeah, like trees or something like that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, and you have that?

PETTI: Yeah. My brother's got it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: And I was about five years old and my brother, you know, he's—he was older than me.

LEVINE: Yeah. So—

PETTI: He was five years older than me. And between my brother and me, there was another boy and he died.

LEVINE: Do you remember that? Do you remember him born and—

PETTI: No, because—no, because I was—

LEVINE: You were too young?

PETTI: I was born—

LEVINE: No, you—oh, you were born after him?

PETTI: After him.

LEVINE: Sorry. That was [unclear].

PETTI: I don't remember. He di—he died. I think it was a year and a half, something like that.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

PETTI: Or two years.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay. What was your mother like? Her temperament? What was her personality?

PETTI: My mother was—see, I—I was a good eater and I eat anything. My mother used to fry an egg for my brother because he wouldn't eat, and I couldn't—I couldn't have an egg. That I remember. And I didn't think it was right. You know what I mean? And my brother used to take the egg with a frying pan and go around the corner to eat it, so he—he wouldn't make me put the bread, to dunk it in the—in the oil.

LEVINE: [chuckles] W—

PETTI: Those are my memories. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Well, now, was it—was it a—a sort of a special thing to have an egg? Is that—

PETTI: Oh, yeah. We used—they used to sell the eggs to buy, you know, thread and cotton to make sweaters and to make sheets, you know. We used to make the sheets with a—I don't know what you call it.

LEVINE: A loom?

PETTI: A loom that you throw the things [unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: We used to sell the eggs. We used to change the eggs for—for fruit, for oranges. The guys used to come around and sell oranges.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So in other words, you raised—you raised chickens? Did you?

PETTI: Yeah, chicken.

LEVINE: And what else?

PETTI: And goat. We used to get the milk when it—the goats would have the, you know, babies.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: We didn't have milk. We had milk certain time, when, you know—and—but we didn't suffer with—with anything. Like, we had enough food.

LEVINE: Did you grow food as well?

PETTI: Yes, we had a—a—some kind of property behind the house that we used to grow vegetables. And they were kind of a trees, like [unclear] and Chinese apple, plums. You know?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Used to raise squash, stuff like that. Not me. I was a kid.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: We used to raise all that. And we had an uncle, my father's brother, God bless him. He was the head of the church. You know, he used to take care of the church. He was a blessed man. He used to take care of us, like he would bring a lot of grapes the time of the fruit, you know, grapes and—and artichokes, stuff like that to us, because my mother was a widow after, you know.

LEVINE: Right.

PETTI: But after, she got married.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, what—in other words, your mother, did she work in the fields or was—

PETTI: No.

LEVINE: She—

PETTI: No.

LEVINE: She was mostly in the home?

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was she like? What was her disposition? How did she treat you? How was she as a mother?

PETTI: Well, I don't really remember the—in Italy how she treated us. She was very stern with my brother. She used to beat him up if he did anything wrong.

LEVINE: Like what would be—

PETTI: But with me, she—she was okay.

LEVINE: She was okay. Uh-huh.

PETTI: You know. Then she remarried. In other word, my father and my stepfather, they were the same—same time of the war. Same—they had it in the same—because they were neighbors. Was in the town. The town was only 3,000 people. That's all.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: So they were together in the war. And my stepfather saw my father die and he—and he promise—my father says, "Promise me that—take care of my family." Know what I'm talking about? So my stepfather was a young man; he wasn't married. And when he came, we were like—we lived here and he lived across the street. The streets are narrow over there. They had a window over there and they were neighbors. They used to look by the window and take care of us. Like, I was a—a little baby. That I remember, though.

LEVINE: You do?

PETTI: Because we had a [unclear], whatever you call. [unclear] was where the—we used to make the bread. You know, cook the bread?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Used to throw all those—the [unclear] to heat up the—the place and then you put the—the bread to cook. So we had it, like, on top of there, was like a little sl—slat. So we used to [unclear] the door and go and play on top of there. So my brother was older than me so he would jump to go and play in the street. And I was—I wanted to jump too. I didn't want to stay. So my stepfather (he was not my father), he used to watch, "No, no, no, no. You can't go down there. Go inside. Go inside." From the window. In other word, he used to—

LEVINE: Watch out for you.

PETTI: Yeah. And that I remember like it was yesterday. And then he married my mother. He didn't marry my mother. They lived together because with the town permission, they had to li—they lived together. They made papers—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: —because my mother had pension for us and her. Because they marry, the pension—so they lived together. So then my father came to America, my stepfather came to America. And after three years, he became a citizen. He was smart. He knows how to write and read, you know. And he called for my mother. He came to Italy, marry my mother, made a—legal—

LEVINE: Ah.

PETTI: —and took her to this country. But we couldn't come. We were left—I was a child, you know, were left—my brother and I were left so my uncle would pay—you know, watch over for us. But we lived in our own house and everything.

LEVINE: So were you—

PETTI: But our aunt—grandmother there too that we could've—

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PETTI: You know.

LEVINE: Well, what—were you about three years old? Or how old were you when your mother left?

PETTI: I was about nine years old when my mother left over here.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Uh-hmm.

PETTI: Maybe 10. I don't know. I don't remember. But we had my mother down—my grandmother downstairs and my uncle that—and his wife. You know, they were n—nice to us. But I had to do all my cooking. And then my brother used to go to the—to learn carpenter, you know—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: —and going to school. And I—how to cook. I tell that to everybody. [chuckles] I needed to—to chop up the wood to—to cook. You know, you put the—the wood in there. And I said to my brother, “You got to chop this wood because, otherwise, I can't cook.” Says, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.” You know, but he didn't. One time, I says, “I do myself.” I took that big chopper thing to chop the wood, slipped and went in my hand and went all the way to the bone. And I had that scar here for years, but that scar just sort of went up. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: As you grow, the skin goes up. I never knew that. It—it went from here all the way up to here, the scar. And—but came a time that we—well, we came to America too.

LEVINE: Well, now, if—

PETTI: My mother became a citizen because my grandfather couldn't take us—wasn't as a father—by paying—by paying money to—to big people wherever he went to so my mother could become a citizen. And that's when she called us to—for us to come this coun—

LEVINE: I see. I see. Well, it's—just to back up a little bit, in other words, from the time your father di—you were a baby when your father died.

PETTI: No, I wasn't born when my father died.

LEVINE: You weren't born when your father died. When your fa—when your stepfather got out of the army—

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: —you—he—he, after a point, moved in with you in your house? Was your—

PETTI: Yes.

LEVINE: —stepfather in your—in your own house.

PETTI: Yes.

LEVINE: So there were some years before you—they—he left for America that you lived with your mother and your stepfather—

PETTI: Yes.

LEVINE: —and your brother. Okay. Tell me your stepfather's name.

PETTI: Giuseppe Stitale.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

PETTI: S-P-I—S-P—Sp—S-T-I-T-A-L-E. Giuseppe—was the same name like my father.

LEVINE: Father, uh-huh. And what was he like? How—how do you remember him, as a little girl?

PETTI: He was wonderful man. He had a—a horse and he used to take me all over where, you know, from town to town with him all the time. He was great with us. See, they had a—a son (my brother is in Italy now) together—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: —with my mother. And he treated us better, much better than what he treated his son, because his son get in a lot of trouble. We didn't give him no trouble.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: You know what I mean?

LEVINE: So why did he decide to come to the United States? Did—did anybody ever tell you?

PETTI: I—that I really don't know how come for him. But while he was in the United States, he called for my uncle, my mother's brother. And he came here.

LEVINE: The one who was watching out for you too.

PETTI: No.

LEVINE: That one?

PETTI: No.

LEVINE: No, another one.

PETTI: He was a young man.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: My mother's brother was the youngest one and my father called him to America, and they lived together in one room wherever there—there was.

LEVINE: Where did they come in America? Do you know where they were?

PETTI: In New York.

LEVINE: In New York. Uh-huh.

PETTI: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And what were they doing? What was he doing to—to—to save some money to bring you over?

PETTI: He mentioned a lot of times. They were building the—the Empire State Building and he used to work 40 feet down. That—that's how he—he made [unclear].

LEVINE: Forty feet—

PETTI: Down.

LEVINE: Down?

PETTI: That they were—

LEVINE: [unclear]?

PETTI: Yeah, under. Under.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: Because they were starting the whatever, the—

LEVINE: Subway?

PETTI: What do you call that? The foundation.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. They were just beginning that.

PETTI: All the—the—yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: They used to go down 40 feet down. That's where they used—used to work.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. Uh-huh.

PETTI: Everyday, he had to go—you know, work 40 feet down, he used to say. That's what he used to say.

LEVINE: Oh. So when—did you—you must have gone to school over there.

PETTI: Oh—where? I went—

LEVINE: In Sicily.

PETTI: Oh, I went to school in Italy.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: And if I tell you something, I used to go behind the door because I wanted to go to school so bad. And my mother came to the teacher, says, “You know, why don’t you let her in? Just maybe she watch.” She says, “I can’t.” You know, “She can’t. Just no time. You got to wait before you come to school.” But every day, I went over there and looked the kids in. So one day, was raining, really raining hard. That I remember very good. And the teacher says, “All right. Come in.” Put me in the back of the—give me a pencil and paper. And I was doing better than the other kids.

LEVINE: Because you were too young to go in.

PETTI: Yeah, I was too young to go in.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: So, and I used to go to school, you know, before. And I went to school, like I—like I flew the—the first grade, second grade, third grade. My brother repeat the second grade three years. [laughs] Now, I tell you another story. When we came to this country, I went to school. I went to school, night school, and I had to work from seven to seven at night, you know, work. My mother had a job for me be—when I came here.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETTI: I—I’m n—I was home about a week. Everything was strange to me. Had to go to work. A week later, I had to go to work.

LEVINE: Wow.

PETTI: And I worked from seven to seven.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: You know? What was I going to say? I forgot. But my brother t—used to take the girls out to the movies instead of—he—he went to work in the pocketbook store.

LEVINE: That's in this country?

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, first, let's finish about—

PETTI: [chuckles]

LEVINE: —talking about Italy. What—what did you do for fun? Do you remember what was enjoyable to you? I know you say your stepfather would take you on his horse. That must have been—

PETTI: Oh—

LEVINE: —enjoyable. Anything else you did?

PETTI: Well—well, what I did while I was growing up, like when my mother and father were here, I used to go a—and ch—chop the almonds and the walnuts and separate the—the thing. I used to get paid for that.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: You know?

LEVINE: So what—what kind of a place would it be? Where would you go and—

PETTI: Well, there was no theater. There was nothing. There was no way you could—you just went to school and, after school, you went to do that kind of work.

LEVINE: I see.

PETTI: And as far as sweet, we never tasted sweet in Italy—the only time when they had a feast. You know, the church, they had a feast. This whatever you call it—this—come from the—well, I won't say the city but bigger than the town. They used to come with the sweets and everything. If we had money, we used to buy a little something like that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: Otherwise, there was no sweets. There was no stores at where we lived. The—the—the people used to come to sell with the—on a horse and jackass, you know, just to come to sell us oranges and stuff like that, and needles. We had to change the eggs for the needle, or maybe a thing of fava [unclear] beans. You measured the thing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: You give it to them and they give you the needles. And they, you know, buy because we used to make or own stocking, used to make our own sweaters, used to make our own clothes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. You didn't buy any clothes?

PETTI: No, you couldn't buy no clothes, used to make your own clothes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So there were no shops at all in your town?

PETTI: No, there was—there was two shops, one that had the material.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: There were no—no transportation to come to our town. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: And—and another st—store that had, like—see, as far as greens, vegetables, everybody had their own vegetables. They used to sell sugar, maybe, and maybe soap. You know what I mean? Things like that. Only two stores in the whole—the whole town. But people used to travel to go to the, like, [unclear], you know, where there were a lot of stores and you could buy whatever you wanted.

LEVINE: And they would go by horse or by jackass?

PETTI: By horse.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: But now, when I went back to Italy, I didn't recognize my—my place. It's all built up.

LEVINE: Mmm.

PETTI: You know, and the autobus comes all the way to the town.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: And then you could get a [unclear]. Now, everybody's got money, for some reason.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Everybody fixed their own house and I couldn't recognize my house when I went. You know, the streets—when I was a child, the streets were big. Now, when I went there, the street looked so small. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: And I cried. You know, I went with my daughter's mother-in-law. She went—from Palermo, she went to her own town and I went to my own town. So when I met her in Palermo, because I was five days in my town, just visited my cousin and everything, I went back and cried on—she says, "What's the matter? What happened?" I says, "I didn't recognize my house." It was all built up.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: See, over there, the houses, they have a lot of ground in the back, in the side, so they—they builded. The only thing I recognized is the balcony, the big—the big window in—window—doors, like big windows with two doors, you know.

LEVINE: Why don't you describe your house as it was when you were growing up?

PETTI: Well, the house was downstairs and upstairs. Right? We went into a [unclear] (the [unclear] is where we used to bake the bread), and then go upstairs. Downstairs, we had a lot of [unclear], whatever you call it, to—to—I told you, to—to warm up to—to heat up the—the big things to make the bread, and wood, you know. And we had a place where we kept the jugs for the water because we had no water. We had to go—the water, they used to open it three hours a day.

LEVINE: And then you'd go with your jugs and fill them up?

PETTI: You had to get in a line, yeah, and—and to wash clothes, we went where they had the river. And we had those things to wash the clothes, you know. What—what was I going to say?

LEVINE: Well, you were describing your house.

PETTI: Oh, my house. So, as you [unclear], they had two holes there where you put the jugs, the big jugs, and you get the water from them to cook and to

drink and to wash a few things when it rained. But it—in Sicily, it nev—  
hardly ever rained. You know, you had to—if it rained, you filled up the—  
the thing to—for the water so it could [unclear]—

LEVINE: It had a great big—a great big, like—

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: —tower.

PETTI: Yeah, in case it rained, it filled up with water.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

PETTI: And then upstairs, we had one big room and the kitchen was downstairs.  
You know, as soon as you walk into the—the house, a little—a little  
kitchen on—on top of there, like a—it's—it's—was a little corner where  
you put the—the grate—the grating, and you put the pot there and you  
feed it with wood.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: It was [unclear].

LEVINE: Was it—was it an open fire?

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

PETTI: Yeah. It was the same thing where you baked the bread and then on the  
corner there was the little—where you could—all in one thing. Not many,  
one, two, three. You cook many thing.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. One—

PETTI: So you—you ate pasta every day. You know what's pasta.

LEVINE: Sure, uh-hmm.

PETTI: Pasta, peas; pasta, potatoes; pas—we grew up, really, a lot of potatoes  
and vegetables. That's why my daughter-in-laws there said, "You're  
healthy because you grew up in Italy. You didn't eat sugar when you  
were a"—[laughs]—

LEVINE: Did you have fish?

PETTI: No.

LEVINE: No.

PETTI: No fish. No fish at all. That's a dry country. You know, we—we had to go to Palermo to—to get the fish. Palermo's a big city, you know.

LEVINE: I see.

PETTI: I—we never tasted fish. But we used to have—you know when it rained? Like before the—that they—well, anyway, they make—they—the ground makes, oh, like snails.

LEVINE: Oh, yeah.

PETTI: You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Yeah, yes.

PETTI: And we used to go around and pick up snails, you know, with a thing. We used to go around and pick up [unclear] snails and cook and put a little tomato sauce. You know, that was a feast for us. You know, it was hard time. I'm here about what? Sixty-five years? No, I'm marry for 65 years. Longer than that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: Since the 31<sup>st</sup>, you know?

LEVINE: Right.

PETTI: I'm here.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: But now, everything is different. They have everything. They have cars come in. They have a—people come and bring—it's still now the—they have people come in and bring a lot of stuff that you don't have to go to the big c—places—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: —to buy, you know.

LEVINE: Right. You can do it right there.

PETTI: First, you used to go to [unclear], you know what I mean, to buy when you needed some. Now, they come with—with trucks that sell everything. That time, there were no trucks. There were no cars.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: It was small. Now, the town was big.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: They were—when we left there, they were building new church in the town. Before that, we had to go about, maybe 10 miles or more to go to a church.

LEVINE: How did you go? How did you get there?

PETTI: We walked.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: We walked to go to—to—to the church at that time. Now, they had—when I went there, they have a—a big church. And my—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PETTI: —father's name is in the churchyard. You know, big yard, whatever you call it. They call it [unclear] in Italian. Well, gianno [PH] means a big space.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: [unclear] is church. And they have my father's name, the—the people that died in the war?

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: You know?

LEVINE: And his name is on—

PETTI: And my father's the first one—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: —over there, Giuseppe Sabella. And when I went there I saw—I couldn't help. I—I felt like something turned [voice breaking] over here.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: Because I wish I knew my father.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well—

PETTI: You know?

LEVINE: —it's nice that he's honored like that. Uh-huh.

PETTI: Now, that's why my kids, they're all going to Italy. They want to go see where—where my [unclear]—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: They—wonderful children, really. They—you have no idea. They're just beautiful family.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: They all get along nicely.

LEVINE: Oh, that's great. So let's go back to your house. You were saying that you—you—well, what did you do for light?

PETTI: A [unclear]. A [unclear]. The—the thing, you put kerosene in it.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: And you light it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then—so you—you were saying you had the little kitchen when you first came in.

PETTI: No kitchen, just the kitchen to cook.

LEVINE: Just the grate for cooking.

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Right? And then what was in the rest of the house?

PETTI: The rest of the house was one room, was a little—a nook where you used to keep the oil, the thing. They didn't have a closet like over here. You put a little nook. One room, there was the bed. There's the sewing machine and there's a table. That's all. And a big—big room, one room upstairs. Okay?

LEVINE: Oh, so that's upstairs?

PETTI: Upstairs.

LEVINE: You went upstairs.

PETTI: Upstairs, there's one big room, the bed, the sewing machine and a trunk where you keep your clothes, and a little nook where you kept—you kept the oil. You know, we have a—a thing like that. Used to buy the oil and we finished—

LEVINE: How did you buy it? You bought it in, like, jugs?

PETTI: No.

LEVINE: Or how did you—

PETTI: No, no, no, no. They brought—they brought us—they used to come and sell the oil in—in a—a glass thing, in a glass thing. So we used to pour in a thing. And—

LEVINE: So you mentioned before about a balcony. Where was that?

PETTI: The balcony was in the same big room.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: You know. And the place was higher. You know, the—and we could see the—where we had the property far away. We could see the property from there. In fact, my mother used to say that she knew when my father left where he was to come home.

LEVINE: She could see him?

PETTI: She could see him from—from there, you know, with a horse and everything.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So were you on a hill, or not?

PETTI: It wasn't a hill.

LEVINE: You were just higher—

PETTI: But after—after—where we lived, there was a—a little fa—maybe a mile; then was a—down.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: And then was up again.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah.

PETTI: But we had a nice balcony. It was always full of flowers, you know, beautiful flowers.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: I remember my boyfriend used to come with a mule and he used to pick all my flowers. I wanted to kill him.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

PETTI: Me, as—as young as I was—even now, I have a room full of plants. They're beautiful. I used to kill him. And then this fellow—you—came to this country, but he just died, because it was my brother's friend. They—they all got up together all the time.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: Were brought up together, you know.

LEVINE: Well, now, the church being so far away, did you go every week? Or you didn't go every week?

PETTI: No, no, no, no, no. We went like a—people used to go. They had their animals. But we couldn't go. We had kids. We had no animal. But they used to go. But then when we left, the church was like already half built in the town.

LEVINE: What did you do before y—the church was built in your town? How did you—how did you observe your religion when you didn't go the 10 miles?

PETTI: Nothing.

LEVINE: Nothing.

PETTI: Nothing.

LEVINE: But you had certain feast days that—that you did celebrate.

PETTI: Well, we had feasts that we used to go in—in the—in the winters, whatever you call. They used to come and bring stuff, like sweets. You know, when they have a feast that—that they would come and fix up whatever they were selling. And the [unclear]—that was like a big holiday for us.

LEVINE: Was there a priest in your town?

PETTI: The priest was—was—they were—at that time, they were on a big church over there. It was on a hilltop.

LEVINE: I see.

PETTI: See, where we come from, Sicily, there's three Blessed Mothers. One is out on—on the hilltop over there. One is on the—on the hilltop over that, and another one over here.

LEVINE: All different directions.

PETTI: All different direction.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

PETTI: And the people, it's a hilltop. They all on a hill, the Blessed Mothers. See? And everybody had their own way—you know, that Blessed Mother had their own and the other Blessed Mother had—and people used to come. They called [unclear] and the Blessed Mother of the Oil. They had a ground laid with all, like a—a [unclear] that the—the oil used to come out of from the ground.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: And people used to come from all over to pick up the oil by—on top. They used to get the—and they used to put on people where had hurt or something. They would get better. Would you believe that? I don't know. But—

LEVINE: Did you ever go there and see any of that?

PETTI: Of course. We used to go there all the time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: You know?

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So people came from all over to be healed?

PETTI: From all over to be healed.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: You know?

LEVINE: Oh, well, that must have [unclear]—

PETTI: I have a picture of the church, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: And I have a—you know, because when I went now, I took a picture of the church and the church is different now. It's a—

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETTI: And I took a picture of the Blessed Mother.

LEVINE: So did you believe it as a child that—that that oil w—was healing people?

PETTI: I believed then because people used to come from all over the—all over the world, really. All over the world—all over the vicinity, like Palermo, stuff like that, they used to come. But I used to see the oil—we—that would come up from the ground. And they'd go and pick it up from the top, put it in the jar, and then they used that to—you know, I never saw the doctor when I was in Italy. Never. There were no doctors in our town. If you had to go to a doctor, it was in another faraway town. You got to go by mule. But when I was four years, I got drunk.

LEVINE: How so?

PETTI: Because we had a vineyard. We had wine. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: They used to have wine in big barrels. Big bar—they used to sell the wine. So same time of the year, they changed the—the wine. They changed the wine from the big barrel they put in a big jug, you know, like this, round bottom. And then they clear up the—the barrel. The barrel. Those were big thing—with alcohol.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETTI: And then they put that wine back. So I was a child; I was four years old. My stepfather—that was before he came to America—was helping, you know. And I would go to the—that big thing, stick in my finger and lick it, you know. So my stepfather says, “You—you want wine?” I says, “Yeah.” He took a glass. He filled up. He says, “Go sit on the steps,” because we had steps from our side to go [chuckles] upstairs. I sat on the steps and I drank the wine. When I finished, I went back. I [laughs]—I filled up the glass. I went and sat—I—I remember—that I remember, [unclear]. [laughs] Ah, I spill—I was spilling it as I walked because when he filled up the glass he brought it to me by the steps. Then I—I was spilling it. Went to the step, the second step, and I drank the second glass. So I got drunk. I slept for 48 hours. My—but I could hear my mother yelling. “What did you do to the kid? What did you do? Why’d you give her wine?” She says, “But I give her glass of”—but a glass like that. She says, “Couldn’t have got drunk with one glass. She must have went and got another glass.” Then they see that spilling. [chuckles] Make you laugh. So—and they took me to the doctor on a horse. I could hear my mother yelling my father—yelling at him. “What’d you do? What are you”—so they took me to the doctor, says, “But she sleeping. She’s not dead. Don’t worry about it. She’ll be okay.” That I remember.

LEVINE: So they took you to the next town or some other place.

PETTI: Yeah, on a horse.

LEVINE: Wow.

PETTI: You know?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: To take me to the next town. And that was quite a—far. It wasn’t that—you know, and there was—even if you had a car, there was so—so many up and down. But with a car now, they—they made a, you know, the road that you could—with a car, you could go to the—these different town now.

LEVINE: Right.

PETTI: But then—

LEVINE: You—there were no cars—

PETTI: No, there were no cars.

LEVINE: —in your town.

PETTI: No cars at all in the town. Nothing then.

LEVINE: Did you ever know about anybody else who had, like, a medical condition and what—what was done about it—

PETTI: Well, a lot—

LEVINE: —when you didn't have doctors?

PETTI: I tell you the truth, a lot of people from the town were giving birth. Some of them died. They didn't have a—they had a—they called a—a woman.

LEVINE: A midwife.

PETTI: Midwife.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: You know, [unclear]. But some of them really—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: —died. It wasn't—how could it—how—I don't know how we lived over there with no doctors and no—no medicine, no nothing.

LEVINE: Right.

PETTI: You know?

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: So I bless my stepfather that he brought us here.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So—okay. So when he came back, do you remember when he came back—

PETTI: Yes.

LEVINE: —and then he brought your mother? W—could you talk about that? Like when he came back and then your mother was leaving, what was that like for you? I mean, you were—you were a young person. How did you feel about your mother going—

PETTI: No, you see, before they left, after they got married, they got papers so you could take her. They took me to Palermo. They wanted to leave me in a—in a orphan. You know, being I was an orphan, they wanted to leave me into—with the nuns.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: First of all, as they—we were going to Palermo, took about three hours or more to go to Paler—I was throwing up all over the place, the car. I was si—I was getting sick. When I got there, they were talking to the people like I'm talking to you now, the they wanted to leave me there. I cried and I cried and I cried. I remember how I cried. "I don't want to go. I don't want to le—I don't want to be left there." See, I could have been left there until they were ready to c—but my brother was five years older than me, like he would be okay, because was my grandmother [unclear]. But I was younger, they figured. So I cried. So when they saw that I really, really didn't want to stay, they said, "Well, she"—you know. But they knew that I didn't want to go before they—they took. They knew. "That's okay." And they just forget it. She—even the nun said, "But she's not—she don't want to stay. No sense in—you know, she's going to get sick." And they took me back home and I—they left and I hated my mother. And when I came here, three years and a half later—I think three, I didn't even recognize my mother.

LEVINE: Why?

PETTI: You tell me why. I don't know. I didn't recognize her. She's a stranger to me.

LEVINE: Did she look like—

PETTI: Like I hated her.

LEVINE: Oh, you were just so angry.

PETTI: I hated her.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

PETTI: Like, you know, I felt, 'Why could she—she go and leave us?' I didn't understand that she had to follow her husband and everything. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Hmm. So when—during that time, your grandmother watched out for you?

PETTI: Well, my—my grandmother lived downstairs next door. And my cousin lived upstairs. She was already married and she had kids. And my uncle lived across the street and I really spent a lot of time with my cousin, was—she was about three, four years older than me. And—but I had to do my own cooking. I had to do my own business. You know what I mean? Mean—meanwhile, I was learning to sew. I was learn—because that—that's how it—you spent the time there. There's nothing else.

LEVINE: You—were you finished with school by then over there?

PETTI: No. Well, I finished all the schools that they had there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETTI: Then I had to go to the town, the big—to—to go to high—high school.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: But h—how was I going to go there?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: See?

LEVINE: So you stayed home.

PETTI: But when I came here, I made my business to go to school.

LEVINE: Oh, good for you.

PETTI: See, what happened was my father didn't want to send me to school because was a night school. "You can't go to school." But then there was my mother's friend, that she was going to school to become a citizen, to learn something about—so she says, "I'll—I'll take her with me." So I used to go three days a—three nights a week. I used to come home from work. Instead of eating, I used to go to school. I fell in love with the teacher. [laughs] So and—when—at night, I used to go to bed late because I wanted to study the—the spelling, 10 spellings each word, because I wanted, make good impression to the teach—I had long hair up

to the bottom here. I had beautiful hair then with nice w—r—black ribbon. Every time I walked in the classroom, the teacher would touch my hair.  
[laughs]

LEVINE: Oh. Now, that teacher didn't become your husband or anything?

PETTI: No. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles] No. You just had a crush on the teacher. Uh-huh.

PETTI: Yeah. But then you know what happened? After months—I don't remember how many months—he pushed me upstairs because I learned everything down there.

LEVINE: Wow.

PETTI: You know, upstairs. And I missed him. [laughs] But anyway, I graduated.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: Then they wanted—I could have gone to a high school, like. You know what I mean? But I had to go in another town and there was no transportation and—

LEVINE: Well, now, wait. Are you talking about in Italy now?

PETTI: No, here, here, here.

LEVINE: Oh, here. Yeah, okay.

PETTI: I had to go on a train.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: I had to go to Flatbush Avenue. We lived in Brooklyn, Flatbush Avenue.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-hmm.

PETTI: My father wouldn't send me, so and that was it. But my brother didn't go to school. He used to take the girls out to—to go to movies or something. Up to today, if he didn't marry somebody that knew how to write, he—that she's doing everything—he can't even speak English. And a lot of people that came from Italy, a lot of my daughter's friends' mother and father, that they—they don't even know how to speak—how could you live in—you know what I mean? I made my business—thank God.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: I could write my own checks. I could do everything. He never went to school.

LEVINE: Well, just to go back a minute. When—when you were in Italy—when your mother was here and your fath—and your stepfather, and you were just kind of sewing and making your own food and—and your brother and you were living in the same house—

PETTI: Yes.

LEVINE: —where you had always lived—

PETTI: We used to see—we used to—we had property and we had—they used to get—at the end of the, you know, [unclear]—what you mean, you get the ground and you get things like that. So we used to get so much stuff to—to live, fruit and everything.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. Uh-hmm.

PETTI: And we used to give so much to this lady, you know, to make bread for us, because there was no stores. But she put me to work. She had five kids. I had to watch all the kids. And you know what I mean, sometimes they would call her and I had to take care of the—the oven to heat up the—the bread. I was only a child. They made me work like a horse.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: And she used to give us three—three big loaves of bread ev—every—every week. You know. We were big eaters.

LEVINE: Three loaves wasn't—wasn't so—

PETTI: No. Well, with the—the big bread, like the three. Then I told her. I says, “You give us more bread.” She says, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. But three loaf is e—good for you.” I told my uncle. My uncle went and said, “Look. The kids need more bread.” So she gave us four every week, four loaves of bread. But she used to take all her—her—her ground to—you know, they used to [unclear] the ground for flour?

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PETTI: They had the mills, whatever you call it.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

PETTI: So—and my—my uncle used to give so much—

LEVINE: Grain so that you—

PETTI: —flour—

LEVINE: —could grind it?

PETTI: Grind it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: He used to have a ground—used to go and grinded the flour to give it to her. So she used to take care of her children with our stuff. But you know, you had to.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: But her husband, this woman's husband, the end, was a big help for us because we were kids that he made sort of a—get—we had a—men. They used to go to the—the—Palermo back and forth for the—for things. I don't know. He says, you know, you, you know, make papers for this—for these two kids. So—but that woman's husband had five kids. He helped us a lot with paperwork and everything. So in other word, one thing—

LEVINE: Right.

PETTI: One hand washes the other.

LEVINE: Right.

PETTI: Whatever you say.

LEVINE: Yeah. So in other words, do you remember the day when you found out that you were going to go to America? Do you remember being told [unclear]?

PETTI: Yeah. I didn't want to come to America after.

LEVINE: You didn't want to?

PETTI: No.

LEVINE: Because you were angry at your mother.

PETTI: I was angry at my mother and I—I had a boyfriend.

LEVINE: Ah.

PETTI: My brother and this fellow were, you know, close. They have—they had bikes and everything. They used to travel, the bike. It was always in my house and I used to go to church. It was a big thing, look nice, because I wanted to impress my boyfriend. And then I had a boyfriend. And then I—like, I got sort of used to being by myself, like I used to do my own work. I used to do—you know what I mean? I didn't want to come. I didn't want to come.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: But I'm a glad I come. God bless my stepfather, took us over here.

LEVINE: Yeah. How about your brother? Did he want to come to this country?

PETTI: Well, I guess. I don't know. And then my brother, when we came to this country, he had—we didn't get off the boat. The boat got—

LEVINE: Well, first, tell about leaving. Were—you had to go from your town. Do you remember, like, was there any kind of a sendoff when you were going or how did you get from—from your town—Blufi?

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: How did you get to Palermo and then tell the whole—the whole—

PETTI: Well—

LEVINE: —traveling?

PETTI: Well, this—this guy that I told you that took care of—for the bread, the one that was—she—he took us to, well, I would say maybe 30 miles would be where we catch the [unclear] to go to—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: —Berlin.

LEVINE: He took you by horse?

PETTI: Yes.

LEVINE: And did you—do you remember what you brought with you?

PETTI: No, I really don't remember. We didn't bring much. Yeah, we didn't bring much. You know, we brought just a few clothes to—to—

LEVINE: Did you make your clothes that you had?

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: Yeah. And then we—we went from there. So—and then in Palermo there was a guy that met us and—and it took care where we had to go and everything.

LEVINE: So you went [unclear]?

PETTI: So this guy was fix—I don't know how you call this guy that took care of us from there to Palermo, and then in Palermo there's some other guy that took care of us. We m—like, we meet you over here; everything was taken care.

LEVINE: Were they like agents for—

PETTI: Yeah, I guess so.

LEVINE: —the steamship line or anything like that?

PETTI: I guess so.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: I guess so.

LEVINE: I see. So, okay. So you got to Palermo. Then what did you get—take to get to Naples?

PETTI: I remember this man gave us two chicken, two chicken to bring it to this guy in Palermo because he was doing us a favor. Now, w—w—what the chicken—we're going to do?

LEVINE: Well, what—what kind of shape were the chickens in? [chuckles] I mean, were they just—were they—they weren't cooked? They were, like—

PETTI: No, they were—

LEVINE: They were live.

PETTI: They were—they were all cleaned and everything.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PETTI: You know, put in a box to bring to—the guy was so happy that we brought the chicken for—for—for a present.

LEVINE: Well, maybe he knew.

PETTI: Isn't that—doesn't that—

LEVINE: Maybe he knew—

PETTI: His—

LEVINE: —that would make him [unclear] [chuckles]—

PETTI: [unclear]

LEVINE: —and he would take care of you. Yeah.

PETTI: Just to take care of us.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: Two chicken.

LEVINE: Right. So—

PETTI: So—

LEVINE: Then, do you—do you remember—had you been to Palermo before that?

PETTI: Yeah, we were in Palermo about a month.

LEVINE: And when happened during that month?

PETTI: Not to go back and forth because we had no transportation.

LEVINE: Right.

PETTI: We stood in Palermo in a—in a hotel, whatever you call it.

LEVINE: What was that like, that month? Do you remember that?

PETTI: That was not like now hotel. That was like a boarding house.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: We had one room.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: So I sit in the room every day. I didn't know what to do. My brother—and my brother used to go around and go buy stuff and eat. I had to eat. I had to send, you know, the—the thing downstairs from the balcony, send money down. I don't know how much money I—so to bring pota—boil potatoes up so I could eat, not to go back and forth from the town because n—transportation wasn't—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: [unclear] Palermo because we were waiting week after week to get the okay to leave.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Understand? And that's why—

LEVINE: So how did you get the okay? Did you have to go someplace or did [unclear]?

PETTI: No, we had to get the—the—the thing there for the passport.

LEVINE: Passport, uh-huh.

PETTI: The—and they said, "Well, come back next week." I come back next week. And so we just went there, I think about two weeks, and then we went back to the town and straighten out, you know, whatever we are going to take. And then we—we waited another week and a half, I think, before we got that okay from the big office, whatever you call it, and that's what—when we came.

LEVINE: Wow.

PETTI: So another thing, my brother wore—bought sunglasses in Palermo and he wore those sunglasses like he was in [unclear] as a showoff. And on the boat he wore the sunglasses. Because his sunglasses—well, we came here, they won't let us out. They won't let us out. He had to be examined. And we were here three days. I—I slept on a bench at—and the bench—that they were there when I came, they're still here.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Yeah. We have the old benches.

PETTI: They're still there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: I—my son took pictures of me on the bench where I—we slept on a bench for two nights, and they starved us over here.

LEVINE: Well—well, tell about when you got—you finally got your passport.

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then what? You got on a—on a boat?

PETTI: Yes.

LEVINE: And the boat went from Palermo to Naples?

PETTI: Yeah, overnight.

LEVINE: Overnight. Then did you have to stay in Naples?

PETTI: Overnight.

LEVINE: Did you remember anything about Naples?

PETTI: No, [unclear] over—overnight there and the next day we h—we had to leave.

LEVINE: Okay.

PETTI: [unclear].

LEVINE: Then do you remember anything about the voyage? Anything about what happened on that passage from Naples to America?

PETTI: I remember nothing because I was sick as a dog.

LEVINE: Ah.

PETTI: I could never go upstairs on the boat because I was puking. I was throwing up. The boat was shaking or something.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: But my brother used to bring me food in the room. Says, "Come on. You gotta eat." "I can't eat." I used to—if I get up on a bed—my head out of the bed I would puke. I never got sick here, take cars to go to the boat. I go—I—I been on cruises. I never got sick. How come I was—I was sick because I think I was upset that I didn't want to come.

LEVINE: Were you down in the bottom of the boat?

PETTI: No.

LEVINE: Where were—what kind of—what kind of accommodations did you have? Do you remember?

PETTI: I had—I had my own room.

LEVINE: Oh, you had your own cabin?

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: There was a—a lady there but then she—they moved her, for some reason, I don't know. And then I was all by myself.

LEVINE: And your brother was someplace else too?

PETTI: Oh, yeah. He was with my mother, with—with men or whatever the—

LEVINE: Do—do you think you were traveling—do you kn—remember if you were, like, first, second or third class, traveling? Do you—do you have any idea?

PETTI: I don't know. No, I don't remember that.

LEVINE: Do—would you have gone, like, to a dining room? I mean, assuming you could eat.

PETTI: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Yeah, a nice dining room.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Where you could, you know, when th—they feed you good. But I couldn't—I couldn't—12 days, took 12 days. I w—I was in the room.

LEVINE: Do you—

PETTI: I thought I was going to die.

LEVINE: Ah, I bet. Do you remember when you came into the New York harbor? When the ship was coming into—

PETTI: Yes. I saw my father—the ship d—docked. As soon as we—I look up and I saw my father with that Fedora hat. My father was good looking, my stepfather.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: And my father was good looking. And I saw him. I says, "There's Papa." I told my brother, "There's Papa." He says, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I see him." He was at—at the edge. You know, he could see us. He—he couldn't see us. We saw him but he didn't see—

LEVINE: See you.

PETTI: And—but we couldn't get out. Then we found out everybody was out and we couldn't get out. They kept us over here three days.

LEVINE: So in other words, the ship came into New York and then you had to get on a ferry to Ellis Island.

PETTI: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Because they were going to hold you there.

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then you had to stay. Well, I—I think maybe this is a good place to pause because we're at the en—end of the tape. And then we'll continue with your life [chuckles] in America on the next tape. Okay?

PETTI: Oh, my God.

LEVINE: Sarah is waiting for you.

PETTI: You mean, all that I told you is in the tape?

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay, okay. We're going to pause here and we're at the end of tape one.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

LEVINE: —going to be a w—great interview. Okay. We're going to start now on tape two. And we were talking about your arrival in New York and you saw your stepfather. While you were still on the ship, you spotted him. Okay. And then you were brought to Ellis Island because your brother was wearing those sunglasses.

PETTI: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, talk about everything you can remember about Ellis Island.

PETTI: Well, Ellis Island, we—waiting to—you know, to get off. But then the boat—they took us away from there and they brought us here. And over here, we just sat and sat and sat. They were no bed where to go to sleep so they kept us here two—that—that day, you know, the night, the next day and then the next day. I mean, we didn't eat.

LEVINE: Well, you mean, you—you—you weren't given any beds? You didn't go into a room and sleep?

PETTI: No.

LEVINE: You just sat on—in the Great Hall?

PETTI: No. We were—we were on the bench.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: We slept on the bench.

LEVINE: Was that bench in that Great Hall downstairs?

PETTI: Yes, whatever it is. I saw the bench last time.

LEVINE: The great big room?

PETTI: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Huge room, uh-huh.

PETTI: I says, "This is the bench where we slept, my brother and I." My brother came to—over here too to see the—where we—we slept. And they didn't feed us until the next day.

LEVINE: Oh, my goodness.

PETTI: The whole night and the next day, they—they fed us pasta with cabbage. Cabbage, you know. But that was like a piece of meat because we—we were hungry. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: And in other words, your mother and stepfather couldn't come here?

PETTI: No.

LEVINE: Until you were, uh-huh, released. Uh-huh.

PETTI: No. And then the next morning there—there, my father and my mother came. They had—my mother had a little baby at that time and that's why she—but she came the next day. And that's when I said to you that I didn't recognize my mother. I'm looking at her; I didn't r—like, when she left us, I just got it out of my mind, like I didn't know her. You know, first they wanted to leave me there. Then I—they left me and they—I didn't realize all this, like, you know what I mean?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: That she had to come to America with her husband and everything.

LEVINE: So—

PETTI: Like, I didn't recognize her. I look at her like a—I was still angry, like I—turned my eyes like I didn't want to look at her. But my father, I hugged him and kissed and everything.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Because he was the best. You know, he was a single man. He got—got together and he was good with us. He sent money so my brother could buy a bike. He said—you—he—he was—he—he sent us package. It was some sweet, stuff like that. Now, who would do—a stepfather like that?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETTI: You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Yeah. So then your mother was here when you and your brother were released from Ellis Island?

PETTI: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: And where did you go? What—how—

PETTI: We went home.

LEVINE: W—and how did you go? How did you get there?

PETTI: I don't remember, we take a train or wh—I don't know how we got—we got home. I don't remember.

LEVINE: And—

PETTI: I was, like, too confused.

LEVINE: Oh, yeah. Sure. And you went to Brooklyn, you said?

PETTI: Yes, went to Brooklyn. The minute we got in—in the house, my father left. I says, "Where did he go?" When he came back, I says, "Where did you go?" He says, "I had to go and pay the people that give me the money." You know, he borrow money for us to—to—to—to come here. He says the minute he w—the min—the minute we came in, he had to go and pay the people money. I don't know who—who he owed money or anything like that.

LEVINE: Well, now, talk about your mother. H—how that ha—how did you—how did you get over your intense anger toward her and how did things go after you were here for a while?

PETTI: My mother, she may rest in peace, I took care of her after my father die. I took care of my father, took care of my mother. She lived to be 94 and I worked from seven to seven. I told you. I went to school. Then when I finished with school, you know, my—one of the girl—that lived on the

block was having a party. I says to her, "You know, I saw a dress that I want to buy." I says, "It's 2.98, two dollars and 98 cent." I says, "I want to go to the party, you know." She says, "I got no money to give you." I says, "But, you know, I got no clothes. I came from Italy, no clothes." You know what I mean? We came just came little [unclear]. I said, "I want to go to the party." She says, "I'll tell you what. I'll give you 50 cents. Go to the market and buy material and make your own dress." So when was the—you know, off on a Sunday they were open, you know, the peddlers or whatever you call. I went to the market. I—I couldn't buy it. With 50 cents, I couldn't buy a big enough piece of material to buy a—to make a dress. So what happened? I took two different color, one yellow, one brown. So I made myself a dress. She helped me. She helped me, you know, to sew it. First of all, I was too busy. Second, she helped me, was—so I made a dress, yellow with the pleats in here. You know, box pleats?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: Brown.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: I—the pleats brown and the back too, brown little collar and brown little cuffs. I was the best dressed in the—in the party. She wouldn't give me—then she had a little baby; it was two years old, three years old. She had the baby when she come here. And on—on the Saturday that they didn't work—I don't know—it was Sunday or Saturday, we used to take a walk on the avenue. This is in Brooklyn, Pitken [PH] Avenue. She would buy the kid Charlie Rooster or ice cream or something and she wouldn't buy me nothing, and I had to bring the envelope closed to my mother.

LEVINE: The envelope from work. You had to—

PETTI: From work. She used to give—she used to give me 10 cents a day to go to work.

LEVINE: And what were you doing for work?

PETTI: Well, I started to work in the bras, you know, cleaning 'em or put in boxes, whatever I was doing. So at lunchtime one day, I says, "Let me see. I'll buy something to drink." I used to take lunch from the house. So I saw a fruit store and I bought a—I thought it was lettuce. I figured, you know, it was dry, this—I ate some lettuce and the rest, I bring it home. Instead of lettuce, it was cabbage. I didn't know the difference. [laughs]

LEVINE: So—

PETTI: I couldn't go to the movies. The girls that I used to work with and, you know, sometime we didn't have—were off work. We got off. They went to the movies; I had to go home. I had no money to go to movies, even if it was 10 cents, the movie.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETTI: My mother—forget about it. Maybe—and I took care of her. You know, I took care—at the end, she lost control. You know what I mean, control? I had to clean her and everything. And my daughter used to come and pick me up at five o'clock from her house, and my brother lived upstairs with his wife. She wouldn't do nothing. She says, "So that's your mother, not my mother."

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETTI: And she came in and she said she went like this, my daughter. The smell.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETTI: She says, "I'll wait on the porch for you." And when she took me home with a car, she says, "If you think I'm going to do to you what you do for Grandma"—she says, "you go in a home." She says [laughter]—

LEVINE: Well, well, tell me now your—your—

PETTI: [laughs]

LEVINE: —first impressions when you came to this country, when you finally got off Ellis Island. Can you think of some of the things that stood out in your mind that you'd never seen before that w—were new to you that struck you? In the first, like, days and weeks?

PETTI: N—no. The only thing is, I was kept strict. My father wouldn't let me go out. He says because you must—he had a lot of people that knew him over here, you know, like a [unclear] or whatever you call it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: And—and he said he figures, "If I let you go out, people think that I don't care for you because I'm your stepfather." And he was very strict. He wouldn't let me go out. I got fr—friendly with a [unclear]. [unclear] means my maid of honor. When I got married, she was my maid of honor. I was friends with her before. Her and her sister used to come to call for me on

a Saturday or Sunday. "Come on. Let her come with us to the park." My mother says, "No. She's got to press the clothes. No, she's got to wash the curtain." "She's keeping you like a servant." My mother was heavy, big and I had—in the summer, we used to eat, whatever. They used to go down, my father and mother, downstairs for fresh air. I had to wash the dishes, clean up the floor and, you know, I had to take care of the baby. Saturday—Sunday, they used to go to New York to buy sugar—no—butter and eggs. They had a lot of friends in New York and then she—when she came they lived in New York. And then they moved to Brooklyn. So they had—they had friends in—in New York and they used to go every Sunday to buy stuff, like shopping in New York. And I had to cook. She used to tell me what—but I says, "I don't know how to do this." He says, "You ask her, [unclear]"—[unclear] was his next-door neighbor—"how to do it." I had to cook for them and watch the kid on a Sunday. And I couldn't go here and I couldn't go there. Now, you think that was a good—good thing?

LEVINE: Hmm-uh, no. So in other words, you didn't have any kind of fun.

PETTI: No.

LEVINE: You didn't enjoy yourself.

PETTI: I got marry. I was—was 17, not even 18 when I got marry.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Because I wanted to get away from home—from home.

LEVINE: Right. How did you meet your husband?

PETTI: Oh, my—my brother had a girlfriend and they used to go to Coney Island. You know what Coney Island is, yeah? And one day, I says, "Let me go to Coney Island too." They said, "Okay. But you go with your brother." "Okay." So my brother had the girlfriend and we went to Coney Island. And there were two other boys that my brother knew that they came from Italy and they made friends. They used to go out with the girls. So on Coney Island we had a—we went to a place that had a round, big round table. And there was a stage and they had a—some kind of a show. And you could buy something to—to eat or to drink.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: So we sat there. So my husband came and sit with us on a—on a table. So—and they got chummy, the boys, friends. "Where you come from?"

Where this and that. My husband came from—from New York. So—and there was like that. So a month passed. We went again. But they—

LEVINE: [unclear]

PETTI: —they talked. “We’re going to be here a certain day.” And we all went there. But he did have an old girlfriend. His girlfriend was in another town. I don’t know where. And his girlfriend had the mother but no father, you know. He was engaged with her. So he broke his engagement. He told my brother, “I like your sister.” He says, “Good.”

LEVINE: [chuckles]

PETTI: He came over the house to me—not over the house, to the hou—to the house. He waited downstairs for my brother, first time. The second time, my bro—when he says he like the sister, my brother says, “Well, come up. Meet my sister, my”—so that went on for a while. And then he came up and he says, “I like you—your daughter. I’d like to take her out, if she”—but meanwhile, I was hiding—I liked him too. He reminded me of my old boyfriend from the—Sicily. [laughs]

LEVINE: What—what was it about him that reminded you?

PETTI: His hair. He had beautiful wavy hair and I—I liked him. I—I couldn’t go no place. I couldn’t go out with a—a lot of people were going. A lot of girls were going to dance in New York, Roseland or stuff like that. Everybody, now after I was—“You never went to Roseland. You never”—never went anyplace. But the—but there was a—a boy on the—on the block around the corner that he had eyes for me too. But I couldn’t talk to him. They kept me like I was a prisoner. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: So—and then my—my father says—he used to come, meet my brother and go out. You know what I mean? Not with me, with my brother. Then he says to my father—he says, “I like your daughter. With your permission, if she likes me”—I says, “I like him.” I didn’t say it in front of him but I told my father, “I like him.” You know? He was a nice looking guy. So—and we got engaged. But the girlfriend that he had before, they took him to court because he was engaged to her. I didn’t get engaged then, but later on. And—and the judge says, “What do you want? She ch—he changed his mind. Is it better if he married and then he leave her?” But she had to keep the ring. So I had to wait for him to—to make him enough money to buy me a ring. [laughs]

LEVINE: [chuckles] So, meanwhile, you continued to work?

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: You were still working in the same place with the bras?

PETTI: No, no. Then I went to work as a model—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: —in a shop.

LEVINE: Oh, tell me about that. How did that happen?

PETTI: Well, one of the lady—a friend my mother's says, "Some—they need somebody in the shop." You know, she told me, "Would you want to come? They—they making dresses." I says, "Yeah." But I—I—I could sew but I didn't sew the—the electric machine. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Oh. What kind of a machine was it before—

PETTI: In the shop they have electric machine.

LEVINE: No, but what did you have?

PETTI: We were—

LEVINE: By hand, you were doing—

PETTI: No, no. With a pedal.

LEVINE: Oh, like a treadle.

PETTI: Yeah, I still have it.

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh.

PETTI: The machine that you push with a [unclear] by [unclear]. I couldn't sew with a machine. But they taught me how to use the snaps. You know, they used to make snaps here then? This, I'm talking about 70 years ago. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Snaps for, like—

PETTI: Yeah, the—

LEVINE: —for a skirt or something, you mean?

PETTI: Yeah, they used to sew buttons on the dresses or stuff like that. So I learned to sew—sewing machine. But one day after I worked there a while, the boss called me. I says, “Oh, my God. He’s gonna lay me off,” because things were bad by that time. My father got hurt. He was working with the street cleaning, you know—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: —on a horse. They used to put the dirt on a horse.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: At that time, they didn’t have trucks. Was years ago.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: So he was on top of there. The—the guy from down—from on the sidewalk gives the stuff, so he throws on top of the—the horse got scared and, for something, and stopped running. And there was a tree and he fell off the horse. And he was—at that time, there was no compensation or something, whatever you call it. And we had to work in order to—my mother was sewing coats. And when I came home, I had to take off the things, the basting or whatever you call it. So what was I—

LEVINE: You were talking about when you went in and the boss called you down when you were—

PETTI: Oh. The boss called me down. I says, “I got so scared he’s going to lay me off.” He says, “You know, you got high heels?” He says to me. I says, “No.” He says, “Oh, all right.” I says, “Why?” He says, “Well, I want—I want you to stand on the—on the thing and try a—a size seven dress.” I says, “Fine. Okay.” But I didn’t have no high heels. So anyway, they try me. They—they sew already the dress. I had to try it on. Dress fits—fits nice. And on me, they pulled it here and they pulled it there. They—you know, they—they fixed the dress for me. Then every time they made size seven they—they—

LEVINE: Try it on you.

PETTI: —they measure me. You know what I mean? Everything. Then every month they had a—the floor lady took me with her to New York (my father wouldn’t let me go) with a car. She bought me shoes, high heel shoes.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: And I had to try on these dresses. The people came from out of town to—to—to buy these here things or to see—

LEVINE: So did they come while you had the dress on to look at it?

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Yeah. And I would stand on the platform—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: —with high heels and the—and wear these different style dresses. And I used to get \$40 on the side there.

LEVINE: Wow!

PETTI: And working, I was only getting \$20, \$18. You know what I mean? Then I got married and become pregnant. I couldn't do that no more. So that money, I—I saved it. I didn't give it to my mother or to—for my wedding because then a year later we got married.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: And—and that was the story.

LEVINE: Wow. And what was your husband's name?

PETTI: Louis [PH].

LEVINE: Louis?

PETTI: Louis.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So when you said you were on Pitken Avenue, is that Brownsville? Is that—

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: —the section in Brooklyn?

PETTI: Yeah, Browns—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Or where you come from? Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, my stepfather came [chuckles] from Brownsville. That's why I remembered—

PETTI: Brownsville.

LEVINE: —that name of that street.

PETTI: Pitken Avenue. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, right. [chuckles] Right.

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. No, I grew up in New Jersey, so—but—okay. So when you got married, where did you live?

PETTI: Oh, I got my own place.

LEVINE: Also in Brooklyn?

PETTI: Yes, rented three rooms in apartment house.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: And I lived there and I—after three years, I got a baby. And my husband worked from 10 to 10 at night. Then I waited for him.

LEVINE: And what was he doing?

PETTI: He—he was a shoemaker.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: Shoemaker, fixing shoes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: And he used to t—work from 10 to 10 at night.

LEVINE: Now, he came from Italy—

PETTI: No. My husband was born here.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: But then when he was 12 years old they took him to Italy.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: And they were very poor. He used to try to sell—in church, try to sell chairs, so people could sit down, for two cents each.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: Two cents each. That was his job, you know, and he attended church—the church. But after, when he was 18 years old, he says, “I don’t want to stay here. I’m American born. I want to go to America.” He could have come because he was American born but he didn’t have no money. But he had a cousin, a nun, in Palermo. And he wrote to her if he could—she could help him for the—

LEVINE: Passage.

PETTI: To come here.

LEVINE: Come here, uh-huh.

PETTI: My—and she says yes, so she gave him the money. She says, “I’m not giving you the money, but I send them the money wherever, you know, you got to”—so he came to America. He was sending her money until we were married.

LEVINE: Wow.

PETTI: Package, money, because I was working for three years and he was working.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: Sending money to her and pay her back.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETTI: You know? And—and that was that. He had a stepmother. His father died in the war one day, bombed Naples, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: His father was here. His mother died here and then he marry somebody else, and the lady that he marry, she was always sick and was Italian too.

And she couldn't stay here and that's why they went back to Italy when he was 12 years old. You fi—you follow me?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: And he used to send package. I used to go around buying stuff just for him to send to his stepmother because his stepmother was good to him, he says.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: Then one—the guy came from Italy, from the town, the new—came to visit us because he came from the same town where my husband was. He says, "You sent packages to your stepmother. She's selling the stuff around. She doesn't need it." So my husband stopped sending a package. [laughs]

LEVINE: Wow.

PETTI: It's a little—it's a little—it's a little—

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, how about the Depression? You—these are the Depression years you're talking about [unclear].

PETTI: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: H—can you say anything about the Depression? How it—how it affected you, your family, other people?

PETTI: No. Us, no.

LEVINE: No?

PETTI: Didn't affect because we had ground, you know. After years we were here, my—my stepfather—cousin came from Italy. He had been here. He went to Italy back—and then come back. And he says, "While you're there, see if you could put the—the property for sale."

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: So—and whatever happened then, I don't know. They sold some of the property and, you know, the houses and everything. So we had money.

LEVINE: I see.

PETTI: And when I got married, the government sent me money too. We bought furniture, you know, because I got married at 18.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: When—once you're 18, stops, but they send you—I wrote to them that I was getting marry and everything and they send me money.

LEVINE: Now, why was that? Because of your father?

PETTI: Because my father was dead in the war.

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh. I see.

PETTI: See? I was—I was getting money until 21.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: So being I got married before 18, they send me three years—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: And my brother, they gave him money till he was 18 and no more.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PETTI: But I'm here, thank God.

LEVINE: So what did your brother do, just as an aside? What—

PETTI: He—

LEVINE: What did he do when he came here?

PETTI: My—when he came here he went to work on the pocketbooks.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: He couldn't speak English. Then somebody says, "But you—you know—you know how to be a carpenter, stuff like that." Says, "There's a place there you could go send—tell him I sent you" to my father. My father was finding out where you could—so he went to work on cabinets, you know, and he made good money.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: But he didn't understand nothing as far as written in English. Italian, he understood. So—but he made good money. After years, my—my husband went in business as a shoemaker, you know. He had the store as shoemaker.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PETTI: Then he made application to work for the city and he got called. He went to the Y to, you know, to learn whatever he had to learn. And then he got a job with the city, you know, at Transportation. With TA—TAs.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: So then he—he taught my brother. He used to come every night to study because my brother didn't know how to t—talk English or do this or do that. So he stopped [unclear] cabinet and he worked as a—

LEVINE: Transportation?

PETTI: Transportation.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Is—would that be on the subways?

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: And my brother's—he'll be 90 this—the—this coming year, December.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, yeah.

PETTI: He's still okay.

LEVINE: Good.

PETTI: We must have come from a good [unclear]. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Your good genes, huh?

PETTI: Good genes, yeah. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Well, how about the buildup to World War II? Do you remember that happening in this country? Do you remember anything about the war, from your experience?

PETTI: Yes, my husband was—didn't go to war because he—he had the children. He had two children. They didn't take them. Besides, was essential what he was doing, transportation.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PETTI: He didn't go to the—to war, my husband.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: But my son, they were in college. They didn't call them because, while you're in college, they didn't call. But then they changed and my youngest son, they called to go.

LEVINE: You're talking about later now—

PETTI: Yeah, later on. Yeah.

LEVINE: —after World War II. Yeah, uh-huh. Uh-huh.

PETTI: So he went. He was starting college, my youngest son, but when he—they called him, he went for three months and then they sent him back.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: For—for a reason, I don't know. They didn't—but when they—when he did come back, that they didn't send him after three months, he didn't go back to college. He says, "Oh, I'll take a year off. I'll go. I'll take a year off. I'll go." But he never went.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, when you—when you think about being Italian and being American, how—how do you think about that for yourself?

PETTI: Well, I'm proud to be Italian.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. You—

PETTI: I—I did what everybody does. I had to go to work here. I used to—the children went to school. I had the little boy. I had to go to kindergarten. I bring him to kindergarten. And then at three o'clock my daughter comes out because she's five years older than him. I pick him up, bring her home, and then I work till five o'clock. I worked.

LEVINE: Oh, what—what did you do then?

PETTI: I worked on skirts in the neighborhood on the sewing machine. By then, I—I knew how to [unclear] the sewing machine.

LEVINE: You mean in your home, you did the work?

PETTI: No, no, no, no.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: Was two blocks away.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: They had a—a store. They were making skirts. I was working on skirts.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah. So you—you worked while you had still young children.

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah.

PETTI: Not when I had the two—the two boys and my daughter. I worked more when I had the little boy, had to go to wait until the kindergarten. Then I used to bring him to school in the afternoon. And at one o'clock I would go to work. At three o'clock, my daughter comes out of school. I brings them home and wait to say, "You stay home"—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: Until I came home for—for—I used to work from one to five.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Part time, you know.

LEVINE: What—

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B]

LEVINE: —in Brooklyn and why did you move out of Brooklyn?

PETTI: I—I—we lived in Brooklyn in three rooms and I had three kids. I couldn't get rooms because they—nobody wanted children at that time. Now, I don't know what they [unclear]. They didn't want no children. So no matter where we went looking for rooms, you couldn't lie.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Right.

PETTI: I—I—I have three chil—

LEVINE: They'd find out, for sure.

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: And they—I couldn't get rooms. Nobody wanted to rent rooms for children. So we tried to buy a house with my father and us, because my father and mother, they were paying rent to an apartment h—when we looked for a house, just, "Well, I don't want to go downstairs with you. Your children going to trample" on top of my—my mother. I says, "Okay. So you take upstairs." I took—she says, "What do I need six rooms for?" She was so—so that went on. We didn't have money and that time the—the—the houses weren't lot of money, 500—\$5,000, you could have gotten a house.

LEVINE: Wow.

PETTI: We didn't have five—five cents.

LEVINE: You're talking—are—what years are you talking about? After the war or—

PETTI: Oh, I don't know. When was the war?

LEVINE: Well, it—it was over in '45. So you—when did you get married? Do you remember what year you got—

PETTI: '36.

LEVINE: '36. Oh, okay. So—oh, but you already had two children.

PETTI: I had big children then.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: I had big children.

LEVINE: Yeah, so it's in the '40s.

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: So we sort of look—look around. I had a baby, this—the little boy. And we looked around and one of my [unclear] was gramata [PH]. Gramata's the ones that baptize the children. We called it gramata. So they had bought a house five years [unclear] and they says—we used to visit with one another and she says, "You know, there's rooms. There's a—a house for sale." I says, "Well, we'll go and see." I didn't go see it but my husband went and see. So—and he says, "You know, I can't get into the house. They won't let me in," because the house was rented and the people [unclear]. So—no, the—the lady that was selling the house didn't live there. And she says to him, "They won't let you in because I send a lot of people. They won't let you in. But try to go and say that you're a painter." They wanted the place painted. "And look at the rooms." You know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: So my husband went there. He says, "You know, I'm a painter. The lady sent me to see. What do you need? What"—so they let him in. So he come home and he says, "It's got fi—five nice rooms." He says, "It's—it's—it's a house. We're going to try to—to buy it." I says, "Okay." I didn't even want to see it.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

PETTI: So my husband went back to the lady, says, "Yeah, I'll give you a deposit. I'll give a \$50 deposit." So—and the following Sunday we went and the lady met me and my kids. You know, we all went. So we—we had not much money, had to take the money from sch—the kids in school had bankbooks. I had to take money from the ki—the other kid's [unclear]. [chuckles] But the lady gave—gave us a second mortgage. We got a mor—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: She says—she says, "I'll give you the second mortgage. You've got children," she says. She was very nice. So what happened? So we bought a house.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So how did you like being in Queens? How did it compare to Brooklyn?

PETTI: I used to go back to Brooklyn all the time because over there I had friends, take the train with the little kid to go in Brooklyn all the time. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: For a while, but then after a while, you know, [unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: I felt strange but we had a house. We couldn't fix or anything, you know what I mean? And we used to pay the mor—that's when, you know, I had to go to work, like I said—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: —to try—the money that I was making, we gotta pay the lady and we gotta pay for the—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: And we bought the house for \$15,000.

LEVINE: So did you feel like you were moving up in the world? I mean, did you [unclear]?

PETTI: I had a little baby. I had to put—at least, I had a way to put—I have a driveway. I used to put the carriage and the baby there from the kitchen. I used to see—of, then, Brooklyn, I lived upstairs.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: I used to pay for the carriage, \$3 a week. No, a month, I think.

LEVINE: A month.

PETTI: To keep the carriage in the store. And it was comfortable. You know, but for a while I went back and forth to Brooklyn because I had all my friends there. I knew everybody there on the block, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah. So y—you—

PETTI: I'm there since '52.

LEVINE: Oh, you still—that's where you are now? Where you were, where you bought the house? Uh-huh.

PETTI: 1952, we moved, in November.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Fifty-two years, fifty-three years.

LEVINE: Wow.

PETTI: I'm still there. It's a pr—it's a nice neighborhood. A lot of people sold and people moved in, but the people don't bother you.

LEVINE: And what section of Queens is it?

PETTI: Ozone Park.

LEVINE: Ozone, uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. So when you look back on your life, wh—what would you say were the high—was the high points? In other words, what—

PETTI: A high point, whether it was good or—

LEVINE: Yeah, good.

PETTI: —that was bad?

LEVINE: Good.

PETTI: The high point was when my children, you know, graduated college. The—the second boy graduated Madison Square Garden. I dressed with a lace dress. I felt like I was the queen and them—and the kids make me feel like I—I—like I—I'm queen, like—they educated kids and they have master degrees and all that s—sort of thing. Even my daughter-in-law's a teacher too. She—she don't teach but she's a teacher.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, She could teach. Uh-huh.

PETTI: The other one is a—whatever she is in the hospital, you know, big—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Big thing. She teaches the other nurses, whatever you call—I know the word but I can't think about that. Administrator?

LEVINE: Administrator.

PETTI: Is that it?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: Is that the—

LEVINE: Yeah, administrator, supervisor.

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Whatever.

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: My daughter's a teacher.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: And my two granddaughters—one of the granddaughter works half of day, you know, where they make that—makes money. My daughter's daughter, and one is a nurse. You know, they're all good kids.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you think coming to this country as a 13 or so years old, do you think you—do you think that made a—a difference in you as a person? Let's say compared with if you had stayed? Do you think coming here and having to cope with the whole new culture, a whole new place, people—do you think that made a difference in, like, your personality and the way you think about things, the way you approach things? Do you think it did?

PETTI: Well, you know, it works gradually, like you—you know, as far as you are what you are. You know what I mean? But in my neighborhood, there's a lady across the street. She comes across. She's says, "I got to talk to you." I says, "Why?" She says, "Every time you come out of the house you look like you come out of the [unclear] machine." She tells me that. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, huh.

PETTI: [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: I like dresses. I like, you know, to shop and especial now that, you know, I'm not saying I'm rich, but I could afford more.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: I buy what I like. You know what I mean? Even if I don't need it. You know, sometimes when you go store, you look for something, you can't find it?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: Well, when you see it, that you like it, you buy it and put it in the closet. I got a closet full of clothes. [chuckles]

LEVINE: So you think that would have been the same, even—no matter where you were?

PETTI: Sure.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: I was fanatic too when I was in Italy as a kid.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: I told you, I used to go to church with a [unclear] thing and my hair fixed up and every—now, I don't even—I still fix my hair but I'm not that fussy. When I was in Italy, if I went to church I had to be just so. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: I h—I had a lot of kids, friend that grew up together, but when we went to Italy they looked terrible. Oh! A couple of them—couple of them moved out. They got married. They went to different town. But whatever, I found, they—ah! I says, "They look so old!" But then I says to myself, 'But then I don't look at myself, how I look.' [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: [sentence unclear]. [laughs] But to me, they looked—

LEVINE: They looked [unclear].

PETTI: See, in Sicily it's very warm country, hot country. And they all looked dried up. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: And—and it's not like—maybe the young girls—maybe they put a little cream on their face. But the older people, they—my cousin, she—she'd get a piece of bread. You know, the round bread. Under the shirt, she takes a piece and—you know, sweating. What the heck? You put—you know what I mean? That the—I says, "Don't—don't you cha—don't you change that dress?" I says, "I smell." She says, "No. I—I—last week I changed it." Me, over here it's different. You got water. You got—you know, over there, there wasn't that much water.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: She saved the water to w—to wash the clothes or she saved the water to throw it in the toilet. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: It's different kind of—even though they—the things—lot of new over there. You know what I mean. But the older people, they—they still like the old—

LEVINE: They're still the way they were. Uh-huh.

PETTI: The way they were.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, you must have seen a lot of changes in your life. I mean, things that—I mean, you probably wen—like, even the radio must have been something new.

PETTI: My—we—when I was keeping company with my husband, my—my father says, "Oh, I'll—at least I buy a radio so they—they could listen to the radio." The guy would come. Where's he going to listen to the radio? One time—one day, I told her, "Why don't, you know, you cook?" on a Sunday. "Why don't you let him stay here?" And he let him come for dinner because he used to come Sunday, later afternoon, my husband. For the half hour, now. Then he went—because we couldn't go out. We couldn't talk in front of them. You know what I mean? He says, "No, no, no." "I don't want nobody home," she used to say. The old people—she

didn't know how to wri—write and read, my mother. She didn't know any better, I guess. My father, yeah, he knew. He went to school. He knew it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: When my father came to America we used to write the letters, a—and we taught my mother, do the—the—a signature.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: We let her practice, at least to sign [unclear]. She didn't know how to write or read. She didn't know any—any—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: I'm not saying she was dumb. She was no dumb. She knew the \$5, what it was, the money. But, like, she was very stern and—now, why? Why? You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: She was—

LEVINE: Maybe it's the way she was raised and she just—

PETTI: Could be.

LEVINE: Yeah, right.

PETTI: But I was raised that she was stern.

LEVINE: That's true. [chuckles]

PETTI: I'm not stern.

LEVINE: Right. Well, but you're more—you're more aware and you're more, you know, educated, more aware of what—yeah.

PETTI: Probably.

LEVINE: But in this Italian community in—in Brooklyn where you came to, were there organizations—were there groups—

PETTI: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: What—what kind of organ—

PETTI: My boys belonged to the Boy's Club. They had—and they still have—I still belong. The kids are all gone. I still belong to Boy's Club.

LEVINE: But what about like, ethnic, like Italian groups? Were there Italian groups [unclear]—

PETTI: Yeah, they had—they call a—a—hmm—

LEVINE: The Sons of Italy? Is that what you mean?

PETTI: There's the Son of Italy but the—our group—but I don't belong no more. My husband and I used to belong.

LEVINE: But I was thinking when you first came, were there—

PETTI: No, we first—first came, we didn't have no—

LEVINE: No.

PETTI: It's—we moved to—to Ozone Park. We didn't know anything, just used to go to church, talked to the prie—see, the church is near us and the priest used to come back and forth. In fact, when my husband was very sick—he died with lung cancer, you know—

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: —and the priest used to come. I always used to work in the front yard. There was the flowers and every—the—the priest with the book used to walk back and forth, used to talk to my husband. And when he was sick, he used to come and visit my husband in the hospital. Even in the house, he came to—a couple of time. Even when he died, he came to the grave, the prie—and like me, I'm—I go to church. Every Sunday, my daughter comes to my house. We go to—we have breakfast and we go to church—

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETTI: —together.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So what are you looking forward to now? What—what are you—look forward to?

PETTI: Well, I have a friend that, you know, for 16, 17 years.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: I see him twice a week but we don't do nothing. Maybe we go out to McDonald, you know what I mean, or we—we don't go, like—if I go to a cruise, I go with my daughter and her husband, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: We don't. But it's—it's company.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: At least somebody c—

LEVINE: That's nice.

PETTI: —comes as a—he has a car. We go to McDonald. We go to Burger King. Sometimes, like for his 7—80<sup>th</sup> birthday, I—I—I try—try—you know, treat him.

LEVINE: Oh.

PETTI: We went to a good restaurant.

LEVINE: Restaurant.

PETTI: You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: And when it was my birthday, he took—he paid for my—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: But it's—it's just like a friend.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: So—and he comes. If—if there's anything to do around the house that I need some help, he helps me. But now, he's—he's no feel so good, you know? But he's a nice guy.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: You know, to—for company. He says to me, "If you need something, I'll take you," because he's got the car and everything.

LEVINE: Right.

PETTI: But now, he's—he's older and he's not feeling so good. But, see, he was never sick in his life. Since he was 80, all the kids gave me a big birthday, a big, big birthday. My son, this one, he made my—see, when I was modeling, I have nice pictures of myself with it, because I says, "Gee, at least I'll take a picture of this thing." And he made a—as—as big as this door, a picture.

LEVINE: Oh. [chuckles]

PETTI: Yeah, enlarged.

LEVINE: How nice. Uh-huh.

PETTI: And when—when they gave me a party, they put that picture there. Now, look at me. I don't look like that. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: And one half on—on the other side. People came in. You know, was a big thing that—that he—they blew that very, very—

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: I—I can't say much about—and they give me a big, big picture. He says—him says—my friend, since his 80s, "Everything is happening to me." He's got—he's got to take that pill. I don't know what kind of pill he's taking, for the blood.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: He had a—an eye operation, cataract. It didn't come out too good and he's still put—two years, he's still putting drops in his eye.

LEVINE: But you, on the other hand, you seem very healthy.

PETTI: No. I don't take no pills. I don't take no medica—see, I belong to senior citizen. I don't go. They're too old for me. [laughter] You know, I don't go because who's on crutches or who's—you know, like, it's not for me. And—and the lady says to me, "You got to reregister every year," you know. So to—to belong, so I register. "What medication?" I says, "I don't take no medic"—they can't believe I don't take no medication or nothing.

LEVINE: Do—do you—were you aware when the Trade Towers were hit? When—when 9/11, when the Trade Tow—

PETTI: Yeah.

LEVINE: What was your reaction to that?

PETTI: Oh, my God! I thought—I thought it was terrible when I heard. I says, “Oh, my God!” You know, “Oh, my God! All those people!” I—I couldn’t get over it. Right away, I went to the senior citizen to see if they knew. They had a big TV there. They—and everybody was so t—terrible, like we were hit. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Ah, yeah.

PETTI: Wasn’t that terrible?

LEVINE: Terrible.

PETTI: And ever since that happened, everything’s going wrong, the war and everything.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: A lot of people are not working.

LEVINE: That’s true. That’s true. Well, we’re getting near the end of the tape. I want to—is there something, anything that you can think of that maybe we didn’t cover that you want to talk about? Anything else that you would like to say?

PETTI: For instance, what—what subject? What [unclear]—

LEVINE: Well, I just wonder, just about your—your—starting your life one place and coming here and spending, really, the rest of your life in this country. Anything else that you can think of that has to do with that?

PETTI: The only thing that I was very shocked when my husband died because he was the only guy that died in my family. My mother was still living. My father was still living. And after he died, I felt like my—my heart was pumping like that.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETTI: Now, the people, th—th—their husband die, they don’t—nothing. Me, I took it so bad.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PETTI: I—I used to see him w—after he was dead, walk in the driveway. I had to open the window to see if it was him. I—that I took very, very bad.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: And I had to go for the—through the church. I had to go for, like, counseling. Not—I wouldn't call it counseling [unclear] what. We used to meet a lot of people—

LEVINE: Grief—like grief counseling, huh?

PETTI: So when I see all the people who lost a daughter, 15, who lost a—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: —I says, "They're worse off than I am."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: But it helped a little bit.

LEVINE: Good, uh-hmm.

PETTI: It helped, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

PETTI: I went—we—we had to pay someone. You know what I mean? But I tried to go someplace where they really—you have a better—but they—they would have charged more money. I didn't have money. See, my husband died. He worked for the city. And when he retired, he retired because he couldn't work with the boys no more. They'd come. They're young people. They don't know how to do nothing. They—"I have to do the work. They getting paid. I'm getting aggravated." He had put in his time. He retire. See? And when he retire, he took all the pension himself. He says, "I'm still young. I could get another job."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: You know. He asked me. I says, "I don't know nothing about that."

LEVINE: Right.

PETTI: My father took the—the pension by himself. He worked with the street cleaner.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: But he lived to be 89.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PETTI: And my brother took his pension and he—he got it himself. But he’s—he’s going to be 90. You know what I—

LEVINE: Yeah.

PETTI: I didn’t know any different. So he took all his pension. When he died, I had nothing. I was young. I was probably 55. I couldn’t get no widow’s pension until I was 62. And I had to go to work to—ah, really no work but was like in the office in the church. But you—

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PETTI: And my children were good to me too.

LEVINE: I’m sure.

PETTI: You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PETTI: And—but I’m here.

LEVINE: You—you’re wonderful, and I think—I think we’ve covered everything and I—I want to thank you.

PETTI: More than—

LEVINE: You—you’re wonderful. This has been [unclear] interview.

PETTI: You know, when they told me that you gotta—I says, “No, I’m not going to talk to nobody. What am I going to do? What”—but you’re such a nice—

LEVINE: Well, you’re—

PETTI: —person.

LEVINE: Ah, thanks.

PETTI: Such a disposition, like it's nice to talk to you. [chuckles]

LEVINE: So nice to listen to you. [chuckles] Well, I want to thank you and—

PETTI: Did you get bored?

LEVINE: Not a bit.

PETTI: No kidding. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Not a bit. I've been speaking with Josephine Petti, who came here in 1931 from Italy. And this is Janet Levine on June the 14<sup>th</sup>, 2003 at Ellis Island, and I'm signing off of tape two.

[END OF INTERVIEW]