

EI-1323

PETER DRAGO

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AGE: 1½ years old

SHIP: Giseppi Verdi

PORT: Palermo

RESIDENCES: Lower East Side, Manhattan; Bergenfield, New Jersey

LEVINE: Today is May 5, 2004. I'm here in Bergenfield, New Jersey with Peter Drago, who came through Ellis Island as a baby in his mother's arms. He was about 1½ years of age. He and his mother were coming from Palermo, Sicily in 1923 on the Giseppi Verdi. The port was Palermo, and the ship came directly to New York.

DRAGO: Manhattan.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And if we could start at the beginning, what was your name when you were born?

DRAGO: Pietro Sabastiano Drago.

LEVINE: And where were you born?

DRAGO: Mistreta, Sicily.

LEVINE: Okay and you mentioned early Mistreta is in Massena.

DRAGO: The province of Massena.

LEVINE: Okay. And your mother, what was her name?

DRAGO: Her name was Vincensa Cicarello.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

DRAGO: C-I-C-A-R-E-L-L-O, and she married my father who was a Drago.

LEVINE: And what was your father's first name?

DRAGO: Vincenzo, they match. Vincenzo and Vincensa.

LEVINE: And let's see, what did your father do when he was in Sicily?

DRAGO: There wasn't much work there, and he was from a poorer family that didn't own land. So he had to just roust about whatever work here, labor, fields, and horses, he tented to horses for the people that owned horses that ran farms. In fact he got so good with horses that when the World War I broke out, he served in Austria in the cavalry, the Italian cavalry. He was up in the alps. He never seen action but he patrolled the Alps to keep the Austrians from crossing over. And he served two years in World War I.

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LEVINE: Now his family, the Drago family. Were they from Sicily? In other words: his parents and their parents, do you know if they had come from elsewhere or whether they had been there all the time.

DRAGO: No I think they were Sicilians all the way from way back.

LEVINE: Way back. And how about your mother's side?

DRAGO: Same thing. They knew each other in a little town. One time I found out that the Drago name was brought over when the Spaniards occupied Sicily. That name is more Spanish than Italian. And it was brought down over the ages when the intermarried and whatnot.

LEVINE: Now how about your mother. Her maiden name?

DRAGO: Cicarello.

LEVINE: Oh yeah we have that.

DRAGO: Now she came from a family of two sisters and two brothers I think she had. And one sister came over here, married, and came over here a year before my father ever came over. And they're the ones who helped my father set up an apartment. So they lived right next building and they took care of my father for one year, till my mother came over.

LEVINE: I see, now this older sister of your mother, did you know her?

DRAGO: Oh yes she lived next building.

LEVINE: Oh okay.

DRAGO: And her children and that's we were first cousins and we had all kinds of parties together, went to schools together.

LEVINE: I see. Do you know why she came? What were the circumstances? Why she came as the first of the family?

DRAGO: Same thing. A large family over there, not enough food for the family. And they had to leave to go find work. The word was out, America has got everything. So they all came here to try.

LEVINE: Was that sister married when she came here?

DRAGO: Yeah, she came over with two children, and she had two more, three more here. So she had five children here.

LEVINE: Okay so she came over, and I assume she wrote back and, your father went first.

DRAGO: Yeah he came first to get an apartment, get a job. He worked as a common laborer. In fact, he build Queen's boulevard, the boulevard. One day when I was driving past, he did brick work. The boulevard consists of about two feet of brick and then the pavement. And he remember that, he said "I built that."

LEVINE: He was proud of that huh?

DRAGO: Oh yeah he was a brick laborer. Later on he became a Union member and he became a brick layer. And we were pretty good then because brick layers made good money in them days so we always were ahead. Because of him.

LEVINE: Wow. So he came here. Now, I assume he wrote back and forth and what? He saved up enough money?

DRAGO: Yes, yes. And then he sent for her. He sent her the money and then she came over.

LEVINE: And you were the only child at that point.

DRAGO: That's it yeah.

LEVINE: So you, yourself have no memories of Sicily at all?

DRAGO: Oh no, no.

LEVINE: Is there anything in your family legends, or family stories, that your mother or father ever talked about Sicily that stuck in your mind?

DRAGO: My father always was sort of against it. He called it the land of hunger. He was, because he had it pretty rough. At least my mother's family owned a farm, so they used to get the milk and other things there. They had to work for it, but that little piece of land kept them going a little bit.

LEVINE: I see.

DRAGO: See and then her brother, her older brother became what they call a "carpenere" [ph], police, Italian police. You've seen them with them hats?

LEVINE: Yeah.

DRAGO: He became one of them. And he got pretty high, he got to be what they call the Marshall. I don't know what rank there is. But she always bragged "My brother is a monachallo de cauze rapinere" [ph]. And they lived very good on his salary until Mussolini fell and he was out of a job. Cause everything, the regime went with Mussolini, no matter even if you weren't involved as a fascist. You were a policemen. Even mailmen got dumped. Everybody that had anything to do with him. So then things got pretty bad for them. But years later his, no another sister, oh that was on my father's side I'll- my father's sister came over to visit us, many years later like maybe forty years later, and then things got better over there. There was work and whatnot. But up to that time, not too much.

MRS. DRAGO: She had a son that had a good job.

DRAGO: Yeah.

MRS. DRAGO: And so they were living better in those day.

LEVINE: So, in other words, on your mother and your father's side, except for your mother's older sister, did the others stay there?

DRAGO: Oh well wait now, at that time, New York was getting an overflow because they were coming from all over. So they opened up Buenos Ares, Argentina all that area, and everything shifted over to that side. So she had two sisters and another brother that went and lived there. But they never, they lost track of each other, they were in the Buenos Ares. Maybe they sent a letter at the beginning but then it just- So I have relatives down here that I don't know about.

LEVINE: And they lost touch after a while.

DRAGO: Yeah they lost touch over the years, but that was it.

LEVINE: Now your father, when he got here was he able to find work then? He must have to send for you.

DRAGO: Yes, yes. Common labor, he worked, but like I said, he worked- Let me start, to become a brick layer he took bricks from the job and brought them home with cement and everything. And in one corner of our bedroom he moved the bureau and in that corner he laid down the oil cloth and he used to set up bricks. Practice, make a wall and then knock it down, and he kept doing this for years until he went down there and he says I want to be a brick layer. He had to give money under the table. And he became a brick layer. And then everything was good. Bricklayers made like fifteen dollars a day.

LEVINE: Wow.

DRAGO: In them days, where common labor was making three see. Oh we were on our way and everything.

LEVINE: So your father took your mother and you to the lower East Side.

DRAGO: Yeah well that's where we was lived.

LEVINE: Why don't you talk about the community there, and you growing up in that place.

DRAGO: Yeah. Everybody block or few, all blocks around were all from Sicily or Italy or all around. And they, everything was based, like I said they had clubs they belonged to, they had- the saints, the saint's birthday every

year they would celebrate, the street carnival. Like St. Janeiro, St. Janeiro in August.

LEVINE: Yeah oh yeah right.

DRAGO: They had their own. And there was a public school within one block or two. Really run down school let me tell you. There was one stair case in the school, it was a four story, three story building. We weren't allowed, we had to go up fire escapes attached to the sides of the building. And that's how we went in and out. And I'm talking about maybe five hundred kids going up and down these fire escapes. And separated of course. Boys on one side of the school and girls on the other. In fact I went through all my school days always in the boys school no matter, Junior High. Until I went to Haren High [ph] on fifty-ninth street. Girls were mixed, I started talking to girls! I didn't know what they sounded like.

LEVINE: (Laughs)

DRAGO: That was it.

LEVINE: Tell about the rest of the neighborhood. And when the societies and all that.

DRAGO: Well the societies were all clean, they weren't like the mafia societies. They were just religious societies.

LEVINE: No right.

DRAGO: Oh another thing that happened that was quite common, people couldn't pay their rent which amounted like three dollars a month or

four dollars a month. They didn't have that, especially if their job- and the practice was that the landlord would hire people, they'd come up and take all the furniture out and dump it on the curb. And this furniture stood on the curb and relatives would get together, neighbors, they would chip in, try and find another apartment for these people. It was quite common, almost everyday somebody got thrown out of the apartment for a few dollars. There was no welfare in them days. No such thing as welfare.

LEVINE: So what, then the people who chipped in, they find another place, and they stay there...

DRAGO: And they would pay to rent for a month, and then this man would have a month to go get a job someplace. And the children, the children worked in sweatshops in the garment district.

LEVINE: How old?

DRAGO: Oh if they were 10, 15 years old they had to go work. They helped bring, also garment district gave out work to the families where they would sew buttons on jackets or make stitches, or put, sew sleeves, lapel. And they even got paid a few pennies. They would have to bring the bundles of clothes and go pick up, you know when they'd finish, and they made a few dollars a month that way.

LEVINE: Called "homework" I think.

DRAGO: "Homework" yeah. There was a lot of that. The kids they used to muster up, sell newspapers, shine box, shine shoes out on the corner. Cause in them days they had shoes that could shine. Today you have no more shoes that could shine. There was a lot of things that kids

could do. Sell the newspapers, that was another thing. You go around selling newspapers.

LEVINE: Did you ever do that?

DRAGO: I got a job once with the

(Disturbance of some kind)

DRAGO: A messenger delivery service. You deliver, business had to send packages or papers too each other. I worked there for a week, two. And it was hard to find a job at the beginning because we couldn't speak English, nobody spoke English in the neighborhood.

LEVINE: Everybody spoke...?

DRAGO: Yeah your own, Italian, Polish, Russian, Jewish- well the Jewish had it different because they had their own schools. But there was a few Jew that went to private schools- eh to public school.

LEVINE: Public school?

DRAGO: And they were in the same boat we were. They couldn't understand. And we learned by just making signs and saying words. The Irish kids were alright, they were made, they spoke English, they spoke it. They were the bosses. They told you, you want to know something, you go ask an Irish kid and he will tell you.

LEVINE: And so in other words even though you were a baby, even by the time you went to school because everybody was speaking Italian at home and in the community you didn't know it when you first went to school.

DRAGO: Well what you learned from the older boys in the neighborhood, the ones that were in their teens, they taught you- this is called this, this is called that. So the older taught the younger. And I don't even remember learning any, I just like came, I knew it from the beginning because of all these. But when you got home the parents spoke Italian and you were back in a hole again. And you had to tell them how to say different things.

LEVINE: Were you like a teacher to your mother and father?

DRAGO: To the parents oh yeah. Well I was the first born. See then I had a brother who died after about six years old or something. And then a sister, and then another brother, and then another sister, so we were five. And between them, we taught each other how to speak and all. I was the big brother.

LEVINE: Did being the big brother have certain privileges and responsibilities?

DRAGO: Yeah you took the blame for everything.

LEVINE: (Laughs)

DRAGO: That's right you took the blame for everything. "Who did it? Pete did it!" My sister she used to frail, she was a frail little girl, her arm used to get out of, twisted, "Pete grabbed it, Pete grabbed it!"

LEVINE: (Laughs)

DRAGO: But my father always knew. He respected me, to the point that was anything I did for him, I did good. After a while I studied architecture

because he became a contractor. And I studied architecture so I could help him. And I did help him out with drawing some of the plans and everything. But then luck wasn't with me there, I couldn't get schooling. There was only one school that had architecture and they were full up, there was too many. So what they did, they sent me to Harrin High School, and they only had mechanical drafting there; and that didn't suit me at all. So I finally found another school that taught architecture, but it was a trade school, you didn't get the other subjects. You got architecture, but you didn't get the English to make you go to college, or the history and everything. And I couldn't go to- I applied, my father was all for it, "I'll pay, don't worry." And we got down and went to a councilor, he says "You have nothing to back you. You may be- you know your architecture, but you don't know English, you don't have no-" So like that was it. I went to work for my father and then.

LEVINE: Why don't you say a little bit more about your father and how he, he became a contractor you said?

DRAGO: Yes, repairmen. But there was "V. Drago and Son Contractors." And we'd do any kind- break up a sidewalk, make new sidewalk. Oh then the big thing was the city cracked down on fire-trap houses, old houses, wood stairs. And they passed a law- all these wood stairs and everything had to be ripped out and steel stairs with marble steps had to be put in. The walls had to be filled with asbestos blocks, and traverkein [ph] and cemented, cement walls see. They didn't do much about the floors because they were there, but they tried that. And we got into that and we did fabulous. He had as much as ten people on the pay roll doing the plastering, the (not audible), the iron workers he contracted out. And I did every one of them, I did everything. But he only gave five dollars a week no matter what I did. (Both laugh)

LEVINE: Now were these jobs mostly in the Lower East Side?

DRAGO: Yes, all in the Lower East Side.

LEVINE: Describe the living conditions.

DRAGO: Oh they weren't the best, but it was clean, let me put it that way. I remember having a gas light in the hall, electricity didn't come in yet- oh I got a good story now- Electricity didn't come in, they had gas in the hallways. But they went around and they got gas in each home, in each apartment with a meter that you had to put a quarter in, and the quarter gave you so much gas. And my father figured out a way to put the quarters in and then pull them out. (Both laugh)

LEVINE: ...more than a quarter...

DRAGO: Well he couldn't do it all the time, he had to put some quarters in. But then they finally took away the gas lights in the hall and they put the regular electricity in the halls. There was another story...

LEVINE: What else came in like the radio? Were people listening...

DRAGO: Oh electricity that came in that area, believe it or not, was DC electricity. The only part of Manhattan that had DC electricity was my section, a section, let's say, of ten square blocks. We had this- you couldn't buy a refrigerator, you couldn't buy a washing machine, even if you had the money because it was DC. You had to buy a transformer, transformed the AC to DC and then you- my father went out and bought a refrigerator. We were the first to have a refrigerator. And it was about four foot high a "Crosely," [ph], Crosely I remember; half of it was converter to convert the electricity and the other half of it was

refrigerator. And we had that. And they didn't change that till many, many years. All around us everybody got AC, I couldn't get an electric train as a kid. I wanted an electric train, I couldn't get it because they all came in AC. So I went through life without and electric train.

LEVINE: Oh wow.

DRAGO: That hurt, really.

LEVINE: Imagine, yeah.

DRAGO: Because were pretty well to do, my father was making money. If I wanted a train he would have bought it right there, he even bought me a be-be gun even though it would hit me in the eye. Anything, whatever we wanted, but because of that, we couldn't get that train and oh did that hurt, that really hurt.

LEVINE: And how about music. Was the music that people who had immigrated particularly liked and enjoyed?

DRAGO: There was...

MRS.

DRAGO: A lot of the operas.

DRAGO: There was, yeah the operas was the standards, Caruso, and all of them guys, Benemini, Gjlilie, they were big international stars. But there was guys who really knew Italian singing. You know like you would say a Frank Sinatra? All they sang was Italian songs and they would travel to Italy and back. And they would put on shows. Well our nearest street was fourteenth street which was a big cross town street, Lou Chow's

was there, and the Edison Company, that didn't come then that came af- but along there, there was a play house, play house, and there they would put on Italian plays and shows. Movies were very scarce, Italian ones, but every once in a while they'd get one from Italy. And these singers used to come down there and play. Then there was an Italian Station on radio that they had all these singers in Italian; and they got pretty popular. Like, what's his—

MRS.

DRAGO: What was his name?

DRAGO: (Inaudible) Lil Italiano I can't think of the name now. But they all records, and you had the machine that you wound up with the records.

LEVINE: The victrola.

DRAGO: And they got pretty big these guys.

LEVINE: How about, were there songs that were particularly, like the words were about immigrating to this country, coming to a new country? Do you remember that as popular music?

DRAGO: Yeah I know what you mean. No I don't think there was anything. There was still Sorrento, Retonadia [ph]. It was all about the old country mostly. Oh there was a, a big spot was the boy's club of New York. That was down on tenth street and everybody worked there. All the boys from, they did a marvelous job bringing up kids.

LEVINE: What did they do? What did they offer?

DRAGO: Everything was clean in there. They had all play rooms, libraries, swimming pool, movies (American movies during the week). And oh I don't know, I'd say maybe five, six thousand kids used to go. All nationalities, all mixed, there was no nationality in the place, you were an American. And they did a beautiful job. And they even had a camp you'd go away for two weeks, like six dollars or something. They made it very- it was all paid for by millionaires, people with money. They got under the, members of the Boy's Club Society and it got quite big. And they started baseball games, and Ping-Pong started there. They started the original Ping-Pongs that you had people going to Europe to challenge the Europeans. All started in that building.

LEVINE: Wow.

DRAGO: Grastiano [ph]- the boxer- he lived one block away from me. We used to go there and play pool and everything. Grastiano [ph], and Izzy Ginaze [ph]- all the guys were boxers. They got a name cause they used to go and get their heads punched out. Tony Kenzinari [ph], he lived two blocks over that way. And that's they way they got famous- by getting their heads knocked out. But it was all part of the neighborhood.

LEVINE: Did you have a favorite past time that you go involved with?

DRAGO: I was with my father, I worked- let me tell you. There was a pool room, on thirtieth. The pool room was a den of evil. Little stolen things used to go on there. And one Irish cop would walk in that pool room everybody against the wall. And a hundred guys ran against the wall- one guy, that's the way the law was back then. And he'd go down the line and when came to me he says "Get outta here. Go help your father." He knew who the kids who didn't belong there. Cause I used to

like to shoot pool, play cards in there, not for money. But that's the way the law was in that day. One cop, ah he was a drunk and whatnot, whatever he had. But he kept that, that was his beat and he kept it clean. Anything that happened you could go to him he could tell you what happened. That was the law of the street; you respected that cop. And he kept crime to a minimum. Of course the crime was a minimum because there was no dope. That was the evil of the world. Them guys down in South America got rich but they ruined the world. There was no dope. The most you had was cigarette. But that ruined it, because everything was honest in that day.

LEVINE: Can you say anything about the shops or the way people bought their food.

DRAGO: Everything was local and nothing was packaged. Pasta came in boxes and the man would take out the pasta, put it on a piece of paper and roll it for you. Cheese he would cut it and put in two pieces of paper. Butter in a little cup. Everything was out; sacks on the floor with beans, everything. The bread used to come in loose, in a sack. They throw the bread in a box, you picked out your own loaf, they wrapped it up in a paper. Along first avenue, which is one block west of us, it is open market, push carts lined for about five, six blocks all the way down. And they sold everything Plus the stores opposite them were all stores of food. Fish stores, fresh fish you know, the guy made his own sausage. He used to make the sausage, you could see him making it. How about the Jewish guy had the pickles. For two cents you could get a pickle or a pig's feet in a barrel right outside. And German guys, they used to make the sandwiches for you; for a nickel you got a sandwich with a half a pound of meat in it. Oh another thing, let me tell you, a bakery opened up across the street, German bakery; rolls a penny a piece. We didn't make bread any more we ran across the

street; ten rolls, ten cents. All kinds of buns and everything. So we grew up eating buns for breakfast, no ham and eggs, buns. Oh and then the trolley car came through. That was it. Avenue A was a wide street compared to B and C which were, and they decided to put up a trolley car all the way from down town. Way down on wall street or something it started, it would go all the way up to 14th and turn and then go across town. And this was the thing, they didn't make the trolley car with overhead wires, they made it with a crack in the street, steel crack, and the car had a big lever that would go down and touch the electrical connection. So there was no overhead wires and that was nice. It was a clean street and these trolley cars. And no body ever got down further because it was maybe down two foot below the surface of the street, the electric, so they couldn't get it. And that was nice, the trolley car. You jump out of a trolley car you end up all over for a nickel in them days. And that was another thing about the neighborhood. What else...?

LEVINE: How about the family, were there anythings that you did together?

DRAGO: A tissue Mary please...

LEVINE: That you did like maybe on Sunday, or were there any kind of family rituals?

DRAGO: Sunday was the big meal of the week. Well like I say my father was pretty good, other people could only have meat on Sundays, you know who were poorer.

MRS.

DRAGO: Well your father worked for it, you know.

DRAGO: Yeah. Papa was a hard man, but he was straight anyway.

LEVINE: What was his temperament? What was his personality? How would you describe him?

DRAGO: Oh he made it and he had it. He really was- he never smoked or anything like that, so people that smoked he used to look at them like "That necessary?" But he was a hard man, a hard man.

LEVINE: Was he a strict man?

DRAGO: Yes, very strict. He had to have his way, right or wrong. For instance, he invited somebody; alright come up on a Sunday three o'clock be here, to his house, and we couldn't make it, he'd take everything off the table forget about it. (Laughs) Real tough.

LEVINE: And how about your mother, how was her temperament?

DRAGO: You know she was appeasing him all the time, appeasing him. Yeah and keeping him quite. And she had the children around, and then when the grandchildren came, oh forget it, even us she forgot. The grandchildren, she took care of them, even did their shirts, the white shirts because, the mother's didn't do it right. (Both laugh) And they both, they had pretty long lives, like I say 83, 80. He died of a heart attack.

MRS.

DRAGO: (Inaudible)..almost all their life.

DRAGO: Yeah they lived, they never went...

LEVINE: So in other words you were in the Lower East Side until you got married, so you must have seen a lot of changes besides the trolley car and the gas lights.

DRAGO: Oh yeah, different elements came into the neighborhood that people moved out, all the people that were there.

MRS.

DRAGO: I remember I had a picture of you, and the trolley was passing. And then that was it, that was the end.

DRAGO: Yeah they took away, they stopped the trolley and all that. Then automobiles came in, before that there was no automobiles.

LEVINE: Do you remember that, people getting automobiles?

DRAGO: Yes, I bought an automobile for twelve dollars. I was, oh God I was like 20 years, less 19 years old, 18. I couldn't get a permit because I was under age I think. Oh yeah I had the permit. The permit I got but I couldn't get a license yet. So I had, I kept the car out in out Queens, a friend of mine had a- and we used to take the train to Queens and ride around in my car. Seven gallons for a dollar! Put that in your hat. Seven gallon for a dollar.

MRS.

DRAGO: You could make a book out of this.

DRAGO: And we'd ride around, what we did, we used to go crabbing out in Long Island on certain days. A couple times we'd hire out a little row boat, go fishing. I mean we didn't stay in the city we traveled around.

MRS.

DRAGO: In the summers you went over there.

DRAGO: Yeah.

LEVINE: So you grew up, you went to high school, then, how about the depression? do you have any memories of that?

DRAGO: Yeah, yeah well yeah. When the Depression I was still- That hit us hard, that hit us. My father had put money in an Italian bank, there used to be these little banks, and why did he put it there, because they also had a postal service, they would send letters to Italy for you, you know with the stamps and all; and it folded up. And he lost, I don't know, a couple a thousand dollars that he had amassed at the time. I remember he, he felt pretty bad that he put- this is before he really got out of (inaudible) 1924 or something, no 1930-

LEVINE: No more than that

DRAGO: Yeah well in the '30s that would be in the '30s. Yeah.

LEVINE: You were at least 10 or some age around that.

DRAGO: Yeah of course the following year, we started to get good, and my brother died. So my brother was six years old and he was five years, four years, two years younger than me. Two years younger than me, so he was 6 years old, so that's eight years before then. Yeah it must have been about '31, 1931 or something. And that, the funeral cost him a thousand dollars that he was back in the hole again. Little things that happened.

LEVINE: Set backs, yeah.

DRAGO: It was the first time I seen my father cry.

LEVINE: When your...

DRAGO: When my brother died. He was a hard man, he never cried. But he did that time.

LEVINE: What did your brother die of?

DRAGO: Oh-

MRS.

DRAGO: Stomach...

DRAGO: What do you call it?

LEVINE: Appendix.

MRS.

DRAGO: Appendix.

DRAGO: Appendix. They didn't know, they thought it was a stomach ach caused by castor oil and it killed him.

MRS.

DRAGO: They said give him and enema.

DRAGO: Give him an enema. And he died from that.

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: How about the health care, can you say anything about...?

DRAGO: Oh health care we were pretty good because my father had a private doctor, he used to give him gifts and the doctor would take care of us all the time. And he was involved- no he wasn't involved when my brother died, he was a younger guy. Yeah we had him for many years. Anytime you had anything you'd run over to him. Plus the druggist at that time were half doctors. Anything any cut or anything you go in there, they used to patch you up. Something in your eye they used to take it out. Then there was a clinic if you wanted to go. I think it was in that, they had a boy's club one of them Christa Dora Houses or something. They had a clinic you could go in, mother's could bring their babies there.

MRS.

DRAGO: They had eye, ear and throat and all that.

DRAGO: Yeah. They had a couple of clinics. That was pretty good the hospitalization. And then we were within five or six blocks of Bellevue Hospital. Their wards were always packed with guys being beat up or cut up or something like that. But they were effective. They were good hospitals, at Bellevue.

LEVINE: Now you said that all the different ethnic groups wanted to be Americans, so there was no- but was there tension between them or no?

DRAGO: No, no. We used to play ball with each other. That's stick ball, we had stick ball that was the game of the- we'd go play them, they'd play us.

The polish people, oh there was a lot, there were about four blocks south of us. Opposite them, and we had this Thomson Square park which was a square block, that was the center of everything. They had a wadding pool in there and everything. And we went and met in that park, a skating rink, they had a skating rink, we used skate around the rink. And never any fights over nationality or anything, we were all in the same hole. I mean we all- never.

MRS.

DRAGO: It was good to go skating there.

DRAGO: I don't maybe if you see a big black kid, that they stayed away from. Seen then, you didn't mix with them. They didn't mix with you, you didn't mix with them. But there wasn't that many of them around, because they were all up in Harlem. So that element wasn't there at all, see.

LEVINE: How about the water front? Did you have much to do with that?

DRAGO: The water front, no. The real bad one was over on the West Side; Hell's Kitchen and all that; all the rackets went on there. We had a small water front, the East River- which wasn't very clean- But there was nothing, no construction job. I think up further was that company that made the cement trucks, they had the cement trucks. Things like that, there was no real traffic on the East River.

MRS.

DRAGO: No big industry.

DRAGO: No. Oh this is something little, they had a bath boat, they called it a bathboat. It was an enormous wooden boat, flat bottom, hole in the

middle, but a hole I mean maybe it was twenty foot by twenty foot hole, off, wood slates on the bottom so you couldn't fall through. And it was about three foot deep. And you would swim in there, in the East River.

LEVINE: On the boat?

DRAGO: This boat was moored, after that, it was run by the city free, no charge, you go down to the boat and you run into this hole. It was all wood slates, you couldn't fall through. But that, that was the only water you had to go swimming. And they used to go-

LEVINE: Wow.

DRAGO: And it wasn't the cleanest water because you'd see all kinds of thing floating by. But these slats, were all, maybe one inch apart, and it kept our big stuff from coming, and it was fairly clean. And we used to go down the boat house. Then the city broke it's (inaudible), and they build bath houses, wadding pools, like there's one at 23rd Street and it's still there.

LEVINE: Yeah I know that one.

DRAGO: That was public, and you used to go there- It was nice, clean; never any fighting in there or nothing. Well maybe on cop patrolled the whole thing and everybody respected him.

MRS.

DRAGO: Everybody was congenial.

DRAGO: Yeah. And you went there and you all mixed in. You bring your lunch, don't throw no paper on the floor, they kept it very up. People didn't

throw because they knew...They had one, they had another one, a bath house on 10th Street and Avenue C. You could go down and take a bath there, they had public, no charge. And the city ran it. And you'd go down there, take a shower, a bath; because most houses in New York had no bathroom, bathtub. The bathtub was in the kitchen, and you used the top of the bathroom as a serving thing, a big, they had metal plates they put over. So if you had to have a bath, no body had to be in the house, you'd take it when everybody went away. And you had the bath there. But that was common, because somebody was always home, you know. You have to chase everybody out to take a bath? And so we used to go to the bath house. It was very nice. The boys club had a pool, you could use the pool once a week; you had two hours of pool. Then there was another place on the opposite side of the park, Christa Dora house. It was more protestant than Catholic. But they allowed you the pool rights. Then there was another pool over on 13 and 1st Avenue, Grace Chapel, it was also protestant. SO you made believe you were protestant for a while, you walk in there. And we used to take bath there, and it was the cleanliness of it. But most people kept clean, no body smelled.

MRS.

DRAGO: No body had that, like tubs, even in the kitchen there.

DRAGO: Oh yeah no, people didn't even have the tub in the kitchen, so it was hard to take a bath.

MRS.

DRAGO: Well I was small, and when I moved I was 4 years old, and I moved to a steam heated apartment and marble stairs...

LEVINE: I want to ask you questions later.

DRAGO: Later. (All laughing)

MRS.

DRAGO: I'm just telling what I know.

DRAGO: Little hard to keep her quiet.

LEVINE: (All laugh) How about boarders? Were there any people taking in boarders that you were aware of?

DRAGO: Oh yes there was like people, let's say a woman lived alone, or her husband had died, or even if her husband was sick. They'd have two or three rooms empty. So they would take, usually women they didn't want men, they'd rent out a room to a woman that was alone maybe.

LEVINE: Oh.

DRAGO: And they'd matter a few dollars a week, you could pay. And they gave you a bed, that's all there was really, and use of the bathroom. Oh another thing, bathrooms, now we get to bathrooms now, most of the old homes, had, didn't have a bathroom for every apartment. Out in the hall they would have a bathroom, usually two bathrooms on every floor. One bathroom was for two apartments on this end, the other was for the other two. And you had to bring your own toilet paper. And that was it, and that was a way of life. Oh the first house we had where we lived in, we had the bathrooms out in the hall, and the second one, when my father moved, we had private bathrooms. Oh that was nice.

LEVINE: So it was just a little, like closet, with a toilet in it,

DRAGO: Oh just a small little telephone booth, that's all it was. There was a window in each one, each one had a window- it was ventilated. And the tank overhead where you pulled the chain and the water came down.

LEVINE: So can you say anything about the buildup to World War II, just before and what was happening?

DRAGO: Yes, World War II started before we even got involved or England got involved. It was, started in our neighborhood when Mussolini marched into Ethiopia and Abyssinia and Eritrea- took all them countries, Mussolini took them over. Because here he had a big army, he took the people that were starving into a big military camp. So, you can't have guys being soldiers having nothing to shoot at. So he decided to take over Eritrea which he took, and then he went in Ethiopia, but Ethiopia was backed by the British, so that gave him a little problem there. So there was a little friction between them. Then Hitler moved in to Poland, so the Polish people were all up in arms crying for people that they had there. See they took it hard, there. And really those were the two big groups, the Polish- oh and then Hitler started going after the Jews especially in Russia and all that, Russians too. And the Jewish people started crying, here they all getting, you know, mad at something, they have to take it out on somebody, who could they take it out on? Nothing. Then when England go in with the, everybody sided with England right away. "Hey that's the only country." Everybody was rooting for England really. Even the Italians didn't want nothing to do with Mussolini for what he did. And then of course, he marched in to Belgium, and then France, he took over France.

LEVINE: So what led you to, to sign up?

DRAGO: Well, I don't know really, I was hearing all these stories, plus I had gotten, I had broken up with my father, I didn't want the business anymore, and I went out and get a job with a piano company- cabinet making and wood.

LEVINE: What made you break up? What made you go on your own?

DRAGO: Because, it wasn't, I don't know, I guess I didn't have my own life. See I wanted, I had to work, and I wanted a job with a future because this was dying out. There was no more old buildings to fix. In fact he, he had sold it, he got rid of the, he bought himself a hardware store. So he was busy in the hardware store, I didn't want to stay in the hardware store. That's it, yeah. He settled down with the hardware store, he owned the building he opened up a store down there. He did rather well there. So I went out and got a job in the piano store.

LEVINE: What did you do when you got your job in the- Steinway?

DRAGO: No it wasn't Steinway it was a company called Winter.

LEVINE: Winter.

DRAGO: Winter and Company. They made more pianos than Steinway ever hoped to make. But cheap ones, the ones, Macy's sold them, and they put the Macy name. Everybody saw the put the- but they made like thirty, forty pianos a day, spinetz [ph]! I got in with the wood. Fitting the pieces in, putting the legs on. I learned in the business, then I got into the furniture part, finishing them. And I did pretty good with that company, I got to be a foreman there after a while. And I got married while I worked there. I worked like twenty years for them, eighteen

years. Then they folded up and they went to, down South. Because labor was cheaper down there. Up here it was getting pretty expensive.

LEVINE: Well now, when was it that you were in the Army? You started to work before.

DRAGO: Oh 1941 the war started.

LEVINE: And were you working at Winter then?

DRAGO: I was working at Winter. I was working at Winter. I just says "You know, I think I'd like to get into this now. Yeah." So I went down to Whitehall Street, they says "No you got to be 21 years old, or come here with your parents permission." So I, my father was a little peeved at me that I didn't stay with him and all that, so I says I want to join the army. I mean the job wasn't much I was making, like eighteen dollars a week. Yeah, which wasn't much in them days. So he says you want to go, go a head. I go "You got to sign the paper." My mother goes "Whhhhhaaa" (feminine noises of agitation), so my father says "Let him go, he's 20." I was just past 20. Well I was 20 in September and this was January, it was January so it was two months. To Whitehall Street I went down there and they "alright," signed up. I bought the paper, they took me, that's it. Four years later I came home.

LEVINE: So tell a little bit about like, you did training, you were trained here and then you went overseas?

DRAGO: Oh yeah. Well I had a pretty good IQ when I went in, the register-everything goes by that IQ. You're eligible for officer school, you're eligible for everything. Office school I couldn't make because I didn't have a college education, number one, plus I was a little short. See

they weren't, they guy told me he says "How would it stand, here's a family, a squadron of giants and you out there telling them to follow you?" (All laugh) Yeah he was right about, he says "Listen to me, don't go," this was the psychiatrist, he told me don't go, "I'll fix you up." And he sent me to an Aberdeen, Maryland Proving Grounds, where I went to artillery school there. I graduated that did, I wan an automatic artillery mechanic, they couldn't take that away from me. And it carried the rank of staff sergeant. So all the way through I couldn't do no wrong.

LEVINE: Wow. And then say what you did as an artillery mechanic.

DRAGO: Mechanic? I had to make sure that all the guns in the division fired, and fired properly. So I had to check every one. A division consisted of three battalions of artillery and that's like twelve, twenty-four guns each battalion. Oh I had ninety guns to take care of. But I had a squadron of four men; and we did it. It took us a month to check every cannon. This is overseas, I was on my own just traveling. I would get to a place, "where's that?" "Oh they moved out. Hey you're behind enemy lines now." So I was a little...

LEVINE: You mean you were in charge of ninety cannons?

DRAGO: My four men.

LEVINE: You, you and you're four men?

DRAGO: Well no it was ninety, no wait I think it was, forty-eight.

LEVINE: Forty-eight.

DRAGO: Forty-eight. Yeah in a division. There's three battalions.

LEVINE: Yeah. So you're doing this while there's action going on?

DRAGO: The war is. Yeah, they're firing at the enemy. Especially at the Rhine when we were going to cross the Rhine. To soften the other side they fired oh all night long, all day long, to knock everything out of the way because we were going to go across the Rhine. See they had to soften it up, and then cannons were firing from morning till night and I just had to keep them going. They all "Oh there's one broken in A07 artillery..." And I would find this place, remove the parts. But I had a cool four men, they were beautiful guys. They're all dead now, I kept in touch with them.

LEVINE: After the war you kept in touch with them.

DRAGO: Christmas cards. They loved that, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DRAGO: But there was a good...

LEVINE: So you saw the Rhine, and what else did you...?

DRAGO: I crossed the Rhine.

LEVINE: You crossed the Rhine?

DRAGO: Yeah, in Pontoon boats.

LEVINE: And we have the picture of you with your medals. So where else were you besides there during the war?

DRAGO: Oh in this country here?

LEVINE: No, over there.

DRAGO: Oh just from Les Harve [ph] to Paris. Then from Paris we swung over to the Belgium boarder down the Maginal line on the Rhine. Then we crossed the Rhine and headed for Berlin. When we got outside of Berlin they stopped us, they let the Russians take it. It don't know why. Then from there, they changed us over to Patton's third Army and we were, before this we were in the Seventh Army. Then from there we made a quick dive all the way down to Austria. And we met the Russians at the Entz River in Austria. We met them, we shook hands. They got on one side, Patton says "If they come across that water at night, you blow 'em out of the water!" (Laughs) He told the artillery, and we went, from there we went South to Austria. Like I say when we hit the town of Stier [ph], we're sixteen miles outside of Austria, the war was over. Then we were put on capturing enemy soldiers that ran away. You would go to the edge of the woods, fire a shot and say "Come on out!" and they'd all come out. And you'd line them up on the road and march them back to a concentration camp, put them in camps. To get them all, to feed them more than anything, and get their weapons away, and repatriate them. Send them home to wherever they belong. See because you can't leave them walking on their own. You had to put them on trains and send them back home. And all these people, these big "Supermen" just walking around eating what we gave them. It was a sad story there at the end.

LEVINE: Do you remember when you heard the war was over?

DRAGO: Yeah.

LEVINE: What was, what happened?

DRAGO: We were working, oh no we wouldn't have no artillery firing there because it was almost over. We just had trucks. We stopped at a bombed out airport because all the trucks had to line up. And we were in there and a guy came over with the news. Oh yeah, that's it.

MRS.

DRAGO: You were sorry it was over.

DRAGO: Well in a way, I liked it. In fact I wanted to rejoin, reenlist. Oh I did stay in the reserves. I was an inactive reserve. And we had, my daughter, we were married, we had my daughter.

LEVINE: Well no wait a minute, you weren't married when you went in.

DRAGO: Oh no, I got married in '48. I came in, in '46; two years later I got married.

LEVINE: Oh Okay. Why don't you say for the tape how you met your wife because you told me off the tape.

DRAGO: Oh yea. You want me to say how I met her?

LEVINE: Well, the circumstance.

DRAGO: Well I was pretty loose. I was running around with three or four of my buddies. And one of them decides to get married, he had to spoil it.

(Both laugh) So he says you've got to come to the wedding so I says "I don't have no girls to bring to the wedding." So he says "Come on you got to get one, you got to come to the wedding." So I go to my sister, I says I need a nice girl to take to the wedding. And she said "Oh I got just the girl for you, I meet her on the bus." And she talked to her "You want to go out with my brother?" and all that. They made, we met at an ice cream parlor or something, we were just introduced. So I says yeah alright, we were nice, we talked. I says "I'll see you in about three weeks I'll pick you up, take you to the wedding." She says "Look at her stupid guy, three weeks..." (All laugh) Well I, I had no conception of what the protocol was for getting a girl. I mean, I say what. And as luck would have it, I met her the next day on the bus, I had to go someplace else. In fact, I was up in Connecticut the night before, a couple of friends of mine we were running around up in Connecticut some beer joint up there. And we came home early the next morning, I had take the bus to go down to get my citizen papers. I met her on the bus, and I guess she overpowered me.

LEVINE: She overpowered you (laughs).

DRAGO: And I made a date and I took her out. And I started dating her. And then my friends all got mad at me.

MRS.

DRAGO: He says how would you like to go to...

DRAGO: Bronx Park or something.

MRS.

DRAGO: Bronx Park and meet my relatives?

(All laugh)

DRAGO: I mean, I didn't know where to take her. But then I acted good. Every week, every weekend of our first year, she got a bunch of flowers. Every Friday, when I came home from work when I finished, I would stop at the flower store and buy her a bunch of flowers.

MRS.

DRAGO: Every month.

DRAGO: Oh once a month, once a month. Our anniversary for the month.

MRS.

DRAGO: They guy knew already, he used to prepare it.

DRAGO: He used to have a bouquet ready. And every month I would bring her flowers. I was cute, I was real cute.

LEVINE: Awww.

MRS.

DRAGO: He knew how to get around.

DRAGO: Yeah I learned the bologna.

LEVINE: What's the proudest thing that you, what are you most proud of? What do you feel a lot of satisfaction having done?

DRAGO: Number one, my war service. I'm proud of that, I pretty proud; clean all the way. Although I was AWOL for five days one time, at the beginning. They broke me to a private, but being that I did the same

job they had to give me back my stripes. So that I went a month without pay. Then they gave me back my stripes.

MRS.

DRAGO: Sent him to school but he didn't stay there.

DRAGO: Oh then another time I went to school I had another break- I had breaks all my life, I can't say that I- They decided that there wasn't enough college graduates in the United States because everybody was in the Army. At this time I was a buck Sergeant yet, I didn't get my full stripes. So they came over to me, "Pete according to your IQ here, you're eligible to go to college; the government is going to send you to college." ASCP it was that, some kind of a, just to get college graduates in. So I says "I don't want to go." "You have to go, you're the only one in the company that is eligible." "I don't want to go,"- "Alright you have to go," I had to give up my stripes, sergeant stripes, and go as a cadent. And they shipped a bunch of us, we didn't know where we were going; Michigan State University. We landed on the campus there, the campus there, hardly any boys around, just a lot of girls, college girls going to Michigan State. And they figured out what I was best suited for was basic engineering. So had to take a basic engineering. And it was, very like a college term had to be put into three months or something. I mean you could get your AA citizenship but you had to get your history, Jefferson's monetary units with England in it, and English and all these other things. No body could do it. So it was too crowded so they sent us to Wisconsin, a bunch of us a smaller bunch, Rockbound, Wisconsin. The town was proud for being the birthplace of the Republican Party. (Laughs) That's all that ever happened there.

MRS.

DRAGO: When did you go to Aberdeen?

DRAGO: That was before.

MRS.

DRAGO: Oh before.

DRAGO: So I went there for about six months and everybody in the class failed. We couldn't do that work in six months. Plus you're not primed for certain things physics, chemistry, you had to take. Everything, a little bit of everything. So you had a half hour period, a half hour here, and they finally figured it can't be done. So I wasted a good eight months there. So they took me out of there and they sent me back, my outfit had gone. They formed another division and they needed an artillery mechanic and I got the job right away. But this is something new now. As luck would have it they were getting ready to invade Sicily from Africa. They were going to go across the Mediterranean, hit Sicily and then through Sicily to Italy because Italy was occupied by the Germans at the time. So they figured Sicily is a pretty rough country, we need an outfit with mules. (These are smart guys generals) I mean tanks can't go to Sicily, just mules. And they made an outfit what they called a "light division." All mules, and men pulling carts. It was a, like a division has ten thousand men, this was only a seven thousand men division; the Seventy-first Light Division, that's what it was. And we went on for about seven months with mules; carrying everything with mules. I climbed Pike's Peak with the mules and then the mules started bleeding at the nose because the air was so- they took the things off the mules and loaded the hand wagons and we went up to the top. And Mr. Wintchel got a letter at the time about what they did to us, and he made a big stink about it, that the men couldn't, had to go up

because the mules were bleeding from the nose. But they didn't cut it out. From there they sent us to the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California to practice there, the rough terrain. And we were up in them mountains for about a good month, and it started raining in Sierra Nevada Mountains. And all the trails got washed out, and the mules couldn't go up the trails. And we starved for two weeks on one-third rations. (Laughs) I shot a crow I ate a crow! I cooked him in my helmet. See the stories I got!

LEVINE: (Laughs) You've got enough stories.

DRAGO: And that there fizzled out, and oh what they did was they sent a different division instead of us. They sent the Tenth Mountain Division, they went into Sicily. That's the same outfit that went into Baghdad, they still, the unit is there, the men are different but it's the Tenth Mountain Division is the one that invaded Baghdad.

LEVINE: Wow.

DRAGO: See I heard about them, "Boy they got lucky! They went into Sicily." They did there pretty good, but the tanks had to do it, and airplanes. You can't beat an airplane, they can do everything.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Okay well we're practically at the end of the tape. How's life now for you now that you're retired?

DRAGO: Ah well, I worked for the piano industry for fort-five years, the same year, and they paid me pretty good, got a little pension I got. Plus Mary's got a pension. Plus our money we get from the government. We just about make ends meet that we don't have to skim. And I thank God for that. We don't miss nothing we go to everything.

LEVINE: So just anything else about coming to this country? Living...

DRAGO: Oh let me tell you something...

LEVINE: Yeah go ahead.

DRAGO: After all this stint in Europe, we were going on a Liberty ship (the one's they built over night). There was fifteen hundred of us on this Liberty ship. You only had your bed half a day, somebody else got it the other half. And we went across the ocean alright. We just took five days to cross the ocean. Incidentally the first time I went it took fifteen days because we were dodging submarines. This, five days we made it. And we got in, and outside of New York Harbor there is an Ambrose Light Ship, it's a wood boat that's anchored and it's got a light on it. That's the first thing we see and we cried. We cried. Then we went in the harbor we see the Statue of Liberty we broke up, everybody. Grown men crying. Up to the point where we got docked and the Red Cross sends out these dowdy fat women bringing us toothbrushes and everything. And everybody went "Yeah!" we throwing rolled of toilette paper at them. (Laughing) "Get outta here!" That's the best you got you better take us back! (All laugh) I thought you'd like that.

LEVINE: (Laughing) Yeah that's good. Okay well is there anything else, we're going to close now. You certainly had an interesting life.

DRAGO: Well being not born here has given me a siding with people that are foreigners. I'll give them a break anytime, anytime, I don't care where they come from. I even give choice over a citizen. If I have to share a loaf of bread I would share it with them because I know what they went through. Except one day I went to apply for a job, this is when the Irish

ruled the city, and they had a sign up on the wall says "No Mediterraneans need apply." They didn't want to put what kind just Mediterranean. There was French, Italians, Spanish, and that, that hit me. I'm here and I can't go and apply for a job. So I feel all these guys that mow the lawn, little Mexicans, I go out and give them Coca-Colas everyday when they mow my lawn. I feel for them. Any kind, I don't care who they are. If he's not born here I give him first choice.

LEVINE: Okay well that's a beautiful sentiment and I think it's a good place to end.

DRAGO: Well this country's been good to me I've had, like I'm telling you, I had breaks all over.

MRS.

DRAGO: Nice ending. I'm glad the book didn't come out with all the...

LEVINE: I've been speaking with Peter Drago and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service on May 5, 14- (Laughs)-...1492...2004. And I'm closing off here.