

EI-1324

MARY DRAGO

BIRTHDATE: March 15, 1924

INTERVIEW DATE: May 4, 2004

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 80

RUNNING TIME:

INTERVIEWER: Janet Levine

RECORDING ENGINEER: Same

INTERVIEW LOCATION: Bergenfield, New Jersey

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: Mary Distinti

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

Note: Mary Drago is not herself an immigrant, but rather she is a first generation Italian-American. Here she recounts her personal story as she grew up in the predominantly immigrant neighborhood of the Lower East Side and then moved out to Bergenfield, New Jersey with her husband and daughter. Both of her parents were immigrants who came from Sicily and then moved to the Lower East Side of Manhattan; they remained there for the rest of their lives. Mrs. Drago's husband, Peter Drago, is an Italian immigrant who arrived at Ellis Island in 1923 after leaving from Palermo, Italy at the age of 1½ years old. His recorded tape is EI-1323.

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

LEVINE: Today is March the 5th, 2004 and I am still here in Bergenfield, New Jersey at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Peter Drago, and this is now and interview with Mrs. Drago who was born Mary Bellomo.

DRAGO: Right.

LEVINE: And Mrs. Bellomo did not, Mrs. Drago herself did not come through Ellis Island, however her parents did, and they came from Sicily. And they lived in the same neighborhood as Mr. Drago did, in the Lower East Side. So this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and if

you would say again, for the tape, the name you were born with and the date you were born.

DRAGO: Okay, Mary Bellomo B-E-L-L-O-M-O. March 15, 1924

LEVINE: And where were you born?

DRAGO: There.

Mr. Drago: New York City

DRAGO: New York City.

LEVINE: And your mother and father, what was your mother's name?

DRAGO: Angelina. What do you want her maiden name?

LEVINE: Her maiden name.

DRAGO: Angelina Aquilino, A-Q-U-I-L-I-N-O.

LEVINE: Okay and your father's name, his first name.

DRAGO: Louis, Louis Bellomo, yes.

LEVINE: And now were they married when they came to this country?

DRAGO: No. She got married here. And he was here about a year, or maybe, maybe longer. I don't know. Because she came with a seven month old baby when she crossed

LEVINE: So, no wait. And we were talking about the manifest where they the maiden name of the wife.

DRAGO: Yes that's Aquilino.

LEVINE: Right, but so in other words they had been married in Sicily but she was coming here?

DRAGO: She might have been because she was coming here. Really I really don't know that part.

MR.

DRAGO: We never questioned that.

DRAGO: We never questioned it.

LEVINE: Yeah well okay. They came here, they settled in the Lower East Side.

DRAGO: Right and they all ended up near 14th Street, 12th Street, 13th Street, 14th Street. They all had like their own little society there. That they felt comfort in people that they knew about, you know.

LEVINE: People they had know in the old country.

DRAGO: Right, right.

LEVINE: So can you say something about the Lower East Side and the kind of community?

DRAGO: Well we were on 14th Street and right across the street from our building was a Catholic Church and a school. In fact my sisters went to that school, and they didn't know how to speak English either like him.

At least I knew because I had older people in my family. So I was like the fourth kid already, you know, so I learned a lot. Anyhow so we were there and everybody was at home at that little spot. I was 4 years old when suddenly my sister had gotten some good jobs. They were much older than me. One was the first one that was born. And then my sister Grace was like eleven years older than I was. So she got herself a job too that was, in the knitting mills you know, sweaters, they made sweaters.

LEVINE: Did they go to the mill itself and knit there?

DRAGO: Yeah they were on the machine.

LEVINE: On the machine.

DRAGO: Yeah they had to learn the machine. So they were bringing in some money. And we, my mother felt well look we have enough money to live, let's get a better apartment. So they heard about this apartment on 8th Street, St. Mark's Place. And they went to see the apartment and it was nice; four rooms, boxed rooms. Over there they were only Railroad you know. A bathroom in your own room, in your own house; it was off the kitchen but that's besides the point. They had the bathroom to themselves right. And they had a tub in there and everything else. So it was a little awkward if we had company, you know, that you had to go the bathroom. But anyhow that's the way it was. And they had marble stairs, steam heat. It had all the things you would want that you didn't have over there. So they paid. They went there for forty-three dollars which was a lot in those days, a month. So that's the story. We never made it rich really.

LEVINE: What did your father do? Do you know what...?

DRAGO: He was working on clothing, in the clothing shop, you know. Make something with the pants or the jacket. He always had something to do with something like that. I don't know exactly what he was doing, but he wasn't working all the time; there wasn't always a lot of work. So naturally when the girls got older, they went to work and they helped out. That's the way it was.

LEVINE: Do you remember the Depression?

DRAGO: Well it went right over my head if I did because I was a young kid.

LEVINE: Yeah, cause you were young.

DRAGO: I mean when Christmas came I had all the toys I wanted. And not that I asked for them but you know, my mother used to, "who bought me a truck?" Something- they used to have like an orchestra they used to buy this and that and everybody used to play it at once. I had a nice carriage with a doll. I had all the things a kid wanted. Because I was already like the forth child, the forth girl I should say. And then eleven years later my sister was born, my young sister. She had those last two like that; I don't know how. But I was like a mother to that kid. I mean she got sick and she died, I mean forget it, I couldn't take it, not her, not that one. This one lived till 81, the other one lived to 94. She was sick in her own way too, but I mean, that's the way it was. She died at 94. This one died at 90, almost 82, you know. So that was it with that.

LEVINE: So can you say anything about societies in the Lower East Side, like you know did they have cemetery plots and you could loan, borrow money. Were you aware of any of those kinds of things?

DRAGO: I was too young to even concentrate on that you know what I mean. Whatever they did. Like my mother had brothers he might have shown her where to go, where to buy them. They all had lot plot places when they would die you know. And I guess all the relatives where there. Like even my aunt upstairs, they all bought their things there.

LEVINE: And how about your, did you go to public school?

DRAGO: Yes. I went to public school, P.S. 60. That was from, now first I went to elementary school from kindergarten to sixth grade I think it was, yeah. And then from there I went to junior high school from seven to nine. And from there then I went to Washington Irving and I finished my whole thing with high school. Graduated, and then went out, I took the commercial course. I did well, I always had a job. Every interview I went to they hired me no matter where I went. And then I would work there for a while and then I'd say, "You know I don't think I'm making enough money." I would try to look for something better. So a lot of people used to come in, deliver stuff, I'd say "Oh did they need anybody in your place?" He says "Yeah, they're always looking for somebody." So I said "I think I'm going to come for an interview." And I did. And I said I had typing experience, commercial course experience, you know writing like ...

LEVINE: Shorthand?

DRAGO: Shorthand, and things like that. And I always got another job. I would go for the interview and I would get the job. I don't know what it was about me. I always got the job when I went. (Laugh) Then we came out here, now then I got another job- every time I heard of a job that paid more, I would go, and I would always get it, you know. So I would work there for a while. And then in the mean time, I met him, we got married,

we come out here. And I didn't work, I had the baby then. You know, I had the baby I didn't go to work, he said "No you stay home with the baby." So I couldn't really go to work until the kid was like about 9 years old. Not that I would leave her home alone, somebody was always in charge of her, but I started to work for New American Library, that was out here, and I worked there about twenty, twenty-two years.

LEVINE: So, you stayed in the Lower East Side, why don't you pick up on your husband's interview, you married, you were still in the Lower East Side.

DRAGO: We still stayed there, till the baby was, the baby was born there, and she was two years old when we moved to the other little apartment, and that was a little, it was kind of a nicer place.

MR.

DRAGO: We left there in '55.

LEVINE: '55, is when you moved to Jersey?

DRAGO: Yeah, then we moved out here, and we've been here ever since.

LEVINE: In Bergenfield?

DRAGO: Yes.

LEVINE: Do you know why, what prompted the move and why Bergenfield?

DRAGO: Because some of his friends from work moved out here. They were in New Milford, and he says "You come out, go to Alexander Summers, they'll show you a house, they'll show you this, they'll show you that."

We were green with all that stuff, you know, but anyhow we did go out with him and we saw the guys house. And it was just like a little ranch, nothing spectacular. So then we went to see other homes, they were older homes you know, up and down. And we stayed there for, we bought that house, we liked it, it was all like semi-modern. Had double combination sinks, you know things that would attract you. And we took that house and we enjoyed it. We were there for six years. And then one day my friend and I were out in the car and she says "You know, they're building right around here all knew homes. They call them "split-level." The sugar maples you know? So she says, "Lets go see them." So we went to see them, we said "Oh I love these houses. Wonderful what's different." It was different than the other one you know. I says I got to bring my husband here to see it so that was it. So we went home, that night I said "You know I think we should buy some pizza for tonight. I saw a nice pizza joint right around Dumont." So we went out, oh wait a minute, before we go for the pizza, I want you to see what they're building here, they're fantastic. I said they're so beautiful. And the first was the model home it had furniture and everything in it. So we went through the whole thing and he said "Alright just a moment, you wait here, I'm going to go home and get my check book." This is the way, he's so you know, "I'm going to get my check book and I'm going to buy this house." So the guys was shocked he was so happy, you know. And sure enough we did, he gave it, we signed whatever deposit he wanted and we had the house. And then since then we're here. And we've enjoyed it, I like Bergenfield.

LEVINE: Well now what was it like going from the Lower East Side to Bergenfield?

DRAGO: Well the beginning was like I missed my family, I missed them a lot you know. I used to have them out here for like a week or two, my mother

and a sister that were still around you know. And that's it. One time we had the whole bunch over.

MR.

DRAGO: A couple of times.

DRAGO: This sister, the sister with the husband, with the son. We had to find beds for everybody. We took lawn chairs and the men slept on that. We had fun, it was good. But I missed my mother, she used to miss, one day she would call, the next day I would call. We took turns.

LEVINE: Well I guess a lot of people were starting to move out of the Lower East Side?

DRAGO: Oh yeah. Yeah a lot of people were coming out to Jersey. That's how it got so populated. Everybody heard about it, and we got all kinds of nationalities here now. Although they are good people I have to say. They don't look to fight. They're not fighters. They see you, they smile, they say "How are you?" Just a few words, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah we were saying before, before we were taping that the composition out here was pretty much like the Lower East Side when you first came.

DRAGO: Yeah right, right. We were all like from the same boat trying to get up in the world a little bit. So we got a better home, no doubt. The other was an old home. It was well fixed, they kept it up to date the people that had it. They had a new bathroom with a sink and everything, everything was good. But you know, it was still up and down and old fashioned and all that sort of stuff. And that's all I can say about it. It was nice.

LEVINE: Can you say anything about the immigration, I mean, the fact of your mother and father being immigrants, did that have any kind of an impact on you or?

DRAGO: No, no not really. Because little by little my mother started to learn the language, especially when she got angry with some merchant, you know. She would spout it off and knew exactly what she was meaning, you know what I mean. She learned the language, she talked broken English but she made herself understood.

LEVINE: Now did they become citizens?

DRAGO: Oh yes, yes. My mother, my father. He took us down, and I had, my daughter was there. She was like 4 years old like that. So she was like in the hall outside and she'd tell the people "I go to dancing school!" (Laughing) She don't even know them. So they said "Really? What do you learn?" "I learn tap dancing and I have a song that we sing." And she started to sing, (laughing) I could hear her from inside. She was a little ham I tell you she was.

LEVINE: And so did your mother and father, was that like a proud moment for them to become citizens?

DRAGO: Oh yes, yes. That was like the main thing. We were just briefing her on questions and things, you know. And she learned right away, my father learned to. So they got their papers that made them citizens. And they felt proud of that too.

LEVINE: Yes, and then they stayed there in that apartment. It was a nice comfortable apartment. My father died, oh I don't, bet you about, he was not even, he was...

MR.

DRAGO: No he was young.

DRAGO: He was 60 something. You know he died and then my sister was there. And then all the more she wouldn't go out looking for anybody, you know, cause she figured "I'm going to leave Mom alone, you know." That's the way it is. She was still living there.

LEVINE: Now how about what you did as a girl growing up in the Lower East Side? Did you do some of the same things as your husband? In other word go to the- well you didn't go to the Boy's Club I guess.

DRAGO: No not the Boy's Club. There was a club that- what was the name of that club? I didn't even go join- we weren't even allowed to join clubs you know.

MR.

DRAGO: They were restricted, especially to girls.

LEVINE: Oh cause your father was strict?

DRAGO: He was strict yeah. If he came, let's say we were all talking outside, my cousin lived around the corner and his friends and my friends and we're all talking together, and having fun and laughing. All of the sudden my is coming from shopping and he sees me there (gasps) with the men, he went upstairs to my mother he says "I think your mother wants you" he tells me. I said "I don't think she wants me, I'm

going to go up when I want to go up.” So that was it, so he went up and he said “Your daughter is down there with all the men!” Now could you believe that? How strict they were? And so when I came up my mother says “What’s this with the men?” I say “What men? My cousin Jimmy and a few of his friends? What was I supposed to say? I don’t want to stay here?” So that was the end of that one. I always had to watch out who was coming, this cousin, that uncle. Oh this fell off?

LEVINE: No.

DRAGO: No, oh alright; me moving around. And that’s the way it was. They were, they were strict.

LEVINE: Can you think of any other attitudes that they had that you know they tried to instill in you as parents?

DRAGO: I mean, he was strict but I mean, not to a point that he would get crazy about. My mother would say “Alright, alright.” She always knew how to humor him, and that was it.

LEVINE: Well you were all girls, is that right?

DRAGO: We were all girls yeah. When the last one was born it was a girl. Five girls he had. And he said “Don’t tell me it’s a girl” (laughing). Well that was it, yeah.

LEVINE: Now did your mother and father know your husband’s mother and father?

DRAGO: Well we met.

MR.

DRAGO: They met.

DRAGO: They met when we knew each other then we did the great introduction here, and back and forth there. It was nice, it was nice.

MR.

DRAGO: Yeah no problems.

DRAGO: No problem at all. As long as it, my mother used to say, "If you want to go out I don't want no body that divorced, I don't want no body out of the- if he's not Italian, I want him to be Catholic, I don't care." But you know all these different things.

LEVINE: So they were pleased.

DRAGO: They were pleased, yeah.

MR.

DRAGO: (Inaudible) (Laughing)

DRAGO: Oh they were pleased. When I had to have my first date with him, my mother's got her head out the window waiting for him, she says "I see somebody. He's smoking a cigar, he's got light pants with a nice navy jacket." I said "Well that might be him." She liked him right away. He came with candy; he bribes everybody. Candy- candy to my sister next door to, no to the kid.

LEVINE: So you're mother was one of those women who was looking out the window all the time?

DRAGO: Well she knew somebody was coming, I had a date. She knew I had a date, and she wanted to know what he was like, you know. So he came up to the house to pick me up, and he started in with his little gift of gab you know.

LEVINE: (Both laugh) And how about your father, did he?

DRAGO: Oh well he went along with it, he wasn't going to be...

MR.

DRAGO: He loved me.

DRAGO: He loved you?

MR.

DRAGO: I used to bring him cartons of cigarettes.

DRAGO: Ah no wonder he died young.

LEVINE: So anything else about the immigration experience or life in the Lower East Side that you remember?

DRAGO: I always loved it, I always liked it, I always liked it. It was just so lively all the time. When I was a child I mean we had all kinds of games playing, you know. All that stuff. Or we would sit in like an empty store thing and tell jokes or sing; "We're going to play singing today, everybody has to sing a certain song." It was funny.

MR.

DRAGO: I don't want to but in here but something just reminded me, there was friendship between friends. I mean you confided everything to your girlfriend, you lived with her, you ate with her, cause you lived all

together crowded. In a hallway, you could spend two, three hours sitting in a hallway, talking. You don't have that today, kids don't know each other. We knew each other.

DRAGO: Yeah we, it was really friendship really, you know. It was nice, and yet I don't know any of them now. They're all gone. Who went here, who went there. Everybody moved to different places.

LEVINE: Yeah. Are there any other things that were different about like life there where you were growing up in the Lower East Side and life- I mean obviously it's more spacious?

MR.

DRAGO: You got used to the closeness, it was close.

DRAGO: It was close. The apartments were like small, but you got used to it, like he said.

LEVINE: Did you ever experience anybody ever taking in borders?

DRAGO: I used to hear about it, yeah. I heard about people taking in boarders. Even in our building cause they had like four rooms, and if they were left alone, like a woman was alone she needed maybe money, she would take somebody that was going, like let's say she was a teacher or something, she needed a room to stay. They used to take them in, yeah. As long as they knew them, you know.

LEVINE: Oh they had to know them.

DRAGO: Well they knew them and their character and their, you know. It was nice. And like I say, we had a very good repour with all our neighbors. I mean my neighbor in that one building there, I used to go in to visit her, he name was Mala. And I would go in and she would say "Come in, come in. You want some breutmanpita?" [ph]. I said "If you want to give it to me." (All laugh) It was so cute, everyday I would go in, I'd love that; pumpernickel bread with the butter. So that's what she used to give me.

MR.

DRAGO: You ever hear of "Pachie, pachie, tchickola?" [ph]

LEVINE: No.

MR.

DRAGO: Yeah the Jewish kids used to do it, six songs- chanechara- (inaudible).

DRAGO: (Laughs) So then that was my neighbor, I grew up with her. And I mean she was wonderful. She used to say to my mother "You need anything I'm going to go do a little shopping. You want me to get you anything?" She didn't want to load her down. My father used to go, you know. So she said "Oh just bring me the newspaper, just the news." In those days it was just the news. So she did. But she gave us that dog Skippy, her dog had dogs you know, and we had the dog Skippy. And she said to us, I said "We don't even know what to feed him!"- "Oh you buy ten cents liverwurst and you give it to them." So the dog loved it, you know, but I think he got gall bladder from that. He had gall stones, he was sick, and he died young. Skippy.

LEVINE: Did many people have pets? I never really..

DRAGO: Yeah they had pets? I never really....

DRAGO: Yeah they had pets. Yeah they went down, you brought them down to do what they had to do. And I don't even think they asked you to pick it up; I don't know.

LEVINE: Probably not.

DRAGO: Not in those days.

MR.

DRAGO: Oh you couldn't let the dog go, you had to let it do it in the street. Later on when they did come around, you had to pick it up. But at the beginning no, because there was no cars there.

DRAGO: So my mother had this woman, and she was very nice to her, you know. And when I moved we went to that other apartment on Avenue C, I had a nice friend; one of the neighbors was lovely, I mean she was very good. But she used to come in every single morning, she had to have her coffee with me. I says "Okay, come on in." What they heck was her name?

MR.

DRAGO: Fay. Fay Levine.

DRAGO: Fay Levine.

LEVINE: Levine?

DRAGO: (Laughs) Maybe you know her. Fay Levine. And so she used to come in, then she'd say to me "What does the baby want today to eat?" "I say well yesterday she had the lamb chops, I think I'm going to get

liver for today.” One day it was lamb chops, one day it was liver. This is what this kid ate. She didn’t like no baby food or any of that stuff. Maybe Pastina [ph] she would eat; she was a little finicky eater, but she ate. And I the same thing like the other woman, my mother had the other woman, she would go down and buy her some, but she had to have her coffee first. And I didn’t care, I had company. It was nice.

LEVINE: So people got along? Did people like teach each other how to cook differently or any of that kind of thing? Did any of that go on?

DRAGO: No.

MR.

DRAGO: No they stayed with their own.

DRAGO: Only if they wanted to know, but you know.

MR.

DRAGO: Oh they’d eat at our house, they’d eat there, but she wouldn’t cook there.

DRAGO: She would, yeah she would be like very-

MR.

DRAGO: She had her own dish.

DRAGO: A lot of times she said “I made (inaudible) fish you want it?” I said “I don’t know if I’ll be able to eat it Fay, I don’t know. You could bring it. I’ll eat it like later on.” You know see if I liked it. It probably was good anyhow.

LEVINE: Okay well let's I'm trying to think of anything else that, did you think your mother and father, did you notice your mother and father changing, becoming more Americanized as time went on? Or anything like that?

DRAGO: Yeah, in a way. You know the clothing and everything, Of course she had the daughters to tell them what to do, you know. How to dress and how to- they always looked nice. They didn't look shabby.

MR.

DRAGO: Oh and then I got the car, when I got the first car they were in "I should take the hood off." They seen things they never seen before. I used to take them on picnics, (inaudible) out here.

DRAGO: Yeah we used to come out here.

LEVINE: What was it like once the car came in and you could actually get out of the Lower East Side?

DRAGO: Oh it was wonderful.

MR.

DRAGO: Oh it was different. Oh but the parking at night, oh that was murder You couldn't find a spot for nothing. You had to walk two, three blocks, and there wasn't enough automobiles to go around, yet it was hard.

LEVINE: So people really welcomed like a car, it was a big...

MR.

DRAGO: Oh '72, this was 1972 I bought the car.

LEVINE: Oh

MR.

DRAGO: Pontiac, first car. It was big, big car.

DRAGO: Wait a minute we got married in '48.

MR.

DRAGO: The car was a '72.

DRAGO: Oh a '72.

MR.

DRAGO: That's when we bought it 1972.

LEVINE: But the first one was you for twelve dollars.

MR.

DRAGO: Oh that was a 1930 car.

LEVINE: Did anybody go out into the country in the summer, like, you know to these hotels or?

DRAGO: They used to go to the mountains.

MR.

DRAGO: Oh yeah that's were we always used to go.

DRAGO: Well I mean like everybody, all of the friends, "We're going to be away for two weeks." Some of the better ones, their father had a shoe store or something you know. And they're going to go upstate to-

MR.

DRAGO: (Inaudible) We went to all them places.

DRAGO: We went to those places.

MR.

DRAGO: Oh well they gave you everything, food.

LEVINE: And how about Staten Island? Was that a place?

MR.

DRAGO: No.

DRAGO: We didn't even know anybody.

MR.

DRAGO: There was no bridge at first, you had to take the ferry. There was no bridge the bridge came later.

LEVINE: Oh right.

DRAGO: Some people moved to the Bronx, some to Brooklyn. And that was like, you know...

LEVINE: That was like country I suppose.

DRAGO: That was like country for us, right you know. We didn't go that often. It was like cousins of my mother that moved there. He had a shoe repair store.

LEVINE: Did that seem- was that like people were, you say “Oh boy they’re moving up” when they move to Brooklyn or the Bronx? Was that a sign of...

DRAGO: Yeah it looked like, yeah it was. It was. Even when you moved to a better apartment you could say that too you know. But moving there was like-

MR.

DRAGO: Well then you got out of the ghetto, once you moved out of that, that neighborhood was a ghetto.

LEVINE: Yeah it was a ghetto but it sounds like it was a pleasant...

MR.

DRAGO: A happy ghetto.

LEVINE: Yeah (laughs), a happy ghetto.

DRAGO: Oh yeah, at the time, you know, but then later on, what was it with 8th street? They had all the hippies there.

MR.

DRAGO: Oh the village opened up; and then came the dope. The marijuana started, that spoiled everything, up to this point everything was beautiful. We shared music.

LEVINE: And when did that start?

MR.

DRAGO: Oh let’s see. Oh ’45, ’46, ’47, ’48.

DRAGO: Oh I was a teenager.

LEVINE: Oh that early.

MR.

DRAGO: Oh not '48 I'm talking, cause we left there- yeah around then, yeah right, yeah.

DRAGO: My mother used to look out the window and she'd see these kids going by you know.

MR.

DRAGO: The flower children.

DRAGO: So she saw, she'd say "Look at that one there, beautiful blonde girl, beautiful girl with the black- pooh!" She'd go to them and she'd get it out of her system.

MR.

DRAGO: Oh the flower children was, well they brought the marijuana in.

LEVINE: Yeah, so then it became the East Village.

MR.

DRAGO: Yeah.

LEVINE: The Lower East Side became the East Village

MR.

DRAGO: Especially her block it did.

DRAGO: Yeah, but everything is nice now there, everything is good.

LEVINE: Do you still have contacts there? Do you still have family or friends there?

MR.

DRAGO: Up to last year.

DRAGO: Up to last year.

MR.

DRAGO: Up to last year when her sister died, because they still lived there.

LEVINE: They stayed there.

DRAGO: They live in Styvasent Town.

MR.

DRAGO: Once a month at least we'd go.

DRAGO: Styvasent Town, they lived. And it was nice, beautiful rooms, and that's it. And on 8th street once my mother died, there was no call for it anymore, no call to go there. The other one was living next door, so then she got into one of the Styvasent Town too.

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

DRAGO: I used to like to go in. It reminded me of my childhood, you know. It was nice.

MR.

DRAGO: Alright it's her turn, but I just thought of something. When you wanted to buy something, you had to have the money for it, there was no credit.

DRAGO: Ah.

MR.

DRAGO: I think you'd like that. Like the victrola. You went down to buy a victrola that cost eighty dollars, you went in with the eighty dollars, or you didn't buy it. Now all at once they started this credit plan and with the ninety-nine cents. At one time it was two dollars, not a dollar ninety-nine, you know what I mean?

LEVINE: Yeah, I see.

MR.

DRAGO: It stopped at line of credit. If there was, it'd take six months to pay, take three months, and people didn't do that. You'd never told anybody you bought it on credit, you'd say "I paid cash." Because it was a shamed to buy on credit.

LEVINE: Oh.

DRAGO: My mother used to save the money and then buy it.

MR.

DRAGO: You saved the money and then buy it. But once this thing got people, "Well look I don't have to wait six months to buy a victrola, I buy it now and then I pay it off." But not realizing that you had a percentage on it that would bring it up to a bigger price, see. So to make it look cheaper

they say “No it don’t cost two hundred dollars, it costs one ninety-nine, ninety-nine.”

LEVINE: Yeah.

MR.

DRAGO: See that’s how it got started. Everybody started buying on credit, and that was another evil that came.

DRAGO: Well we had a victrola, you know.

LEVINE: What kind of songs did you listen to?

DRAGO: Whatever was in, what is it?

LEVINE: Popular?

DRAGO: Yeah popular ones.

MR.

DRAGO: Bing Crosby songs, you know.

DRAGO: All kinds of songs, that were during that time.

LEVINE: And how about, specifically Italian music. Did you listen to that or no?

DRAGO: Well my father used to buy the operas and things, and he went in for that. He used to use it for his operas. He used to come and he used to have it hidden, like you know, underneath his coat. Because they were expensive. They were like five dollars, five dollars was a lot of money in those days. And my mother says “What do you got there!” You know. So anyhow that was it. That’s how we had a few of those

records too. But I used to always get my friends, "You want to hear records?" Then they knew I had it, and they wanted to come in and listen to it. We loved it. Yeah I mean, we didn't live poor; we bought what we had to get, then we bought the, what was it, the Strauberhausle [ph]? What was that? Was it a television? No.

MR.

DRAGO: A radio.

DRAGO: That was a big radio.

MR.

DRAGO: A radio, everybody had radios in the house.

LEVINE: Yeah?

DRAGO: A big one, you know one that.

LEVINE: Yeah right. And did people sit around, like family, and listen to things?

DRAGO: And listen to it? Yeah, oh yeah.

MR.

DRAGO: They had Italian on there.

DRAGO: And we used to have all those, Eddie Cantor you wouldn't miss, a Milton Borough. All those things that came, we heard through the radio, we loved it.

LEVINE: Now when you say Italian stories, in Italian?

MR.

DRAGO: Yes, they had like, like the soaps.

DRAGO: The soaps. My mother used to cry. "You made him..." (laughs) Oh God.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DRAGO: She used to like them all. And there was Carlo Bruiti [ph], you know he used to sing. Like he used to perform in certain places and they used to hear it. My sister said "Ma you want to go see Carlo Bruiti, we'll take you." And we all went, the two sisters, me and my mother, maybe my Aunt came to, I don't know a whole bunch of us went.

LEVINE: Well it sounds as though everybody was very, what do I want to say?

DRAGO: Congenial.

LEVINE: Well they wanted to keep their heritage, in this case Italian heritage. But they also got along with everybody that had their own heritage.

DRAGO: We got along with everybody.

MR.

DRAGO: You needed him as much as he needed you. I mean you didn't do nothing, I mean alright he's Polish but he's the only guy that could pitch.

LEVINE: Oh, alright, yeah.

MR.

DRAGO: You know what I mean. Yeah we didn't stop there, it was the team that counted. (Inaudible)

DRAGO: It was important to make friends. It was important to make friends in New York. One helps the other. And I had it in two buildings, you know, where I went. And now I'm still helping this one next door.

LEVINE: Right, yeah you still.

DRAGO: And she helps us with anything. Anything we need she says "Ah Mary don't hesitate to ask."

MR.

DRAGO: There's a Jewish couple right across the street, the gray house, if he has to go away for a while he comes over here, "Pete, watch the house."

LEVINE: Nice.

DRAGO: Keep your eye on it.

MR.

DRAGO: He know he can trust me.

LEVINE: So can you think of any ways that, that like life or society has really changed from the ways it was when you were growing up? I mean has the world..

MR.

DRAGO: The dope. That's all I got to say. The dope ruined everything. It ruined everything. There's no monetary value because one of these guys can

go out and sell dope and make two million dollars in a week. It takes me three weeks to make. (Laughs)

LEVINE: Where as you learned, you work hard and you make, and you make it.

MR.

DRAGO: The dope it broke up everything. You can't have a friend who's a dope fiend. You can't because you can't trust them. And now a days if you said "Oh I'll pick up your mother and take her there. You do that, you know that man was going to pick up your mother and take her there, there was no questioning about it or anything. It was one family, everybody. Big family.

DRAGO: Everybody looked out for each other, they really did.

LEVINE: Well that must have been a nice feeling, besides,

MR.

DRAGO: It is, well it made a better person of me. Everybody loves me. All the women at the club they all come over "Oh your husband's a doll." Why? Because I don't hide. I give them what they want. A lady "Oh I'm kind of hungry today can I have two cakes?" "Take 'em!"

LEVINE: Yeah.

MR.

DRAGO: I mean it's so, no rules or anything. You want it, take it.

LEVINE: Yeah so, how about you, what are you most proud of, what do you feel that you feel a lot of satisfaction that you have done?

DRAGO: (Laughs)

MR.

DRAGO: You made a grandson.

DRAGO: I made a what? Grandson? And boy does he take up our time, we love him. Up until what age were we babysitting?

MR.

DRAGO: Oh everyday she would, my daughter would drop him off and go do her business. And we had him all the time till about 6-7 years old.

DRAGO: No till he went to nursery school.

MR.

DRAGO: Oh nursery school.

DRAGO: Up until 2 years old though. He used to take come and take his naps here. If you look around you'll see pictures all over the place and it's all him of all ages.

MR.

DRAGO: Everyplace you look.

DRAGO: Down in the basement, when they come and read the meter the man said "Are these all your grandchildren?"

LEVINE: (Laughs) It's all the same one?

DRAGO: It's all the same one. Because she gives us a calendar, every month is a different picture.

MR.

DRAGO: Picture of him.

DRAGO: And it's either older.

MR.

DRAGO: We may patch the walls with them

LEVINE: Well it sounds like you're enjoyed it.

DRAGO: Oh we enjoyed it, we enjoyed taking care of him.

MR.

DRAGO: This is a great country. I would die for it.

DRAGO: And now we enjoy the dog, we enjoy him.

LEVINE: Okay well is there anything you'd like to say before we close?

DRAGO: I think I said it. I mean I didn't do anything big in my life, like to be proud of.

MR.

DRAGO: Well you didn't do anything not to be proud, to be ashamed of.

DRAGO: Right.

LEVINE: That's true.

DRAGO: Right, I know. Whoever meets me likes me, really, I make friends very easily. That's it.

MR.

DRAGO: We like you too.

LEVINE: Well thank you, and I've certainly enjoyed being here. Thank you very much.

DRAGO: Oh you're welcome.

LEVINE: And I want to thank you for a very nice interview. And I've been speaking with Mary Drago, and it's May 5, 2004. And It's Janet Levine signing off for the National Park Service- in a minute, we were just talking about the World Trade Towers. So if you'd like to give any reaction or response to what happened there, that would be very interesting to have.

MR.

DRAGO: Well the way I see it, it's all Islam. But not the real Islam, the people that love that God and go do for, it's the element that's using Islam to get ahead in the world their way. They still keep the women shut up with their faces covered, kids can't go to school unless they go to military school- like Germany was, Germany was the same way; only a little liberal. But it can't go on, especially when they come and drop the bombs on innocent kids. That's it, that hurt. That never should have been. But they regret it, I say today, they regretted they bombed them towers, because the dog turned around and bit them. But God will straighten it all out in the end.

LEVINE: Do you think we're going to get out of this alright.

MR.

DRAGO: You have to. Not us, but the kids that are coming. They're smart, they're smart. They're going to figure out a way. If dope don't get in their way; but they're going to figure out a way to get there. You're still going to send a man to Mars.

LEVINE: Mary do you want to say anything about that? About the towers?

DRAGO: No, no. Just it was beautiful to see it so close though, you know. It was lovely. Some people got out, they stopped that, they...the lady. The Empire State building...

MR.

DRAGO: Oh the Statue of Liberty.

DRAGO: The Statue of Liberty.

MR.

DRAGO: We went to it once, me and my daughter, we went all the way up. You could only go up to the...

DRAGO: They stopped- crown. They stopped the boat...

MR.

DRAGO: And we went up there. She couldn't go up those steps, the windy stair case to go up, we went all the way up to the top.

DRAGO: So a lot of people got off, that they were going, that they wanted to go in. But the trouble was they let them only on the main floor. They were not allowed to move. Just stay there and then they threw them out right away, because they were worried.

LEVINE: Yeah.

DRAGO: They're worried about all this, stuff that they're saying.

MR.

DRAGO: What kind of people tied bombs to themselves and kill themselves.
They don't see the outcome! They won't know if they'll win or lose!
That's stupid, that is stupid. I mean, you told an American to do that
he'd say, "Hey you do it! You do it!" (All laugh).

DRAGO: They're going to go meet their God, I wonder if they got there.

LEVINE: Okay now I'm signing off for good.