

EI-130

SUNDAY (DOMENICA) CALABRESE WOOD

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RUNNING TIME: 59:20

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 2/1994

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ITALY, 1932

AGE 11

SHIP: "THE ROMA"

PORT: NAPLES

RESIDENCES:

- **COMPARNI**
- **THE US: FREEPORT, LI, NY**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And I'm here today in North Merrick, Long Island with Sunday Calabrese Wood, who came to the United States in 1932 from Italy when she was eleven years old. I'm very happy to be here.

WOOD: Happy to have you here.

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LEVINE: Thank you. And we'll start by my asking you your birth date.

WOOD: Right. My birthday is May 30th.

LEVINE: And what year?

WOOD: 1920.

LEVINE: 1920. So that when you came here you were about to turn twelve years old.

WOOD: Right. I was about to turn twelve years old. A few days short.

LEVINE: Okay. Good. Okay, then, where were you born in Italy?

WOOD: I was born in a little town named Comparni, but that is not registered on the map. The next town is a small city called Mileto and that is where we're registered when we're born.

LEVINE: I see. Now, when you say things like the names of towns in Italy, if you could spell them it would be helpful. Can you spell the name of the little town where you were born?

WOOD: Yes. C-O-M-P-A-R-N-I.

LEVINE: Okay. And how about the town?

WOOD: Mileto is M-I-L-E-T-O. That is where the registry is where they register birth certificates, marriages and so on.

LEVINE: Okay. And how about your mother? What was your mother's maiden name?

WOOD: My mother's maiden name was Campisi.

LEVINE: Could you spell that, please?

WOOD: C-A-M-P-I-S-I.

LEVINE: Okay. And her first name?

WOOD: Concetta, C-O-N-C-E-T-T-A.

LEVINE: And how about your father's name?

WOOD: My father was Michele. That is Michael there. In this country he was called Mike. It's M-I-C-H-E-L-E.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, did you have other family members living in the immediate area?

WOOD: Yes. I had many, many relatives in Bridgeport, Connecticut, in Wallingford, Connecticut. And right now I have relatives in California and

Colorado.

LEVINE: Well, now, how about back in Italy? First of all, did you have brothers and sisters living with you?

WOOD: I had one brother. He was almost five years old when we came here. At the time when we came here it was just my mother, my brother and I. My father was already here. He came here first in 1921, but then he made a trip back in Italy where he stayed six months. And he had not seen my brother until we came here in 1932.

LEVINE: Okay. And how about aunts and uncles, grandparents? Did they live near you in Italy?

WOOD: Yes. I had a great-grandmother who lived two doors away from us. She and I was constantly together. We used to take walks to her land. She owned a beautiful piece of land that was sloped. It had olive trees, and it was surrounded by hills and mountains. During the evening she came over to our house, and we sat by the fireplace, and she told me so many, many stories, so many fairy tales.

LEVINE: Really. Can you remember any specific?

WOOD: Yes. I remember, well, she told me about, she told me Cinderella, and she told me about Moses and, oh, she told me so many. But one thing I do remember is when we left Italy. A few days before she and I took a walk to her land and she was very, very sad. She said, "Ah." She said,

"You're going to America now. Some day you will remember me. But," she said, "remember when you get there, when you reach The Battery there is a row of fountains there. You have to see that there is one, find out which one it is, that you cannot drink out of. Because when you drink from that certain fountain you're going to forget all of us that you're leaving here." So when I arrived at the Battery I was looking for the row of fountains, but I didn't see the row of fountains. So I said I guess since I didn't see them it must be okay. She also wanted me to write and tell her about the Brooklyn Bridge, because she had heard about the Brooklyn Bridge. But she died before I saw the Brooklyn Bridge. Today when I'm driving along many, many times I think of her. The words echo in my memory. "You're going to America now. Some day you will remember me."

LEVINE: And what was she like? What kind of a personality was your great-grandmother?

WOOD: Well, she was very knowledgeable. She was a lady of class. She had class. But yet she loved her land. She loved to go to her land. She loved to plant cucumbers and peppers and string beans, and just go for excursions. We had a flower festival where we threw flowers in the street. That was around in May. And she always used to bring me flowers from the country. We were constant companions. And as my mother told me in the evening I always slept, fell asleep on her lap.

LEVINE: And, now, was that your mother's grandmother, or . . .

WOOD: That was my mother's grandmother.

LEVINE: And did, and did your mother, was your mother's mother and father around?

WOOD: No. My mother's mother died when my mother was a child.

LEVINE: I see.

WOOD: So she was brought up by the grandmother.

LEVINE: I see. And what was your great-grandmother's name?

WOOD: Her name was Rose, Rosa Costa.

LEVINE: Is that . . .

WOOD: Costa.

LEVINE: Could you spell that?

WOOD: The first name is spelled R-O-S-A. Costa is spelled C-O-S-T-A. And she had two daughters, one that died. One that was my mother's mother that died when my mother was a child, and she had another daughter who came here in this country in the 1900's, and she settled in Bridgeport. So we found, my mother found an aunt when she came here, and cousins.

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LEVINE: Oh, wonderful, wonderful. Okay. Now, how about your father's side of the family? Were they around nearby?

WOOD: My grandmother. I vaguely remember my father's father. I was a child. Very vaguely I remember him. He was a tall, thin, good-looking man. My grandmother was a short woman. She was a small woman. She was a farm woman. They were farmers. They worked in the fields.

LEVINE: Was this a farming community?

WOOD: It was a farming community. But my mother was educated in the city because she had been born in the city. My mother was born in the city of Laurene Di Borello.

LEVINE: Wow. Could you spell that one?

WOOD: (she laughs) L-A-U-R-E-N-A. Then capital D-I, capital B-O-R-E-L-L-O.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, in the, considering the map of Italy, what part of Italy was, were you living in? Was it the northern part or . . .

WOOD: It was in southern Italy, Calabria. And it was on the Tyrrhenian side, near the toe of Italy.

LEVINE: Okay. And so your mother was educated, and what did she do? Did she actually work when she was in Italy?

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WOOD: No. She did not work, no. She was just a housewife while Papa was in America, so she was alone raising two kids. But she had help. My aunt, an aunt lived next door to us and two doors away lived my great-grandmother.

LEVINE: Now, was your father, what did your father do before he went to America, when he was in Italy?

WOOD: He was a farmer.

LEVINE: A farmer. And then, was he sending money? I mean, how did you get along?

WOOD: Yes. He sent money to Italy, yes, to us.

LEVINE: And, let's see. Did you go, you must have gone to school then.

WOOD: I was almost, I was in fourth grade when we left there.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the school there?

WOOD: Yes. It was a one-room schoolhouse. It was like a Roman building. They were, there was one staircase going to the right and one going to the left. That began outside after you went through a portico. We went to the left and we climbed the staircase and we went in. There were two windows, and then in the center there was a wall and we had a picture of Moses. And ahead of this, in front of the room there was the desk that the

professor, it was a male teacher and we called him Professor. And then there were pictures, the picture of Mussolini, of course, at that time. And the picture of, there was a cross. First we had a cross. And we went in and then there was a blackboard catty-corner. And whenever somebody didn't behave, the teacher would put them behind the blackboard. We had one very tall fellow, and every time he didn't behave he was put behind the blackboard and we'd see his feet and his head, and we used to go hysterical laughing. We were also punished if we didn't behave. We had to put our knees not on corn, on chi-chi beans.

LEVINE: Oh. You had to kneel on them?

WOOD: Kneel on them for a little while. Then there was this girl. She never behaved. So she was constantly made to lean on the chi-chi beans. And one day her mother and her grandmother came over and says, "You can't do that to her because she's very fragile." After that we kept calling her, "Miss Fragile, Miss Fragile, Miss Fragile." (she laughs)

LEVINE: And what was your favorite subject in school?

WOOD: Mostly geography and history. I wanted to learn about the world. I was very curious about the world.

LEVINE: What did you think about America before you left Italy? What were your ideas? Do you remember?

WOOD: Yes. I thought America was like a heaven where everybody, it must, I

thought it was full of kings and queens and princes and everybody was so rich.

LEVINE: Now had you, did your father write back to you and your mother and tell you things?

WOOD: Well, not those things, no. That was generally told in general by all of the people that the streets were made of gold, that everybody did so well here.

LEVINE: Do you remember at all what your father wrote back over those years when he was here, or when he came back to visit? Anything that he told you specifically that, you know, maybe was in your mind?

WOOD: Well, the Brooklyn Bridge. That's what I remember mostly.

LEVINE: He thought that was remarkable.

WOOD: Yes, was a wonder of construction, yes. And that he constantly wanted us to come to America. He constantly asked for that.

LEVINE: And how about your mother? Was she looking forward to coming to America?

WOOD: Well, she was of mixed emotions because she was leaving her great-grandmother who brought her up since she was young, and she was leaving a sister whose husband was in South America. She was alone,

too. But she did want to come here. After all she thought her husband came first.

LEVINE: Now, can you remember the house you lived in?

WOOD: Oh, yes. We had three huge rooms, all on the ground. And we had, we had a floor that was made of cement blocks, and there was, in one room there was the design of a huge star. In the other rooms it was all squares, but it was cement squares, and we had, we swept it every morning. Then we had a huge door, and we walked out into the garden. The garden was the most beautiful of all. We had three huge grapevines. There were three lemon trees and a huge orange tree. There was a mulberry tree with white mulberries, and we used to take the huge tablecloth, and four people would hold one on each corner. And somebody would go up there and shake the mulberry tree, and we would get the mulberries onto the table cloth. Then we pulled the little leaves out, we put them in baskets, and we gave everybody a basket.

LEVINE: So there were you, your mother and your brother living in these three rooms.

WOOD: Right. My great-grandmother had five chests of bees in one corner. She loved her bees. We used to have fresh honeycombs in the morning. And then the back, in the back of the yard way in the back there was a huge tree. And beyond that was all land, farmland.

LEVINE: This is behind your grandmother's.

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WOOD: We had adjoining gardens, and behind that it was all vast land with trees. There were no houses. The houses were to the north, in front of us, below us, but not beyond our garden.

LEVINE: Now, what did the, what farming was done? What kind of farming?

WOOD: Well, wheat. They planted wheat. And I remember them, when the wheat was ripe they cut it with a sickle and tied it in bundles and made these big haystacks. Then it was thrashed. Originally it was thrashed on a cement platform. They beat it with these long, it was, they were sticks with something heavy, flat, at the end. And then they sort of cast it out into the air, and after they cast it it sort of separated the grain, the wheat, from the straw, and they gathered. But then we put it in round objects and we picked whatever had to be picked out. I did that.

LEVINE: Now, did you do that?

WOOD: I loved that, yes. I loved that, yes.

LEVINE: Now, were there paid people working on your great-grandmother's and your mother's farms?

WOOD: Some people, but there was a lot of bartering.

LEVINE: Oh. Could you say anything about that?

WOOD: Yes. Bartering is today we help you what you have to do and tomorrow when I have something to do you'll come over and help me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Would you say that you were comfortable as far as economically over there, or how would you describe . . .

WOOD: Well, I saw a lot of poverty, but we were very comfortable because Papa was sending money from America. My great-grandmother owned land. They came from people that had land. In other words, what I mean to say, we had, we were of, we were people that originally did have something. Now, we were not rich, but we were not as poor as the poorer people. In fact, we were among the three best, three most comfortable families there. And my mother used to go to the city and buy material. She used to make me adorable dresses. And they had a contest, they had several contests, and I was voted one of the three best-dressed girls.

LEVINE: Can you say anything about the way you dressed at that time, describe it at all?

WOOD: It was basically on the same order that the children were dressed here, basically. She used to make dresses with pleats for me or little ruffles. Lavender blue was very popular. The older generation. I must speak about the older generation. Well, some of them still had the hoods like they do today in some Arabian countries with the, you know, the thing over the head. And some of them had those little caps like the Dutch used to wear with the little ruffle around their heads. That was the very older generation. And they had clothing all the way down to the floor, wide, and

some with a little bustle. But my mother and her contemporaries, they were dressed in short skirts and blouses, just like in the '20s and '30s were dressed here.

LEVINE: Well, what would be the difference, say, between the way you were dressed as one of the best dressed little girls and, say, the other children? What was it that made the difference?

WOOD: Well, some of them wore, they had to wash the same dress over and over. They were torn. They couldn't, enough mending. And that was usually the people that had no land. They had no property. That's how poor they were. Because the general day's work that they did in the fields did not bring them enough money. Now, I have a little story, another little story to tell you. We owned a vineyard, and over and over again, now, I must go back. My mother bid on a piece of property that was very favorable. It was close to the town. And there was a distant relative who wanted this piece of land. But my mother outbid him and she bought the land. Now, seeing that after a while this happened the townspeople dreamt that there was a saint in our vineyard, and they came and reported to my mother. My mother didn't believe in it, but finally she gave them permission to go and dig. So several months a year men would go there in the evening. They kept digging and digging and digging and nothing happened, nothing. They never found the saint. Eventually they gave up, but then they started again. But this saint, she was a young woman that was tortured during this time of the Saracens. So she wanted to be out of the ground and she wanted a church erected. At first my mother was very skeptical. But then she said, "Well, if that's what you want, go ahead. I'll

give you the permission." They went. Of course, we had pomegranate trees and the pomegranates all disappeared in the season. They would all take some. Now, one specific time somebody came over and said, "Mrs. Calabrese. We have to, we want you to get the priest to say mass, have an altar erected at the place and have an altar." My mother got very annoyed that she chased them away. But they kept insisting and insisting. They went to the priest and they begged my great-grandmother to convince my mother. So she gave them permission. One particular day they, the men went, erected an altar, put a crucifix. And the priest came there to say mass. Many people were there. I was way in the back. It was a beautiful day. The sun is shining bright. They all started saying prayers, and the priest started saying mass. All of a sudden the skies became black. There was thunder like I never heard before and lightening, and everybody scuffled. Hail, which very rarely there's hail in the old country, in Italy, but there was hail as big as golf balls. We all scrambled and we went in the local straw huts and we were all huddled together. The priest fainted. He had to be carried to the town. He never knew what happened. And a cousin of ours brought a big, a big lizard, it was. It looked more like a small cobra. It was hanging on two sticks and he had it, it was dead, but he showed it all over the town. I wrote this story. I hope I can get it published.

LEVINE: So then what happened? Was a church erected in that place?

WOOD: No. After that it was given up. We came to America. My mother sold the vineyard. We traded the vineyard for a house in this country. The vineyard plus two other parcels.

LEVINE: Really!

WOOD: And we got a home, a house. Because when we first came here we went into a four-room apartment, train style. There was no windows in the center. Actually we didn't like it in the beginning, because here we came from a beautiful garden. You walked out there, my little brother used to go out during the day and build beautiful mud castles. Now here we were on the second floor. We had to climb upstairs. We had no trees, no gardens around. We were cooped up. But then when we got home, then we really got used to America.

LEVINE: Where was the home that you traded the vineyard?

WOOD: In Freeport, Long Island.

LEVINE: Okay, well, wow. That's wonderful. I wish you luck with your story.

WOOD: Thank you.

LEVINE: It's a wonderful story. Let's see. So, about the town, then. You mentioned straw huts. Were those common, to have straw huts?

WOOD: To put their figs. During the day they had their figs on woven platforms. And then in the evening they would bring them in the huts. They, they were for storage. But a lot of times men used to sleep there during the summer, and the women slept home and the men slept there. Because in

the morning they got up and they started right in where their work. But there were very few men there. Mostly they were in Australia, the United States, in Africa.

LEVINE: The men were going first in order to work.

WOOD: To work, yes, yes. To work.

LEVINE: And send for the rest of the family.

WOOD: Yes. To earn a living.

LEVINE: Yes. Now, what was your father doing in America to earn a living while you were still in Italy?

WOOD: He worked on construction.

LEVINE: And, let's see. Is there anything else that when you think of your childhood in Italy comes to mind, things that you remember there? Maybe games that you played?

WOOD: Yes. We played games. We played something similar to jacks here, only we called it bedouli. They were little round stones. We tossed them in the air and tried to pick one, then we tried to pick two, then we tried to pick three, then we tried to pick the whole bunch of them. Now, occasionally we saw, there would be five or six girls playing together. And when we saw the professor would be taking walks down the avenue, down the

street. When we saw the professor, we didn't want him to see us play. We used to run and hide.

LEVINE: Let's see. And how about, did you ever keep contact with any of the children that you knew?

WOOD: In the beginning, but then eventually it died out.

LEVINE: Let's see. Okay. Well, then, when was it decided that you would come?

WOOD: Well, about a year before, 1931.

LEVINE: And so you were preparing for about a year?

WOOD: Oh, yes. Oh, we prepared. My mother prepared her wool mattress, her sewing machine. She prepared so many things, but then we found out we could not bring them, and so we didn't. We brought beautiful embroidered, no matter how poor they were there their bedding had to be embroidered. They had astounding designs in their linen wear.

LEVINE: And so your mother brought . . .

WOOD: She brought all her, yes. She brought all that with her, and a few beautiful spreads that they had made. And she brought a ceramic clock with vases, and she brought coffee, a ceramic coffee pot with the little cups, which I wished I knew where they were today.

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LEVINE: Do you remember the baggage, what kind of suitcase or trunk?

WOOD: Oh, yes. We had just two suitcases and it was what we called an American trunk. It's the basic, the basic storage trunk that you have today in the stores that's made out of some kind of tin or something.

LEVINE: Oh. I think maybe a steamer trunk?

WOOD: A steamer trunk, yes. A steamer trunk.

LEVINE: And so you had a trunk and two suitcases.

WOOD: Yes.

LEVINE: Did you personally take some things that you wanted to have with you?

WOOD: Not really. I had one doll there and I left it to a friend. We were chums with this girl. She was very, very poor. I left her my doll and I left her all of my clothes. My mother had made new clothes for us to come to America. Her name was Katarina.

LEVINE: Can you remember at all, you know, saying goodbye to your friends or talking with your friends about the fact that you were going to America or anything like that?

WOOD: Well, yes. I was very happy. I was not sad. I was not sad I was leaving them behind. I thought eventually I would see them. But I was just too

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happy to come to America.

LEVINE: And how about your brother?

WOOD: (she laughs) Oh, my brother. My brother missed his mud castles when we came here. And he was, he thought he was not in America yet. He kept saying, almost every day he was saying to Papa and Mama, "I want to go to America. I thought we were going to America. When are we going to America?" My father said, "You are in America." And my mother said to him, "We are in America." "No, no, no. This is not America. I want to go to America!" (she laughs)

LEVINE: He expected it to be very different?

WOOD: Right.

LEVINE: That's great. Okay. So can you recall the farewell, the actual parting? Was there any event in and around that leaving?

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

WOOD: Yes. The night before we had people through the three rooms sitting all over the furniture, on the floor, on top of the trunks, on top of the bed, on top of the tables. We had people sitting all over, spending the last evening with us. In the garden, outside in the front. The next day the whole town

accompanied us, which was about, say, a half a mile to three-quarters of a mile. Then some started bidding us goodbyes, and there was crying. Then we reached my uncle's house, which was in the country, and we had to pass it, and there was a big crowd there. My grandmother, my father's mother, she cried, and so did my great-grandmother. It was a sad farewell. Now, my uncle with his family, they came here later, and they're settled in Wallingford, Connecticut.

LEVINE: Now, you made your way sort of through the town as you were leaving?

WOOD: Yes. We left the town. The town was a small town. I would say there were just about maybe eight hundred, nine hundred people.

LEVINE: And what were you traveling on?

WOOD: We walked.

LEVINE: You walked.

WOOD: This was walking. A half a mile to three-quarter mile we walked. Then after we said our farewells, no. We had to walk, too, down hills and up hills and we reached the city of Mileto. And there we boarded the train. My grandfather, my mother's father who was living in the city came, and he stayed there in the little town and then accompanied us all the way to the city of Mileto. And he bought railroad tickets for us. And I still have a vivid memory of him with his big white handkerchief and the tears rolling down his eyes. He was saying goodbye to his oldest daughter and oldest

grandchild.

LEVINE: So then he saw you to the train.

WOOD: He saw us to the train. From there we went to a place called Pizzo. It was another city. And then there we boarded a train in the evening. My mother was given a jug of wine. You know these jugs that have that canvas woven around? And she dropped it as we boarded the train, so the wine went all over on the track, on the railroad track. We boarded the train, and then we arrived in Naples.

LEVINE: And how long were you in Naples?

WOOD: In Naples we were three days. It was the biggest city I ever saw.

LEVINE: Can you remember anything about that?

WOOD: Yes. It seemed that we were walking up steps. And the ocean was way down below to the right, a vast ocean. And it looked so beautiful, so, it just simply looked gorgeous. We stayed at a hotel and dinners were served there. We ordered what we wanted. And mostly we were running back and forth to the offices of immigration. We boarded buses to go to the offices of immigration.

LEVINE: Was everything in order, then?

WOOD: No, no.

LEVINE: What happened?

WOOD: My mother needed a document, and she had to go and call up. When she called up the boat, the ship was already ready to sail and the document had not come in, so she was a little worried that we weren't going to get in. But then it came through the teletype and they accepted, and we boarded the ship at the last minute.

LEVINE: Was your mother anxious?

WOOD: Yes, she was very anxious. And she was very thankful that we made it. We went through a different entrance. It was like the servants' quarters, the servants. The . . .

LEVINE: The ship's . . .

WOOD: Personnel, the personnel, and we were the last ones to get in.

LEVINE: So it was really you and your brother and your mother.

WOOD: Right.

LEVINE: Only three people.

WOOD: Right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then what did, what was the ship like?

WOOD: It was very comfortable. We had, it was a huge room that in the evening was, the adults used for dancing. It was sort of a little make-believe garden in the center. There were real plants and artificial plants. And then to the far side there was a piano. Somebody was always playing the piano, which I loved, because I loved music. And then on one corner there was a fake palm tree. And there were a lot of comfortable seating. The ordinary couches and chairs that we have more or less like today, and that's where we spend most of our days, listening to the piano, conversing. And then there was another room adjoining it. There were chairs there lined up. And in there we went for church services in the morning, and in the afternoon they showed movies. And it seemed to me they always showed movies of this funny man. He was so funny. Of course, I didn't know who he was then. Later on I found out he was Charlie Chaplin.

LEVINE: And did the audience appreciate?

WOOD: Everybody appreciated. They were the first movies I ever saw.

LEVINE: Now, what was the name of the ship? Do you recall the name of that ship?

WOOD: Roma. R-O-M-A.

LEVINE: And so did you sleep in a cabin?

WOOD: Yes. We had, yes. Below, below where I said before there were cabins. There were four bunk beds in each little room and the little sink. And then there was, for dining they would ring a bell and we went into this huge dining room. We had the table that ended against, a long table that ended against the wall. There were a few tables like that, but a lot of them were round or square ordinary tables like we have today. We were assigned to Table 44, and there was about ten people on one side and ten on the other. There was a woman across from us who had, I don't know, five or six children. One was a babe in arms. She had gone to visit relatives in Italy, but now she was on her trip back to America. And she had a daughter my age. We sat against the wall with her. (she laughs) And we played games. I would go, on her side was where the portholes were, and there was a little room to play, so I would go under the table, cross over, and we'd play games. We even played a little hopscotch. It was beautiful up there and, well, the sunlight came in beautiful.

LEVINE: Wonderful. Now, do you, did you know any English at all?

WOOD: No, not at all.

LEVINE: And did the little girl know any Italian?

WOOD: Yes, she did, but I didn't know what, oh, yeah. She knew Italian, yes. She, but her English I did not know what she was talking about. So she tried to talk Italian to me.

LEVINE: You mentioned the church services. Was your family religious, or any

person in your family religious?

WOOD: Well, the older generation was. But the others, well, as best we could, yeah. We followed it.

LEVINE: Let's see. Is there anything else about the ship, about, now, was it a rough voyage?

WOOD: Yes, a couple of days it was very rough. Well, not really too rough, but it was dark, very, very dark. We looked out the window. There was nothing to see. There was no sky, no trees, no water you saw. For at least two days you saw nothing. We were just floating in mid-air, so to speak. And there was a little fear, too, among some people. But they all started saying a prayer or two. It was raining some, too. And all we know there was just the ship and us and nothing us surrounding us, no matter which time we looked out.

LEVINE: Do you remember how long the trip took?

WOOD: It was nine days, but I must say that a couple of times it must have been a whale rising in the ocean, on good sunny days. And up on deck many people were hollering, "Un pesce, un pesce!" "The fish, the fish!" And we all went up to see, and we saw this thing floating up and down in the water. Probably it was a whale. I don't know. Or some other kind of fish.

LEVINE: And so do you remember approaching the New York Harbor?

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WOOD: Yes, the New York Harbor. First we saw the Statue of Liberty. And everyone up on deck started to holler. "La liberta, la liberta! Viva la liberta!" I didn't know what it meant. I thought it was just the saint protecting the port. That's how I thought of it, as a saint. And the ship, it seemed to go to the left and then turn to the right. And we saw this big, beautiful building. And then beyond that there were tall buildings, and I pictured in my mind that we were going to live in one of those buildings. Then when we arrived, as far as I remember, the ship docked there. It wasn't such a huge ship. It docked there at Ellis Island. That's what I remember. I do not remember going on anything else. Because when, my father was standing at the bottom. The canopy was still there in 1932. I think soon after they took it down. There was a huge canopy, and my father was standing there between the end of the canopy and the sun shining on him. We had to go down the steps, and names were being called. From down the steps, from below, the names were called before we came down, because somebody had to claim us.

LEVINE: I see. The name was called, and then . . .

WOOD: Our names were called.

LEVINE: You went down as your name was called.

WOOD: Yes, as our names were called. And then we met up with my father, and after the preliminary hugging and kissing this nun walks past and she sticks a book, a little religious book in my hands. Before I could say thank you she ran off. As she put it in my hands she says, "Gratis, gratis,

gratis." I knew in Latin that meant, "Free, free." Then from there there was a little bit of lingering around. And we entered this room. There were a lot of people. Then we climbed this wooden staircase. I'll never forget that wooden staircase. It seemed to me we went to the right, climbing. But, wait. We were only allowed to go one at a time after so much, allowing so much space. I don't know how much space, but there was quite a big space. I was wondering why I was climbing in those steps so far away from somebody else, from my mother, who came next, and my brother. Well, I went to the right, to the left, climbing, and then to the right again, and a few steps, and there was a long counter.

LEVINE: Like a zig-zag?

WOOD: Yes. And it wasn't a direct, it was up to the right. Then straight up, then to the right again, and then a few steps and we were at the counter where the doctor was examining, looking in our eyes and making, and our throats. There was a gate next to the counter that opened, and in there I could see, as I was being examined, that there were people, about five or six people that already were rejected. Later I found out they were rejected. At the time I saw them I didn't know what they were there for, but a couple of women were crying, and there was a, there were chairs, and they were sitting there. There were tables. There was one window, one side, another window on the other side. And there were some chains with things dangling, and I didn't know what they were. They were about, maybe about eight, I'd say, in that room.

LEVINE: Chains?

WOOD: No, platforms hanging on chains, long little platforms hanging on chains.

LEVINE: These were the bunk beds?

WOOD: I think so. (she laughs) Now I find out they were bunk beds. So then a few more steps along the counter and down the steps to where my father met us again.

LEVINE: Now, can you remember the reunion with your father? I mean, what, could you describe that at all?

WOOD: Yes. He kissed me, he kissed my brother. He hugged us. My mother, they hugged. And then from there we, I don't know how the, I remember the suitcases, but I don't remember how we brought the trunk, but I do remember that we walked a little and we got on a little boat, not on the ferryboat. And I, when we sat in that little boat I thought to myself, "Oh, there's more water we got to go through," and I could see the buildings in the distance, like almost I could touch them with my hand. That's how close they were. So over we were, and my father put us in the taxi, and we arrived in Freeport. When we docked at Ellis Island in the morning the sun was shining. It must have been around eleven or so, ten-thirty, eleven. When we arrived in Freeport the sun was still shining.

LEVINE: Now, where was the tenement building that you went to first?

WOOD: On Main Street in Freeport.

LEVINE: I see. So you were always in Freeport after that.

WOOD: Yes, until I got married.

LEVINE: Okay. And then did you start school soon after you arrived?

WOOD: No, it was too late. I started in September, because it was May. In September when I went to school it was strange to me because I did not speak a word of English. But the principal came into the classroom one day and she brought a sign that said, "Silence," it said on it. But she asked for us to raise our hands if we could read the sign. I was put in first grade. From fourth grade in Italy I was put in first grade. I did not speak the language, not a word. When she brought the sign in I raised my hand, when she asked us to read. And I said, "Silenzi." So she said to me, "Yes, you're right, but we don't pronounce it that way here. We pronounce it, "Silence."

LEVINE: Great. Now, did you, so what was it like in school? Were the kids . . .

WOOD: Very friendly. Very, very friendly.

LEVINE: Were there other Italian children who had come over?

WOOD: There were two children. They had not come over, but they knew a little bit of Italian because their parents were Italian. They were brother and sister.

LEVINE: Were there other immigrant children in your class?

WOOD: No, no. There weren't, not in the beginning. Later on I had more relatives come in, and they were put in my class because I could translate for them. Oh, yes. I skipped grades. In one year, then, I went into, from first. The sooner I learned the language I was put in the third grade. Then the following year I did the fourth and fifth grade, and then the sixth grade.

LEVINE: So you caught up.

WOOD: Yes, I caught up, yes.

LEVINE: And how about your brother? He actually started school.

WOOD: He started kindergarten.

LEVINE: And was there . . .

WOOD: I was always called to translate for him, too.

LEVINE: And do you remember anything that struck you as very different when you were a child, when you had first come, that was different in this country?

WOOD: In general, everything was different, in general, yes. There were two young girls whose mother had come from Austria. They lived on the third floor, and they came very often to play with me. The mother was very

friendly.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you played? Was it the same kinds of games?

WOOD: Dolls. We made little dolls. We were girls. We made doll's clothes in those days.

LEVINE: And how about your mother? Did she, how did she adapt to being here?

WOOD: Well, in the beginning she didn't adapt too well. But eventually she did, because she felt left out, she couldn't speak the language.

LEVINE: Did she actually take lessons at all?

WOOD: No, she did not, no.

LEVINE: And how about citizenship?

WOOD: Yes. My father had been a citizen of the USA. Otherwise we couldn't come here. Later my mother got her citizenship papers, yes. As far as I was concerned I was always considered, both my brother and I, because we were underage. We were always considered citizens. Because I went to register during the World War and they said, "No, you are a citizen," when I brought my father's citizenship papers.

LEVINE: And so did you, can you remember learning to read or . . .

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WOOD: Well, in the beginning I had a few problems like pronunciation and a little bit of confusion as to such as later a lot of, you know, stuff like that, but eventually it all came.

LEVINE: And so then you continued in school until what grade?

WOOD: I started the seventh, but I left. I went to work because it was Depression time, in the garment district, in the garment industry, later in the garment district in New York.

LEVINE: Oh. And so you were actually sewing?

WOOD: Yes, sewing. Yes, sewing.

LEVINE: And then when did you meet your husband?

WOOD: I . . . (she laughs)

LEVINE: So you traveled from Freeport to Manhattan to work in the beginning?

WOOD: Yes, in the beginning I did, yes. I took the train in Freeport, and I enjoyed it very much, going to Manhattan. I worked there for eight years, and it was after that that I met my husband and I married him.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, okay. Okay, and how, did you have children then?

WOOD: Yes, two.

LEVINE: And what are their names?

WOOD: Leslie and James Wood.

LEVINE: And do they have children?

WOOD: One is still single. One is married and has two children, and he's been working for the post office for almost a good eighteen years. He started right out of high school.

LEVINE: And so what are your grandchildren's names?

WOOD: They are James Michael Wood and Patrick, Michael.

LEVINE: Okay. Say it again.

WOOD: Patrick Daniel Wood.

LEVINE: Let's just say, was there any, were there ways that your mother and father had that they retained in this country? Was it their attitude to keep some of the old ways or to become Americanized and to leave those things behind?

WOOD: Well, I think basically we fell into it because, see, my mother was educated in this city, and she was ready to accept anything, except she had difficulty just with the language, and she dressed well in the old

country, and she dressed well here. That was her, you know, in other words, she was not a farm woman where it would have been so difficult for her to adapt. I think she adapted pretty well because the basics were, you know, to be a housewife and make her family happy.

LEVINE: And then did your father continue in construction?

WOOD: Yes, until he passed away. In 1978 he passed away.

LEVINE: And can you think of any things that you mother and father maybe taught you, you know, that had to do with how you should live, or what was important in life? Attitudes that they held? Are there any things . . .

WOOD: Well, yes, the attitude. My mother had the attitude, "Always walk with class, always keep your head high. Always dress neat and be good to everybody." Those were her basics. "If you march well, everybody will respect you well."

LEVINE: And how about your father or your great-grandmother? Were there things that you remember them saying that kind of stick with you as important?

WOOD: Well, the basics were, it was just, the basics that walk well, always be good. Respect your contemporaries just as you want to respect. They always basically . . .

LEVINE: I see. And is there anything else that you like to add before we close? That has to do with, you know, your coming here, and living really most of

your life here?

WOOD: Well, yes. I want to say that eventually my, we had a beautiful home in Freeport. Then later we sold that and we moved to another more beautiful home. That is the time when I went to work in the city. Then later we sold that. My father built a beautiful home out east in Shirley, Long Island. And he built it himself with the help of my brother's husband, who was of Scottish-English ancestry. And my brother.

LEVINE: Wife's?

WOOD: My brother-in-law.

LEVINE: Oh, your brother-in-law.

WOOD: My brother-in-law was of English-Scottish ancestry. My, and my brother and my father, they built this beautiful home out east which later, after Papa passed away Mama lived in it for a while and then we sold it when she passed away.

LEVINE: Did your father work for a big construction company, or . . .

WOOD: No, no. Because, different times he did but, you know, as they went out of business he had to find other work, yeah. He was, in the end he was, he got a meritorious certificate for working in the construction company. He belonged to the union. He belonged to everything, he was. And for several years he had been a shop steward.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I think maybe we can close now. You have wonderful stories.
It's so happy . . .

WOOD: I want to say something else, yes.

LEVINE: Yeah, sure, okay. Go ahead.

WOOD: While I was working in the city I walked over to the Metropolitan Opera House on Broadway and I took singing lessons, because I always had aspired to operatic singing. I do sing but I didn't really get into it to do it professionally. Also I was always interested in writing, which I attempted a few times while younger, but then I let it go. But since 1987 I wrote a novel and it's called 40 Million Ducats. It has to do with taking in all the, living in the old country and coming to America and living in America. Also I had several little stories published in small presses and newspapers.

LEVINE: Well, that's . . .

WOOD: And I intend to continue. Right now I am in the process of doing a lot of writing. This is my life right now, writing.

LEVINE: That's wonderful. And I think we will make every effort to have your writings available at the Ellis Island Library.

WOOD: Yes, especially the Ellis Island ones.

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LEVINE: Yes, wonderful. Well, it's a real pleasure. I thank you so much for sharing all these stories with us.

WOOD: And thank you, too. Thank you.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service on March 25, 1992, and I'm here in North Merrick with Sunday Domenica Calabrese Wood. Thank you.

WOOD: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW