EI-1338
OLGA PISANI
BIRTHDATE: MARCH 6, 1910
INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 19, 2004
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 94
RUNNING TIME: 2:20:35
INTERVIEWERS: JANET LEVINE, PH.D., AND JO URION
RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

TO ITALY, 1922
AGE: 12
SHIP: COLUMBO
PORTS: NEW YORK CITY TO GENOA
RESIDENCE: LUCCA, ITALY

RETURNED TO U.S., 1923
AGE: 13
SHIP: ROSSO
PORTS: GENOA TO NEW YORK CITY
RESIDENCE: GREENWICH VILLAGE, THE BRONX

LEVINE: Today is July the 19th, the year 2004, and I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Mrs. Olga Pisani, and with another National Park Service employee, Jo Urion, who is here from Keveenaw National Historic Park in Michigan. Mrs. Pisani has two stories to tell, and we are going to interview her together. One aspect will be about the immigrant part of her life, and family life story, and the other part will be about her days in Michigan, in the mining town—is that right—of—

PISANI: Painesdale.

LEVINE: Painesdale. And so we're going to—Joe and I—are going to alternate back and forth, and ask questions about the two facets of Mrs. Pisani's life.

PISANI: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay, this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And we'll start at the beginning, Mrs. Pisani.

PISANI: Okay.

LEVINE: If you would just say your name, and birth date?

PISANI: Okay, my name is Olga Ricci—that's my maiden name—Pisani, P-I-S-A-N-I, and I was born March 6th, 1910.

LEVINE: Okay.

PISANI: In Seeberville, Michigan.

LEVINE: Seeberville, okay. And what was your father's name?

PISANI: My father's name was Vincenzo Ricci.

LEVINE: Okay, and why don't we start with his immigration story?

PISANI: Okay.

LEVINE: Why don't you say when he came to this country, where he came from, and where he settled here?

PISANI: All right. First of all, he was born in Tuscany, in Italy, and his name was Vincenzo Ricci, of course. And he was born November 9th, 1875.

LEVINE: Wow! And the town in Tuscany?

PISANI: In Lucca. Lucca is the city, and then it was surrounding little towns there, and I think it was Ponte Mariano. And he worked—his family, they were sharecroppers, but he worked in a—it was like a textile, they made silk, they made silk cocoons—they manufactured this, and he took care of the cocoons.

LEVINE: Oh, so they were silk worms?

PISANI: They were silk worms, and they manufactured, and this was in the city of Luca. And one day, this man came. He was from America. And he talked

him in to going, coming to America. And I think he was sent by the mining company, to—

LEVINE: Recruit?

PISANI: --recruit workers. And so he was thrilled! He was anxious to get away from, because they didn't have much to eat in that family. So he went to—the man said, "If you want to come, I'll lead you the way. I'll tell you how to go about it." He said, "But you need the money for passage." So my father said—he thought, and then he thought he would go to his superior. In those days, the manufacturer, or whoever—

LEVINE: The foreman?

PISANI: No, no, the boss. The big boss! And he said, "I'll go and ask him if he'll lend me the money." So he took all his courage with him, and he went to the office. And I remember my father saying his name was Signor Veluttini, and he had a long beard. And so my father said, "I have to ask you a favor. If you could lend me the money to go to America," he said, "I would be ever grateful for it." And so this Signor Veluttini looked him up and down, and he said he was stroking his bears! He had a long beard, and he said yes. He says, "I will lend you the money." He says, "I can tell you're a reliable man." He had a good reputation. So he lent him the money to come to America. So, that night when he went home and he told his parents, he said, "I'm going to America," and his mother started to cry, and she said, "Oh, I'll never see you again!" She said—you know, America, in those days. Well anyway, he did come to America. And he landed here in Ellis Island. Not really Ellis Island, but New York, April 1st, 1900. And at that time, Ellis Island had burned, and they were building it up again. And so he had to go to Castle Garden, and he went there. And so when it came his turn, they examined him, and he was in good health, and they said, "What are you going to do here in America?" And he said, "I'm going to be a merchant." He said, "Well, how much money do you have?" And he pulled out a handful of money, and he had about thirty dollars, and he had a twenty-dollar gold piece. And he said, "Okay, you're on your way." And they pinned a card on his jacket, where he was going, and he was going to Houghton, Michigan. And I don't know how many days it took him to get there, but when he got off the train, he said there were still snow patches all around, and he said, "And there I was, shaking and trembling. I don't know whether it was because I was cold, or that I was afraid." And he said he'd see somebody come, and he'd stop and he'd ask them in Italian. And he said, "When they heard me speak Italian, they'd walk even faster! They didn't stop," he says. And finally one man came, and he said, in Italian, he said, "Did anybody else get off the train with you?" And he said, "No." But he said, "I put my suitcase down, and I said, 'To find you, I have found God.'" He was so scared! And anyway, he

gave him the address he was supposed to go to, and he took him to this boarding house. Am I talking too much?

LEVINE: No, this is great! No, it's great. So this was the mining company that had told him about coming to America?

PISANI: Yes. This man must be recruiting men to come to America. That's the only way that we figured it out. And so this man took him to this boarding house, Italian boarding house. And he says he was so hungry, and they were having lunch. The boarders that had worked at night, they were up, and they were having lunch. And he said there was a big bowl of crackers, and he said, "I was so hungry, but I was embarrassed, because I didn't want to show that." And he says, "I didn't take so many." But anyway, the lady asked him questions, and he answered, and she said, "All right," she said, "You can board here with us." And so that's how he stayed in Michigan. And then of course, after a few weeks that he was there, at night time, around the dining room, the table, all the boarders were talking and laughing, and having a bottle of beer. And my father couldn't afford the beer, but tea was on the house. And so he used to drink tea. And so then one night, one evening, the lady said to him, he says—they called him Bianco, because he was so fair, and Bianco means white. And he said, "Bianco," he said—she said to him, "You're so quiet! You don't talk with the boarders and joke," you know. And he said, "Well," he says, "I have obligations, and I have to work and save money to send back to my,"—that was his main worry, that he had to send this money back to his, Mr. Veluttini. And so anyway, so when the boarders all heard this, they all said, "Well, we'll all chip in, and you'll send the money, but of course, you'll owe it to us. But you can just give it to us when you have it." And that's what they did! And they sent the money back, and then he had his pipe and he'd smoke his pipe or cigar, and he'd have a bottle of beer when he ate. And he felt more at home. And so that's—he worked—well, there was another story about when he was coming to America. I mean, while he was over there, he had a girlfriend. And anyway, this—I forget her name, but anyway, he said she was beautiful—beautiful girl, woman. And he said, "I'm going to America, and then I'll come back and marry you." Well after he was here about a year, he got a Dear John letter, and she said, "Today I am getting married, and I'm going to Chicago." And when he got that letter, he was very upset. I won't tell you what he did with the letter! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, come on! Are you sure you don't want to?

PISANI: Sure!

LEVINE: If you don't mind having it on tape, we'd love to hear it!

PISANI: He took her picture, and he nailed it in the toilet! We had outhouses in those days. And anyway, he said to the boarders, “My girlfriend, she ditched me!” But he was not one of those—he didn’t take it laying down; it didn’t bother him. So he worked, and after six years he went back to Italy. And he went back to this place where he had worked, and there was this lady. She took care of—these girls used to come from way out in the country, and they used to come and work there. And they would stay, and sleep there, and then they’d go home on the weekends. So my father went back to say hello to everybody there, and to see Signor Veluttini. And Signor Veluttini was very happy to see him, and that he had made good. And so then the lady that was taking care of all these girls, she remembered my father. She said, “What are you doing here? Why’d you come?” He said, “I’m looking for a wife.” And so she says, “Well,” she said to him, “I have a lot of nice girls here.” And so anyway, he didn’t—she introduced this Rosina to him, and he used to tell me she was a beautiful woman. So she introduced them, and they met, and it was, you know, well, my mother said, to go to America, you know. So she introduced them, and so then he asked permission if he could go to her, meet her family. And she lived way out, up in the mountains, and they grew olives, olive trees, and where the good olive oil comes from. And so anyway he met her family, and her mother was very strict, and very old-fashioned, of course, in those days, 1906. And she said, “How do we know that you don’t have another wife over there?” And my father said, “Well,” he said, “I can’t afford another wife over there,” he says, “And I don’t have a wife over there.” And so anyway, this was, I think, in June. And he kept—this was far; it was not near, you know, maybe—you had to walk up the mountain to get up to her house. And so anyway, he went back and forth, you know, and finally they decided to get married. And so then, they got married, October, 1906, and of course, my father’s mother, she was another strict one. In those days, I think, well, all women were, you know, kind of—we say old-fashioned; that’s how they were in those days. And she said to my father, “How do we know who that lady is?” And she says, “And if I don’t like her, I’m going to tell her to her face that I don’t like her.” And sure enough, when they got—my father had to go up there and get married in the church, right? And I don’t know if you’re Catholic or not, but you had to go to confession and communion before you got married, right? And so the night before that he was supposed to get married, he went to the priest in his home town, and he said, “I’m getting married, and I came here for confession.” Of course, they had all the banns and everything, for so many weeks. So the priest said, “Well, okay,” he said, and he called—they had a maid, the priests had the maid. And he said, “Bring a bottle of wine, and two glasses.” And he said, “And we sat down across the table, and he said, ‘okay, you might as well confess your sins.’” And so my father said, “Well,” he said, “I’m here to get married. I never killed nobody and I don’t have another wife.” And he says, and so they drank the whole bottle of wine, and that was the confession that my father had! And anyway, so the next day he went up to the town, and they had to come down a long way. He ordered a

carriage, a horse and carriage, right? And they had a long way to come down from that mountain. And sure enough, when they got down to Corselli—that's where he lived—and sure enough, his mother was on the door! [Laughs] And when my father introduced my mother—she got off the carriage, and he introduced her. And so my mother kissed his mother, and called her Mama. And so that was okay. My grandmother, she okayed the bride! [Laughs] So then they left for America, and that was it. They came to America, and of course when my mother—they stopped in New York, and they didn't have to go to Ellis Island, because he, they traveled—they were not in steerage, so they didn't have to go to Ellis Island. But anyway, they stayed in New York a few days, and then they came up to Michigan. And my mother said when she came to Seeberville and she saw all that snow, she cried! She said she really cried. She said, "Now what have I done?" And that's how we began in Seeberville.

LEVINE: Wow! What was your mother's name, and her maiden name?

PISANI: Her name was Rosina Giannoni.

LEVINE: Okay.

PISANI: That's G-I-A-N-N-O-N-I, Giannoni. And she was twenty-nine years old.

LEVINE: And your father was—he was twenty-five when he first came here?

PISANI: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then he stayed six years?

PISANI: He was six years in America, and then he went back. And they came back the same year.

LEVINE: So he was about thirty-one?

PISANI: Yes.

LEVINE: And what was the name of the little village, do you happen to know, that your mother came from?

PISANI: Yes, that was Petrognano.

LEVINE: Could you spell that one?

PISANI: Yes, that's P-E-T-R-O-G-N-A-N-O. San Petrognano, S-A-N, San Petrognano.

LEVINE: And since you're so good at it, maybe you could spell the name of the boss of your father in the silk--?

PISANI: His name was Signor Vellutini. It's V-E-L-L-U-T-I-N-I, Vellutini, yes.

LEVINE: Great, great. Now, how would you describe your father's personality or temperament? What kind of a man was he?

PISANI: He was tall and fair, and he looked more like a Englishman than an Italian. And he was very strict with us, but in the same time, he was—well anyway, when we were bad, that we were, you know, get into a little trouble, my mother would say, "Wait 'til your father comes home!" you know? And of course, when Papa came home, nothing was said! [Laughs] But he was very strict. But now I'm jumping ahead of myself. When my mother died, he turned, like, from—how would you say? He was so understanding, and more lenient with us. And he took the place of Mom.

LEVINE: I see, uh-huh.

PISANI: Yes.

LEVINE: And how about your mother? Just a thumbnail sketch. What was her personality?

PISANI: Her person—you know, it's hard for me to remember. I remember more—but she was very pretty, and she was, like I said, she'd just promise us, when we were bad. You know, she'd say, "Wait 'til your father comes home!" But she was good; she was very pretty. She was not as tall as I am; she must have been about five four, maybe. And I can tell you a story about my mother when she was—before she got married.

LEVINE: Okay.

PISANI: And there was a suitor, a man used to come, and court her. And when she'd see him coming, and she'd go up to her room. And her mother would go up and say, "Rosina, come down." I don't know what his name was. And she wouldn't! And she'd say, "Tell him I don't feel good." And so then she, the mother really used to instigate, and say, "You know, he's a nice man, and he's well-off." And she'd say, "Well, if he'd so nice, and he's so good, well, you marry him!" she says. And so then one day her father said to the mother, to her mother, he says, "I think you should leave her alone, because you're going to get her—she's going to get sick over this. Just leave her alone." And well anyway, that's a story of my mother, that she didn't like this man.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PISANI: And when my father went up, and he was courting her, the whole town came out, and they were very upset that a foreigner was coming to take their young women away from there! But he said, "I'm an honest man, and I'm taking her to America." And anyway, then everybody clapped, and he took everybody out for a drink. And so that was the end of the fuss in the town. It was a little town.

LEVINE: Did any other people from either of their villages come to Michigan, that you know of?

PISANI: Yes, yes, in fact my father, he made the way, sort of, for people to come there.

LEVINE: He was the first from the--?

PISANI: He was the first.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PISANI: And he, there was—the one that I really remember was his nephew, because he got—he was married, and he came to Seeberville, and he lived down, down in one of the company houses. And he worked in the mine. And then my mother's brother came, and he worked in the mine. And then there were other town people that he—he would send the, you know, the money over there, and they'd come, and then they'd pay him back.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh!

PISANI: Yeah.

LEVINE: And so, did any—so, okay, well I think maybe that's a good place to end this first phase of the interview.

PISANI: Yes.

LEVINE: And then Jo Urion can continue with life in Seeberville.

PISANI: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay, great, unless you have any other questions about that part?

URION: No, not so much, except when you were talking about the boarding house that your father lived in when he first came to Michigan?

PISANI: Yes.

URION: You said it was an Italian boarding house?

PISANI: Yes, yes.

URION: Was it run by Italians?

PISANI: Yes, yes. Like, they were Italian, maybe it was a husband and wife, and they'd have boarders. And they'd be raising their family, and they would have boarders. And that's what my mother and father did, too. But I think this was in Baltic, I think, the boarding house where he went to.

URION: Okay, and the other boarders there with that family, were they also Italian?

PISANI: Yes, all Italians, and there were, like, Croatians, and they had Croatian boarders. And the Finns had Finn boarders. They were all young men that came, and single, and they would have to board with somebody, yes.

URION: Can you talk about your brothers and sisters?

PISANI: Oh, yes! Yes, my sister. My sister Matilda—but we called her Tillie, and she was the first. And she was born July 9th, 1907. And then my brother was born October 11th, 1908. And then I was born March 6th, 1910. And nine years later, we had a little brother, but he died. He died; he was three years and four months. He had kidney failure, and he died. But my sister—my sister was—she was the good one! But really, not that good, because when she was small, she would always run to play with her friends, the Finns or the Croatians. And when my father'd come home, and my mother would say, "You have to go and look for Matilde, she's not home." And he always knew where to find her. She was always up, either at the Finn's house, or the Austrians. And then my sister would see him coming, and she'd run! And he'd say, "You can run all you want, just [unclear] to get home!" [Laughs] But he never really, he just scolded her. And then she grew up to be the little lady. She was—I was more of a tomboy. My sister, she would sit there and crochet. She'd crochet, and she had made a tam o'shanter. Do you know what a tam o'shanter is? Well she had made, crocheted this, and in a beautiful rose color—I don't remember. But she crocheted it, and it had, like, two tassels, and she wore it to school. And her teacher admired it, and she said, "Where did you get that?" And she said, "I crocheted it." And she said, "That is beautiful!" She said, "Would you crochet one for me, too?" And she said, "Yes, sure." She said, "You'll get the wool, and I'll crochet for you." And so she did, and the teacher gave her a dollar! And from that, other teachers wanted the same thing, and she made a few dollars crocheting. Like I said, she was the most serious one, you know. And she would babysit. She would babysit. She must have been about eleven, and a friend of my mother had a little girl; she must have been about two. And she was having

another baby. And so my sister went and babysat. I don't—she stayed there maybe a week, and she got paid for that, too. I never was the one that would go and crochet or babysit. My mother would start some crocheting for me, and then she'd find it in a corner someplace. I was more of a tomboy; I was always with my brother.

URION: What kinds of things would you do together, you and your brother?

PISANI: Well, my brother—well, we'd go out and pick berries. Michigan had a lot of nice raspberries, and we'd each get a pail, and we'd go picking raspberries. And without fail, before we'd leave, somebody always dropped their pail, and we had to start picking all over again! And what else? My brother used to—he had a friend, a Finnish friend, a Finlander, would you say? I remember his name, Oliver Siponen [PH]. And they used to go and set traps, and he used to catch—they used to catch weasels. Did you ever hear of weasels? And then they used to skin them, and they used to get little catalogs—I don't know from where—and they would skin them, and dry the skin. They'd stretch it, and they'd get fifteen cents for each skin. And I don't know where they used to send them, but anyway, that's—I used to help my brother skin them. He wouldn't dare ask my sister, because she would not stay there and hold the weasel!

LEVINE: [Laughs] Okay, we're going to pause here so Kevin can turn the tape over—

PISANI: Okay.

LEVINE: And then we'll continue.

PISANI: Okay.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE B

LEVINE: Okay, we're beginning here on Side B.

URION: Okay, you've mentioned the Finnish and the Croatians, and that? Can you describe the neighborhoods? Did people tend to live together?

PISANI: Not really. Not really. Like, the children did, but not the ladies. They were all busy; they had their children, and they had boarders, and they had to cook. They had to prepare their lunch pails. They had lunch pails to take

down in the mines, in the copper mines. And in fact, that was one of the things that my sister had to do. She had to dry all the dinner pails, or the lunch pails, which I used to get away with a lot of things. And, but the children did. We were always—they would eat our food, and we would eat their food. But the ladies didn't; they didn't stay over the fence and talk; they all had their own things to do. First of all, like my mother spoke Italian; she didn't speak no English. And the Finns spoke Finn, and the Croatians spoke Croatian, and the Polish. There was a mixture there, and now Seeberville—Painesdale was—had many locations. It was B Location, C Location, and E Location, I think. But Seeberville was all by itself. It was on the other side of the tracks. But it was not a shantytown, you know, it was just a matter of saying. But it was not a shantytown; it was nice, and people kept their little gardens as well as they could.

URION: Can you describe the house that you grew up in?

PISANI: Yes, it was a nice, big house. I know it was painted green; I remember that. And it had a big kitchen, with a big, black stove, and running—we did have running water. Of course, we had an outhouse. And then we had a big dining room, and there was a long table, and there were long benches. And that's how—we didn't have chairs, but I mean, boarders sat on the benches when they had their dinner, or supper, whatever it was. And we had a big coal stove in the dining room. It was a big potbelly. And I remember my mother used to put big chunks of coal in it, and it used to get real red on the bottom! And then we had one big bedroom on that floor, and my mother and my father slept there. And we had a bed, my sister and I, slept in that same room. And then the boarders slept upstairs. That's where my brother slept, upstairs with the boarders. And it was a long room, as long as the house, that's how long the bedroom was. It was one big room, and there were like, I think, about five beds. And that's how the house was. And then we had a cellar. We had a cellar, and my mother used to fill—she'd get ice in the summer time, and fill a big tub of the washing. We had—what would you call it? A tub, like my mother used to wash clothes in. And she had this tub, and she'd order ice, and we'd have a big thing of ice there, and the boarders used to put their beer there to get warm—get cold! And then she bought bananas. She'd get a whole big—what would you call it?

LEVINE: A hand.

PISANI: A hand, a big—and she'd have it hung up from the ceiling in the cellar. And that was our fruit for the summer time. When we had fruit up there, it was like something that was rare, you know? It's not like here, you have a bowl of fruit and the children don't even look at it! We used—if we had an apple, we were happy to have a nice apple, or a banana in the summer time.

URION: Do you remember any of the boarders that lived with you?

PISANI: Yes, I remember quite a few of them. There was, his name was Angelo Rugani, and he bought himself an automobile! And it was the first automobile in Seeberville! And we couldn't even go near it! He would, "Oh, no, no!" you know? And the only time we got a ride in it, if he would take us up to Painesdale. He was on his way to see his girlfriend, maybe, in South Range. And he'd say, "You can have a ride, but you have to,"—he'd go to the cleaners'. He had a suit—they had cleaners in those days, too. And he'd say, "But you have to take the suit, and bring it back home." And he'd leave us up in Painesdale. But anyway, that was Angelo Rugani. And when we went to Michigan in 1958, we stopped in Chicago, and I called his number. And the wife answered, and she said—I explained that I was Olga from, that Angelo was our border, and we're on our way up to Painesdale. And she says, "Oh," she said, "He's working," but she said, "Please come over." And she gave us the address, and we got a taxi, and we met Angelo again, in 1958! And we went to Michigan. He's one of the boarders. And then we had, of course, my uncle. And then we had San Martino. If you came from, like, if you come from Texas here, they call you Tex, right? Well, this man came from San Martino, so they called him San Martino. And there was Angelo, he had a brother, and his name was Sylvio, and he was one of our boarders. And I don't remember the others—faintly, but we had about six boarders, yes.

URION: What did they do for a living?

PISANI: They worked in the mines. And I remember they'd come up from the mines, and like, we were children. We didn't stay in Seeberville; we'd go up around where the mines were and everything. And we'd see the miners come up, and they had, they would be all dirty, and they had these, like, helmets to protect them. And they had like a carbon light on their hats. But they had a dry house, they called it. The company had this dry house, and it had showers, and the boarders, the miners used to go, and they'd get in the shower, and they'd shower, and then they'd put on their clothes to come back home. So when they came home, they were clean. See, my mother didn't have to worry about their clothes, and that was one of the things that the company had for the boarders, for the miners, rather.

URION: What sorts of things did your Mom do for the boarders? What was part of it?

PISANI: She had to cook for them. She had to cook, keep the beds clean, and so they would have dinner. And if they worked in the day time, then they would have breakfast, and they would have dinner pails, we'd call them, their lunch pails. So she had to prepare their lunches in the pails. And so when they came home at night they would have the dinner, whatever she cooked. It was always, like, they always had to have soup, and a meat, and vegetables. It was hard work.

URION: What did they eat for lunch, do you remember?

PISANI: I don't remember. I guess they would have, like maybe salami sandwiches, and cheese, and a fruit, like an apple or an orange. And I think if they wanted tea, they would have tea, in the bottom of the pail, yes.

URION: I've got so many questions to ask, all trying to come out at the same time! [Laughs]

PISANI: I know, I know it's hard. Like, I remember things that I skip around, yes.

URION: I would like to ask you about your house some more, like how was it decorated? Do you remember things that your Mom had?

PISANI: No, we just had, like, green shades, and I remember she had lace curtains. And when she had to wash them, and she would starch them, and then she had these stretchers, and she would stretch them all out. And they were lace, you know. It's not like today that you just wash and dry. And I used to feel sorry for her! I was a kid, but I had—I thought it was such hard work, pinning these curtains onto this large frame. And she, well, it was hard work! She had us children to take care of. And still, she had time to crochet. She'd crochet all kinds of laces, and she'd put them on our pillowcases. Oh, and that's another thing. And she would order sugar or flour, and they came in beautiful sacks—muslin. And they used to wash these sacks, the ladies, when they were, and rip them. And then they would wash them and get the print off, and they would make our underpants and our slips with this cotton! And they were beautiful! And she'd trim them with her lace, her handmade lace. Yes, and she still had time to read. We used to get the Italian paper from New York, the *Progresso*, and it was, it would come maybe two days later. And she didn't have time to actually sit down and read the paper, but there was—every day there was a story, but it was like continuing.

LEVINE: A serial?

PISANI: A serial, right! And she would cut it out, the bottom of the page. And then when she had enough, she would sew them together, and then when she had time she would sit down and read this. She would read this, and they would pass it on from one—like my mother to my cousin, and she would pass it on to another. This was a man, we used to call him Zio, Uncle. He was everybody's Uncle! We used to call him Zio, Z-I-O, in Italian. And he used to like to read, and so he, they would pass it one from one to the other. In fact, when we went to Italy, this Zio Evangelista, he used to send us newspapers from Michigan, to us in Italy, and so we would read, we'd keep on reading our, this—our English. And so, where were we? [Laughs]

URION: Where did you and your brothers and sisters go to school?

PISANI: Oh, we walked to school, and we had a beautiful school! And we had a high school up there. It's—I think it's still there, Painesdale. And Mr. And Mrs. Jeffers—Mr. Jeffers was the superintendent of the schools up there. And when he came in the classroom, even the teachers trembled! He was so strict and so scary! I mean, really, he was a big man, and he was the superintendent there. And I don't know whether you've seen the high school there? It's still there?

URION: Yeah.

PISANI: And Mrs. Jeffers, her name was Cora Jeffers. And she'd get out there, and although she was the principal there, she would get out there, and she would do the gymnastics on the lawn! And they all had these gym suits, they were like bloomers, dark blue, under the knee! And they would do all these gymnastics. And when they put—they did put a swimming pool there, but this was after we were gone. They put a swimming pool in the high school, and she didn't know how to swim. And she went to learn how to swim, and then she taught the children how to swim! And we were really very ahead of times up there, even though it was a little town. And at eight o'clock in the morning, the train used to come from South Range, and Baltic, and bring students right there in Painesdale. And they'd get off the train and go up this hill. To me it was a big hill, but it wasn't, actually, when I went back. And they went to the high school there, and they would get transported from the other towns. So Mr. Jeffers, like I said, he was really scary. I mean, you know, the children were afraid of him, and even the teachers. I read an article about it, [laughs] that he would, they would, you know, a little. And when we'd have recess sometimes, and the recess would actually go on and on and on, and Mr. Jeffers would call a meeting of the teachers. And so they'd be having a meeting, and it would be three o'clock, and we would be dismissed, you know, but we were out having recess, because he just kept on this, this, whatever they were having, this meeting. And so we would just go home at that point! And yes. There was other things that I wanted to tell you about the train. I actually stopped the train once. It was in the winter, and you know the winters up there, right? Now, we walked along the railroad to go to school, and it was against the—we were not supposed to, but it was a long way to go around the road. And so we used to go on the train tracks. And one morning there was—the train used to pass through there at eight o'clock, the train, and it used to stop in Painesdale, and then go on to South Range, and Houghton. But we were on the track, going to school, and it was like a blizzard. And we were on the trestle; there was a trestle there, and my sister was ahead of me. And she turned around and she said, "Olga, run! The train is coming!" I actually stopped a train! That I didn't get—I don't remember anything except that I was on the train, and my sister was there, and there was this Mike Messner. He was a boss; he took care of the

outside up there, you know, in the mines, but outside. And he was on the train; evidently he was around when the train stopped. Now I imagine in my mind that the plow, the snow plow, must have pushed me, and the train must have stopped. I mean, they must have seen me, and when I came to, I was on the train, and my sister was there, and this Mike Messner. And I heard them say, "We'll take her to the hospital." That's what I remember. And I said, "No, I want to go home! I want to go home!" and when they heard that, they knew I was okay, there was nothing wrong with me. So Mike Messner took us off the train, and pushed us on the side, and the train went. And then he gave us a good lecture, and he said, "You know you children are not supposed to be walking on the train," and he really gave it to us! And when he, they found out at school, the principal, Miss Pokinghorn—she must have been Indian, right? Descended from Indians—Pokinghorn? And she came, she went around in all the classes, and she scolded, "All you Seeberville kids—children!" They didn't use kids in those days. "Children. You're not supposed to walk on the railroad track! You're supposed to walk on the road." And anyway, we got a lecture, and, but I was okay. So when I, my sister—he walked us to the road, this Mike Messner, and he said, "Now you go home." And so when my mother—she saw the train stop. You could see the track from where my mother was, from where our house was. And she was coming out, and walking up the road, and she saw us. And what happened? And anyway, we were walking, so she said—she gave my sister a dollar, and she said, "Go buy Olga the doll." I had been wanting that doll for the longest time! It was in the store window. And I'd go home and I'd say, "Mom, buy me the doll!" And she said, "But it costs a dollar!" And I never got the doll, but I had to stop the train in order to get the doll. So my sister went and bought me, got the doll for me! So that's one of the stories.

LEVINE: Wow!

PISANI: [Laughs] So, there's many stories. Oh, in fact one of my grandsons, a couple of years ago he said to me, "Did you have many snow days?" And I said, "What's a snow day?" I said, "We didn't even know what a snow day was in Michigan." I said, "We walked to school every day, whether it snowed or blizzard." We never missed school, just walked to school! And here they have snow days, right? Do they still have them in Michigan? Or, they don't have them?

URION: They have them, yeah.

PISANI: They have them, because everybody goes to school in buses now, right?

URION: Yeah, mm-hm.

PISANI: Well we walked to school, yes.

URION: Well, I'm curious about your father, and his job.

PISANI: Well, he worked in the mine. He worked in the Champion mine, number four. He also worked in mine number two. But the Champion mine was the one near us. He worked at the F compressor. That's where they had these big boilers, and they had to keep shoveling coal in them, to make, for the engines to run in the mines, to make the—they used to call it the skip. It was like an elevator that took the workers down into the mine. It was straight down. And anyway, they had these big boilers. They were enormous. To me they were enormous, because I was so small at that time. But they were big! And his job was to keep shoveling this coal into them, these furnaces, they were like. And that's what he did. He, so, and then he worked—that was his job, like. And he went back to the mines, because he couldn't take the heat.

URION: What did he do underground? Was he a miner?

PISANI: He was a miner, yes.

URION: Okay.

PISANI: He worked in the mines, and once in a while he'd come home, and he'd say there was an accident. And he'd say that—they used to call it the loose. The loose rock would fall and kill somebody. They used to, the copper, it was—they'd make like, they were like a tunnel, and they'd keep going. I really don't know. They would blast the rock to get the copper out of it. And that was one of his jobs. So we had to pray that he'd just come home at night, yeah. And all our boarders worked in the mine.

URION: Was that—what mining company? Do you remember if it was Calumet and Hecklow, or was it, that owned that particular mine?

PISANI: Yes, Calumet and Hecklow owned all those mines.

URION: Okay.

PISANI: Now Painesdale got its name from Mr. Paine, from the Boston Society there, and he—that's how they got Painesdale, and he had a beautiful library built, and he had his mother's picture. I remember a beautiful library. We had everything, like we say in the city, we were a town, but we had everything there. And we'd go in the library, and there was a beautiful picture of her. I don't know where the name Sargent comes from. Anyway, he had this library built in honor of his mother, and it was right next to the high school, and the library, and then there was the grade school. And on Fridays we'd go, and we'd have—the librarian used to tell stories at three o'clock. And the little ones sat on the floor, and she would tell us stories, and we'd look

forward to this. There was no radio, or television, or telephones in those days, and we'd enjoy that. And we had books; we'd always come home with books. And my favorite book was *Heidi*. I read that book so many times! And anyway, we had a nice childhood. It was not like children that live on a farm, that they have to work. We had—the only time we did a little work was my father planted potatoes, a field of potatoes, and our job was when they would get the little bugs, the potato bugs, we'd call them. And my mother would give us an empty tomato can, and put a little kerosene on the bottom, and then we had to go pick potato bugs, and put them in the can. So we'd pick all—and that was one job that we had. Otherwise, you know, we didn't really have things to do. All we thought of was playing, and playing in the snow. We enjoyed that. We had a beautiful sleigh, sled, yeah. And then my brother had made a toboggan of corrugated iron, and he—I don't know where he got it. And if we wanted to ride on his toboggan, we had to bring it up the hill. See, he was the boss! And he'd sit in the front, and we'd all get on, and we'd come down this hill. And it was fun!

URION: I bet that went really fast?

PISANI: Yes, it did. Yes.

URION: Were there books and magazines and newspapers in other languages in that library?

PISANI: Yes, they did have. The had Italian. I read—I had, my friend Louise—she passed away a few years ago. And she lived in—we were pals—in Seeberville. And she had sent me all these things from the library. And it said that they had newspapers in different languages for people to go and read there, and they had a room for adults to go and read magazines and newspapers in the library.

URION: What language did you speak at home?

PISANI: Oh, we spoke Italian! We had to speak Italian, because my mother didn't speak English, and my father—he got a long, but I mean, he didn't. But Italian was our language. And the Finns spoke Finn, Finnish. The Croatians spoke Croatian. And that's how it was! And that's why the women couldn't get to talk. Well, they didn't have time anyway. But the children all spoke English. But when my sister went to school, she didn't know how to speak English, because we all spoke Italian in the house. And I think teachers had a hard time up there, because they'd all go in there, the children, and none of them spoke English. And they had to start from scratch. And I remember how we learned colors and numbers. This teacher in the first grade, she had made little balls of yarn, all colors, and on strings. And then she'd put them all together, and she'd teach us the colors, and at the same time she would teach us numbers—how to count. And I often wonder how hard it was for

them to teach, especially the low grades, right? Because we didn't speak English. I spoke a little English because by that time my sister and my brother spoke English. But in the house it had to be Italian, yes.

URION: Wow.

PISANI: And then my mother got sick. I mean, do you want to go that far?

URION: Well, do we have to turn the tape over?

LEVINE: We're going to turn it in a few minutes, yes.

PISANI: What, we're still in Michigan.

URION: Okay, yeah. I wanted to talk to you about the strike actually, but maybe we can—

PISANI: About the strike?

URION: Yeah.

PISANI: Well that, you can talk about that. But the thing is that I don't remember it. I was three at the time. But my sister, she remembered it, and we used to talk about it sometimes, because she was six by that time. And she was playing with her Finnish friends down the road, and it was across the street from the house where the shooting took place, and she remembered that. But I, I just remember it by hearing about it. But, I didn't—I remember my father talking about it in later years, about the Calumet fire, when they had this—it was a Christmas Eve party for the children, and it was in the Italian building, and somebody shouted, "Fire!" And there was no fire. But the doors, they opened in, and there was a staircase, and all the people came running down, and they fall, because they couldn't get out. And there were quite a number of dead; I think about eighty or more. I remember my father telling me this story, yeah.

LEVINE: Maybe this is a good pause place? Okay, we're finished with Tape One now, and we'll continue with Tape Two.

PISANI: Okay.

END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE A

LEVINE: Okay, we're resuming here with Tape Two, and we're speaking with Mrs. Pisani. And Jo Urion is talking about life in Michigan.

URION: You said your father talked a little bit about his work, and about that strike. I know you were very young when that happened, but would you be able to share some of those stories that he told you about that time?

PISANI: Well, it's really hard. I'm trying to think. I remember him talking a lot about that fire. As far as the strike, about the shooting that took place there, I don't—I don't remember we talked about that. My sister used to, when we were older. I mean, really older—much older. She would bring up the subject, that she was across the way, and she saw the shooting, and all the excitement. And my mother, running out to see where she was, because she was always the one that was—[laughs] she was the one that was always out of the house with her friends! But I don't remember him talking much about the strikers, except that they worked for a dollar a day.

URION: Do you know if he was—if he was part of the union, or if he--?

PISANI: No, there was no union in those days. I think that's how the strike came about. Maybe the people got—I don't think there was a union then. Maybe the workers—maybe that's how it started, this strike. The people must have come up, and started to organize, wanted to organize. And maybe that's when they did get a union. I really don't know. I know that the company took care of—we had free doctors, free hospitalization, and if we were sick, the doctor would come to the house. And they had benefits, like I think they paid a dollar a month for that. But I don't remember them talking very much about the strike.

URION: What did your sister remember about that day, of the shooting?

PISANI: Just that they were out playing, and they heard all this, this shooting, and screaming. And so then my mother came running to get—to get her, and took her home. But she didn't elaborate on it. She said that the men were playing—I think, they were like, something like pinball, or something? Something—a game, like, something like the bowling alley. But they were not. They were outside, in the open, and they had the—they would be throwing this ball up against these pinballs, whatever they were. And the men were outside. They were outside, playing this game. It was in the summer time, I think. And then they were just having a good time, and laughing. And then all of a sudden, there was this shooting. These men came, and they were like deputies, I think, or something. And they—evidently, these, the men that were killed maybe, they sort of got into a little argument with them, or something, that caused the shooting. They were

really not supposed to shoot them, but of course, they said that they instigated, the men that were shot. So, this—these people from Illinois, their name is Putrage [PH], okay? And they were the grandchildren of the people that kept the boarding house. And I was in contact with them; they called me up, and we spoke on the phone. And they went to—they went to Painesdale, to Michigan, in July, this month. They were going back up there, because they had made a little monument for the two men that were killed. Because there was no marker there, and so they collected money from all the relatives of these men that were killed, and they had a little monument put there, in the cemetery, and, to remember them. And I think they were going to have a little something up there; that's why they went. Yeah, the Putrage, from Illinois.

URION: It's nice that you've kept in contact with that family.

PISANI: Yeah, right. Well, they called me.

URION: Okay.

PISANI: No, they got permission if they could—if they could call me or write to me. And now Ms. Somebody from Houghton--?

URION: Miss Kim Hoagland? Does she work at the university?

PISANI: No, that's not her name. I'm sorry, I can't think of her name. I remembered Miss Levine!

URION: [Laughs]

PISANI: And Miss Orion.

URION: You're very close. Urion.

PISANI: Urion! Urion. And so I called them, because they wanted to get permission if they could write to me or talk to me. And we did talk quite a bit. And they were going back to Michigan in July, so maybe they're up there now.

URION: Yeah, actually, that professor from Michigan Technological University, Kim? Kim Hoagland? She gave a talk at the high school in Painesdale—

PISANI: Yes.

URION: --about the shooting. And it was just, yeah, the beginning of July. And they came up to—

PISANI: Oh, see? So then they were up there!

URION: Yeah.

PISANI: Yeah.

URION: Yeah, it was nice to be there, for that.

PISANI: Yeah, I would have liked to be there, but at my age [laughs], I'm lucky that I got here! [Laughs]

LEVINE: As you say, we're glad you came here!

URION: Yeah!

PISANI: Thank you.

URION: Well, I just have a few more questions about Michigan.

PISANI: Yeah.

URION: Did your family go to church when you were living in Painesdale or Seeberville?

PISANI: Yes. It was a must, us children. My father and mother—my mother couldn't go, because she had a house full of boarders, and my father was not that religious. But we had to go to church! We had to go to Painesdale, and we went to catechism, and mass, and we were confirmed; we had a communion. Yes, we did go. And we had to go to catechism. And oh! Catechism, and then there were vespers after that. I don't know if you know what I'm talking about, but you know! And so we did that, yes. Yes, it was a must.

URION: Was there a church in Seeberville, or did you-=-?

PISANI: No, no, just the one in Painesdale. Painesdale was quite a big town in those days! Well, in Seeberville, I think there was about—the old Seeberville—I think about twenty houses. And then they built a new part, a new section, down further, and they were the new houses. And they were five dollars a month: a dollar a room! And yes, and then they put electricity in those houses, and—well, our house burned, in Seeberville. And so from there, we had to move to a company house, and that was in the new section of Seeberville! And I remember, we didn't have boarders anymore by then. And so, we had electricity. And I remember coming to New York City, in Manhattan, and we had gas lights! And imagine, having gas lights in the city, and we had electricity up in this little hick town! I couldn't get over that!

URION: How did your house burn down?

PISANI: It was a connection in the chimneys, something happened. And it burned; it caught fire.

URION: You weren't in it at the time?

PISANI: No, no, no, we were out.

URION: Oh, okay.

PISANI: It was in the evening, and we were out. My mother was home.

URION: Did the company have a fire department, or how did that--?

PISANI: You know, I often wonder about that, because we did have a fireman, and his name was Vinkochav. And in those days, it was volunteer. But how, how—how they ever got to the fires, they had to race! They had to walk, where the fire engine and horses, by horse—right? Everything was by horses in those days, and by the time they got there, the house would be burning and burning! And you know, there wasn't much left. But, they were volunteer firemen, yes. And in fact, for the signals, they would have these—at the F compressor they had this big, huge—how can I explain it—chimneys, but they were huge, tall! About three or four floor high, up! Anyway, to me they looked like they were high, because I was small! [Laughs] And they would blow like a horn, like a foghorn? And it's two long and one short for a certain section, and so on. And when we would hear that, we would just freeze! We'd—even at night, like, you know, wondering where's the fire? But we didn't have that many fires up there, considering that everything was coal and wood, right? And stoves? Yeah.

URION: How did the company house compare to the house that you were--?

PISANI: Oh, they were nice! They were very nice. It was a little shed, and a nice kitchen. And the floors must have been, I don't know, maybe maple. I don't know what they were, but they were shiny—nice. My mother used to get on her knees and scrub the floors! You didn't use a mop, there, scrub. And we had a beautiful kitchen, and a big dining room, and a bedroom. And then upstairs we had two rooms, and they were like, the roofs were slanty, so the snow would come down, you know; it didn't pile up. And of course, even there we still had an outhouse. [Laughs] We didn't have baths. My mother used to bring out the washtub on Saturday nights in the kitchen, and heat up the water. And my brother'd get his first, and then he'd have to go up to his room. But anyway, that's how we got clean. And my mother used to knit our black wool socks, stockings, all the way up here. And we had high shoes and rubbers; we didn't have galoshes in those days. But it was a lot of fun. We had fun!

URION: So when you look back on Michigan, what do you think of your time there?

PISANI: Well, see, most of my time was spent in New York City, because I was only twelve when we left. But I remember fun, fun. We were children, and children always would go on picnics, and we'd get lunch. Maybe I'd have a salami sandwich, and my Austrian friend, my Croatian friend would have, maybe she'd have—oh, gee, what would you call that sausage? It was a different kind of sausage. But anyway, we'd trade. We'd exchange our sandwiches. And they would eat our olives. The Italians eat a lot of olives, and they were bitter, bitter olives. They were not the green ones; they were the dark ones. And they used to love them, and we used to trade for something else. And we'd go on picnics, and pick flowers, and then we'd take our shoes off and go in the running brooks. They had, we had beautiful spring brooks there. The water was—I can still picture it, it's so beautiful and green! Everything was so nice. And then when my father used to go—people were allowed to chop down trees, but you were not allowed to chop down the straight trees, because they were for the company, for the timber that they used in the mines. And so men were allowed to go and chop down trees, and then bring them home. And I remember my father chopping down the trees, and then he'd get somebody with a wagon and a horse, and they would bring all the wood home. And then my father, with the boarders, they would saw them into chunks. And then he would chop them into wood to put in the stove. And he'd have this big pile of wood. And see, these are some of our chores, that we did. And he'd have this big pile of wood, enormous pile, and he'd call us. And he'd say, "You see that pile of wood there? Well when I come home tomorrow night, I don't want to see it there. It's got to be in the cellar." And we had like a window in the cellar, a little window, and my brother would be down there, and we'd get all our friends to help us, and we would bring loads of wood, and throw it down, and he would stack it all up. And then the wood pile would be gone, and when my father would come home, and we'd take him by the hand, and we'd take him downstairs, and he'd look, and he'd say, "That's very good. Fine." But no thank you, or no, "Here, if you do something, you get paid for it," you know? If your children run an errand for you, you're going to pay for that, you know? Not up there! We'd get a penny a day; that was our allowance. And of course we'd get a lollipop. They'd call them dumbbell lollipops; they had a ball of candy on each side, you know, lollipops, but with—and a nickel on Sunday, for ice cream. That was in the summer. And we'd go to the movies for a nickel! And we had, when the note would come around in school, the note would come around, and it would say, "All children that are not vaccinated should go for a vaccination." The dispensary was right up the street, up the road—it was not a street! [Laughs] And we'd all march in to have our vaccination. And everybody, a few days later, they'd be in bed with a temperature or something. And us? Not a scratch! Not a scratch, none of us! The three of us never had a scratch. And we would get very upset, because they were all

home, and with a temperature, and we had to go to school! And so my father one day asked the doctor. He said, "Why is it my children do not get, the vaccination doesn't take?" And so he said, "Don't worry about it, because they're immune to the smallpox." So we never got vaccinated—I mean, we did, but it never showed. We don't have any marks. And everybody'd have their big mark, you know? [Laughs] Yeah.

URION: Did you ever go up to Calumet and Houghton?

PISANI: Oh, that was—to Houghton, yes. That was a big, a big ado, to go on the train to—I think the most that we went to was South Range. I don't remember we went to Houghton, but we did go to South Range. And that was a real treat, to get on the train! Imagine? Not even a bus, or anything. And it was fun, yeah. My father used to belong to the society, Sons of Italy, which it's still—it's still around here. It's still in, people are born here, and they still belong. And he, so every once in a while he would go. They'd have a meeting in South Range. And so then he would take me with him, but he'd deposit me with another family that had children, and he'd go to his meeting. And my mother used to say, "Don't come home with a," like, a title, you know, to be president or something. She said, "Stay out of the politics." [Laughs] But anyway, so we'd go to Houghton, and I'd come home with a big bag of candy, and oh, gee, that was a big bag! And our boarders, like sometimes on Saturday night, they would get all dressed up, and they'd go to South Range, to dancehalls. And so there was one, especially one of the, he'd always come home with a big bag of candy for us. Then on Sunday morning, we'd find a big bag of candy on the table. And, yeah, we had—we used to have fun.

URION: So how was it that you returned to Italy?

PISANI: Well, in 1921, my mother was diagnosed with cancer of the breast. And so she knew, and she said, "Well, I want to go back home. I want to go to Italy and see my mother." And so then, because Dr. West, he was a surgeon, and he did a whole mastectomy on my mother, in Trimountain. They had the hospital in Trimountain. And in those days, 1921, he removed her whole breast—a whole mastectomy. He was a real professor. He was very good; he was a surgeon. And so anyway, so the doctor told my father, he said, "You know, there's no hope here." And so anyway, in the spring of 1922, they started to make plans to go to Italy, and so we went to Italy. We took the train on July 4th, Fourth of July, Painesdale, and we came to New York. And we had cousins here, and we stayed with them two days, and then we got on the ship, Columbo, the steamship Columbo, and we went to Italy. [Sighs] And then, there's a lot of tragedy here. My little brother—I told you, we had a little brother—he had, when we got to Genoa, he wasn't passing his urine. And so when we got to Lucca, the city, my mother's cousin was there, waiting for us at the train. She was well-off. She was a teacher in

something, telegraphs, or something, telegrams. And anyway, she lived in Lucca, in the city. And she took us to her house right away, and she got a doctor, and he said, “There’s nothing I can do.” And my little brother died the day after we were in Italy. So he’s buried over there with my mother. And we’re skipping around here, but that’s how we went to Italy. So we stayed there. My father enrolled us in school right away. He got us a tutor, private tutor. He believed that we should learn, and we went to this private tutor every day, and we did know how to speak Italian. It was a must. And we learned to read and write, and then in October we went to classes; they started school in October. And we went to school until we left to come back to New York. So we learned to read and write in Italian, which I still do. I still watch my programs from Italy, yeah, stories. So it was—and I still corresponded with my friend Louise. She came to see me off, her and Barbara. Are we going back to this later, or no? Because then we went back to Michigan in 1958, my husband, and my brother and his wife, and my son Arthur, that you met. He was eleven, I think, then. And we went back to Michigan, and to this Louise Chop. But she lived in Tyvola [PH] at the time we went back. And so I used to write to her. She was—she came to the station with us when we left, and I used to write to her from Italy. And one day she said to me, “You know, Olga,” because we’d telephone, from, I mean, New York in the later years. And she said, “You know, Olga,” she says, “I have the first letter that you wrote to me from Italy.” And I said, “Well, if you had it so many years,” I said, “I think maybe you should send it back to me.” And I still have it! I still have this letter, and it’s December 1921, and I wrote a little bit in Italian, a little bit in English. And I still have that letter! And anyway, so went we went back to, in 1958, we went by train. And it was such a thrill to get—we went, of course there was no stop in Painesdale anymore. We went to Houghton, and we got—Houghton, yeah, that’s where the train station, and that’s where we got off. And we went to a motel, and we got washed and cleaned up from the train, and then we took a cab, and we went to Tyvola, and there was Louise and her husband. And we got a little motel there, and we stayed a whole month. And we went to Agate Beach. In those days there was nobody on the—and now I hear it’s always crowded, looking for the stones! It’s on Lake Superior, and the stones, you see the stones, and they sparkle. And we picked so many of them, and I filled up box up with stones. And so my husband says, “What are you going to do with those stones?” And so then I discarded—but I did bring a few of them, and I kept them in water, and they looked so pretty! And they say you find some nice stones up there, but I didn’t! [Laughs] So we had a nice time there. And this Barbara Iscra [PH], she was Austrian. She was Croatian, really. And she lived in Ontonogan [PH]. And when my friend Louise, she called her up and she said, “Olga’s coming up here.” And so she came to see me, and we had so much fun! We laughed, and we talked. And she said, “Olga,” she said, “If they didn’t drive me,” she said, “I would have come. I would have walked, even on my knees, but I would have come to see you!” she said. It was so nice to see them.

URION: So, good friendships from Seeberville?

PISANI: Yes. And so, so that was Michigan.

LEVINE: Okay, well I have some questions about life in Michigan before you went back to Italy.

PISANI: Okay.

LEVINE: Okay? You said about, that the mining company cleaned the miners' clothing, when they--?

PISANI: No, they had—they'd come up from the mines, and they were really, like wet and muddy, like all the dust from the blasting rocks, and everything. And they had this, they called it the dry house. In fact, I have a book home, and there's pictures of it. And it was a long room, and it had showers, and they had even baths, like people that, you know. And they had these showers, and they would shower, and they'd have their own clothes that they went there, and to come home with. And they would be all cleaned up, and they would come home. And that was, the company had put that there for the miners, so that they would come home clean.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, I was wondering whether the mining company actually cleaned the clothes they wore in the mine?

PISANI: That, I don't know. That, I don't, I really don't know if they did that. But I know that they would, to me they looked muddy like, you know, all wet from the west, the blasting the rock that they had to blast.

LEVINE: So you actually saw their--?

PISANI: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Well, if you saw them, I guess the mining company didn't clean them! [Laughs] Or, you probably wouldn't have seen them all muddy and dirty?

PISANI: No, I wouldn't have known, no.

LEVINE: Right, yeah, yeah.

PISANI: Maybe it does say in the book. I really don't know. I have this book all about Painesdale.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

PISANI: My friend Louise used to send me all the writings, and whenever something happened, she would send it to me, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and you also mentioned about the mining company, for about a dollar a month, they provided health benefits?

PISANI: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Were there any other things they provided their workers?

PISANI: No. No, no. No, there was, if we were sick, we would go to the dispensary. We could walk there. And I don't think they provided anything else. If there was, like if somebody was killed in the mine, they would get so much, I think. But I don't remember, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah. And how about a general store?

PISANI: Oh, yes, the general store. Oh, yes! That was run by the company.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PISANI: And there, my mother would take us there to buy our shoes, and of course we had a Sears, Roebuck catalog that was, and we used to, my mother used to send for clothes. But when we needed something, like rubbers, or shoes, we'd go to the store, the mining store. And that included the Post Office on one side. I still remember the number of our mailbox, six-oh-four, six hundred and four. And of course, there was Mr. Rule. I don't know if it was R-O-O-L-E, or R-U-L-E, but he was a nice man, and he used to come and he used to take care of my mother, because she didn't speak English. But you know, we'd sort of speak English. And we'd buy our shoes and our rubbers there. And then on the other side, they had a meat market.

LEVINE: Oh, great.

PISANI: In the store. In this—everything was sectioned off.

LEVINE: Could you hold that just a second while we turn the tape, and then we'll talk about the meat market? [Laughs]

END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE B

LEVINE: Okay, we're now starting side B. Okay, you were talking about the general store, and the meat market side.

PISANI: And the meat market. And I remember my mother would say, "Olga, run to the store and get fifteen cents' worth of ham, cooked ham." Now fifteen cents today, you say, what do you—fifteen cents? Maybe it was for a half a pound, maybe—I don't know. But they had—but my mother used to have the meat, they had a meat market. I don't know if it came from South Range. They would come with meat, and take the order, like, today, for tomorrow. And when my mother first got there, she didn't know how, what to do, and the boarders used to tell her, and they used to even write it down, what she had to order. And that's how we got our meat. And our groceries used to come, like, once a week. But if we needed things daily, like then we would get it at the big store, the company store. And we had the baker used to come like every other day. But they had, you know, like if we needed things, like maybe ribbon, or things, or buttons, or things like that, you know, we'd go to the company store.

LEVINE: Could you keep a tab, or did you--?

PISANI: The what?

LEVINE: Did you have a tab? In other words, did your mother like pay for things, or did they keep it on the books, and then when your father got paid--?

PISANI: Now that you say that, I think it was on a tab. I think. I remember writing. But if it was just little things, like we would pay cash.

LEVINE: Now, how about your mother and father's social life? What did—did they get together with other friends?

PISANI: No, no.

LEVINE: No, uh-huh.

PISANI: Maybe the Italian women, if there was, like a child got sick, the Italian women would, right away, your neighbor, to help you. But as far as socializing, forget it! I remember once, though, that my father, we had a horse and carriage because—and we went to South Range. And I think there was like an opera, I think. Or maybe it was Houghton. I really don't know. I know that I fell asleep coming home. But it was a carriage with horses! Imagine! That was the first time I rode on a horse and carriage. Otherwise, we walked. And, but as far as socializing, no. Maybe like, in an emergency, if somebody needed something, the women would get together, but no.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PISANI: But none of that, no.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Let's see. Was there any other dangers of the mines? In other words, at the time, besides the loose rocks? But either then, or after the fact, did men get sick because they had worked in the mines, or anything?

PISANI: That I don't know. I know that my father used to say, I mean, when we were grown up and we were, and he lived with me, he used to say it was not—coal mines were much more dangerous than the copper mines, because the coal mines had gas and things like that, that would burn or something. But in the copper mines, the only danger was the blasting, the loose rock that used to fall. Otherwise it was not dangerous.

LEVINE: Were there Old World customs that your father and mother continued to practice, and their friends, or the rest of the Italian community, that like things from the Old World?

PISANI: No.

LEVINE: Did you have the sense that they wanted you to become American? Was that something that--?

PISANI: Oh, yes!

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PISANI: When we were in Italy, my mother kept saying, "Now, you bring them—when I'm gone," she says, "You take them back to America." Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah. How about like bocce, and games like that?

PISANI: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Did the men play that?

PISANI: Yes, they used to play bocce. Now, did we have one? No, no, but up the hill they had one. Yeah, that's the only thing that the men used to—the Italians had bocce games, yeah. They used to do that.

LEVINE: Did the other groups have their other kinds of things?

PISANI: Well you see, like the Croatians where they—where the shooting took place, well that, they had—they had, it was similar to the bocce game. But they had like billiards, like—

LEVINE: Croquet?

PISANI: [Pause]

LEVINE: Where the ball has to go through a wire?

PISANI: No, no, the—oh, gee, you see, when you get old, you forget things! [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] That's funny, because you remember a lot more than I would!

PISANI: The bowling, the bowling alleys, that—they had something similar to that. And they used to—it was similar to bowling. That's what these Croatian men were doing when the shooting came. You see, each one had their own. Like the men, Croatian men, or the—it was good morning, or hello, but it was not—no mingling of, like now your neighbor? It was different then. Each one sort of, they gathered together in their own kind, see. But my mother didn't have time to go visiting or [laughs]—like I said, it was only in emergencies, when the women used to gather together, if a child was sick. And oh, if we got sick, and the doctor would come, and the first thing they would order was castor oil! And I never heard of an aspirin until maybe I was twenty years old! And so the castor oil, he'd say, "A good dose of castor oil, and she'll be fine!" And I don't know, like magic, an orange used to appear! You know, otherwise I don't know where this orange came from. But when it was time for castor oil, there would be this beautiful orange. And my mother—our neighbor, or Italian neighbor, and she'd be there coaxing, and my mother, and coaxing with this half a glass of castor oil!

LEVINE: Ooh!

PISANI: And that was the only remedy for when you were sick up there! And so then she'd cut the orange in half and quarters, and she'd say, "As soon as you finish," and you'd stick the orange in your mouth. And so that's, that's how we, you know. But we didn't have aspirins, or anything like that. Except when, I remember my father telling this story. My father had a sore back, and my cousin—he was much older than us. He was my father's nephew. And he had something happen to his foot in the mine. And they both went to the doctor, to the dispensary. And so my father, to this day, I'm laughing now, because he says, "We both came out, and we compared, and we each had the same white pills." And he said, "Now, I had a sore back, and he had a sore foot. Now, the same?" And it came to me later, much later, that that must have been aspirin! That must have been aspirin, right? What else could it be? And so he thought it was funny that the doctor didn't know what he was doing; he gave him the same medication for a sore back and his, and the other one had a sore foot. So it was funny, really!

LEVINE: How about when you went back to Seeberville, or Painesdale? What were the differences? How did the places change from when you were a little girl?

PISANI: Oh, all the houses were empty, and some were gone. And where our house, burnt house had stood, it was—I have a picture. We're standing in front of it. It's just a beautiful empty lot there; the grass is grown there. And I can see a little hill on the side; I remember playing on that little hill. And, but the houses were empty, most of them. And the old houses, on the old part, they were, the houses were gone. And in the new part, there were still some. Some of them were still around. My friend Louise said—in fact, her mother still lived in the old, in Seeberville. But Louise lived in Tyvola, but her mother still lived in Seeberville, in one of the new company houses. Yes, and that was—there were still a few of them around, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, how about when you got to Italy? What struck you as very different there, compared with what you had known up 'til that point?

PISANI: Oh, we loved it! We loved it! We didn't want to come back. But you see, we were children, and right away you make friends with other children. And when we came out of school, we had nothing to do, you know, in Italy. But they had to either go and harvest the corn, or the grapes, and we would all go! We thought it was fun! To them it was work, but for us it was a lot of fun. And they'd pick up all this corn, and they'd bring it in the courtyard. And it had big piles of corn! And then when they would come to shucking it, and we would be invited. And we'd—it was fun, just to take off all these—and then after we were all done with that, they would invite us to supper. And then they would roast chestnuts at the fireplace. And everything was so new and different! And to go out and pick grapes on the vine, and fruit from the trees! It was all together different from Michigan. We had never seen—even when we were on the train going from Genoa to Lucca, and we'd see these vines. And the grapes, they were just starting to color, you know. And, "Oh, look at the grapes! Look at the grapes!" We were so excited, you know? And everything was so different, and we loved it! We cried when we had to come back. But I mean, it was the best thing my father ever did, to come back, take us back.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember your mother's funeral?

PISANI: Well, in those days, I remember when she died. I remember this: she was in bed that morning, and my father picked me to kiss my mother. And she was dying. And in those days, they would walk. No, they did have a, it was horse-drawn, a carriage just for, with glass. And they put her in, and it was in a wooden—no coffins like over here. It was actually just a wooden—

LEVINE: Box?

PISANI: --coffin. And they put her in there. But we didn't go to the cemetery. My father did, and they walked. They walked to the cemetery. And we lived in a different town, where my uncle, and where the cemetery was where the family was buried, like my father's mother and father. And so they walked, my father and friends and relatives. And they walked, but we stayed home, with a cousin of ours. She came, and she stayed with us. And she died in February, February 21, 1922. And so then my father decided to take us back. And so we sailed from Genoa on June 3, 1922. And we came here; we got here on June 14th, 1922. And so my cousin and his wife, they prepared us an apartment, and we took over. We, my father went, got a job in a warehouse, and my sister, she went to work, crochet-beading, they used to call it. They used to put beads on material and dresses. And my brother and I, we went back to school in September. And I remember I went to P.S. 38, on Dominick and Clark Street, in the Village.

LEVINE: Wow! Can you say—[laughs]?

PISANI: And we went to live in 114 MacDougal Street.

LEVINE: Oh, wonderful!

PISANI: That was the Village.

LEVINE: Yeah. What was the name of the ship that you came back on?

PISANI: The ship?

LEVINE: Yeah.

PISANI: That was called the Rosso.

LEVINE: The Rosso, okay. And what about the voyage? Was there anything about the voyage back that you can remember?

PISANI: No, no. It was smooth sailing. It was very nice. Going to Italy, we had—we had to sleep, my sister and I, in a different cabin, with four other women. And there was this one woman, she was, her and her daughter were traveling from Chicago. And the daughter's name was Victoria. And they were going—they came from around where we were in Italy, from Lucca. And she had, this girl, she was my sister's age, I think, and she had, like, a problem with her lungs or something. And they thought taking her to Italy would help her. And so for us, it was a fun voyage, with this girl. But coming back, coming back, we didn't have—we didn't make friends.

LEVINE: How about the ship going back to Italy? Do you remember?

PISANI: That was the Columbo.

LEVINE: Columbo.

PISANI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Mm-hm, so okay, so you got here, and then you settled in—

PISANI: On MacDougal Street.

LEVINE: --Greenwich Village. And what, now you had lived in Michigan, Italy, and now Greenwich Village?

PISANI: Yes.

LEVINE: So different!

PISANI: Yes.

LEVINE: What struck you about Greenwich Village, when you got here?

PISANI: Well, we were—we were not used to being in a big city, you know. And I remember, we lived on the first floor in the front, and it was five stories high. And we'd sit at the window and just look at, you know, everybody passing. And we didn't make friends. We only had this friend—excuse me. This friend, Rosina. Now, I meant to tell you, she was sixteen years old, and she was a minor, and she came to America with my mother and my father, on the same ship. She needed a—what would you call it?

LEVINE: A chaperone to come here?

PISANI: Yes, because she was a minor. And her name is on one of these things here. And so she was married, and she had no children, and she lived on Sullivan Street.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PISANI: And so she took us under her wing. She was like a second mother to us. Her name was Rosina. And she taught us how to cook, and she taught us how to sew. And she got us our first jobs. And she was like, I actually remember her more than my mother, because we actually grew up with her, and she was always there for us.

LEVINE: Wow, yeah.

PISANI: And she passed away; she was almost a hundred! She was going to—she passed away in November, and she was going to be a hundred in December. December 27th. And she was living with her niece in New Jersey; she went to live with her, because her husband died. And so, where was I now? I forgot! [Laughs] But anyway, she was like a mother to us.

LEVINE: Right. Could you say anything about Greenwich Village at that time, in 1922, and thereafter?

PISANI: Oh, yes. We remember, there was, it was Prohibition. Remember? Well, you don't remember! You weren't born! [Laughs] But anyway, it was Prohibition, and they used to make wine the night before, and then they'd sell it the day after. And there was, like, across the street we used to see it. There was like stairs going down in the basement, and these people that—maybe they were even society, you know. They would come to the Village just to see what it was like, right? And they'd be drinking this—this wine that was made overnight. I don't know how they made it, with what. I'm just saying this, and maybe it was, you know. But anyway, I remember that. There would be—I remember they'd come around with, selling watermelons with a horse and wagon. And they'd be hollering, "Watermelon! Watermelon!" And everybody'd come and look, and so, they were maybe fifty cents a watermelon. And so my father would buy it, and he'd say—no, it was a dollar a watermelon, maybe. Could be? But he used to—maybe it wasn't; maybe it was fifty cents. But he'd say, "I'll give you a quarter," because they used to take a little chunk off, and show it to you. And if it wasn't ripe, you wouldn't have to buy it. But he'd say, "I'll take it without the sample." And he'd give them a quarter less! And we'd take it into the house, and sometimes we'd win, and sometimes we'd lose!

LEVINE: [Laughs]

PISANI: But I remember that. And then they'd come around selling potatoes. Potatoes, three pounds for a dime. "Three pounds for a dime," you know, and they'd be selling, with the horse and wagon. And all these things used to, you know, strike me funny. And then in the winter—oh, and we would get mail twice a day, in those days, and now you're lucky if you get it once a day! Yeah, twice a day. I remember them picking up the garbage, the garbage men were in this open truck, right? And now everything is nice and sanitary, but in those days, that's how it was. And all these things I remember, you know.

LEVINE: Were there horses then? Was like, the garbage truck--?

PISANI: Was horses!

LEVINE: --was horses?

PISANI: Oh, yes, it was still horses. Still horses and buggy, in 1922. I remember the trolley cars. We used to ride on the open ones in the summer, yeah. And for a nickel we'd go down to South Ferry, and another nickel we'd go to Staten Island on the ferry boat, yeah.

LEVINE: And what about after school? Did you go to any of these, either libraries or--?

PISANI: No. No, I would come home. I remember, on Monday night, on Monday after school, at three o'clock, after school, on Monday night, afternoon, rather, we would go—everybody had to go up on the roof, like the sixth and the seventh graders, and the eighth graders. On the roof, and it was all enclosed with a fence, and they'd play ball and all that. And I would just stand on the corner, because I didn't know anybody, and I was not too outgoing. And then finally I made a friend with May Wheeler. And then we became friends, because she was an outsider, too. She was not a New Yorker. And, but I used to come home and shop. And I'd cook the best I could. I was thirteen. And I'd find, on Monday, we'd have our laundry. The laundry man used to come in the morning and pick up the laundry in the sack, and then he'd bring it back. It was wet wash, and I'd hang it out on the line. I was thirteen! And I look at my grandchildren; they're sixteen, and they don't do any of these things no more! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Where was your line?

PISANI: It was out on the stairs, the hallway? And then there was the flight of stairs going up, and there was a big window, and there was a line from there to another building. And I'd hang the clothes there. And I'd hang them up at lunch time, and then at three o'clock I'd pull them in, and fold them, and iron. And cook!

LEVINE: Because your sister was working, your older sister?

PISANI: My sister was working.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PISANI: And then on Saturday, my sister and I would get on our knees, and we'd scrub the floor. And we had a toilet in the hallway. We had, with the other family, next, we shared the bath, the toilet. No bath, no bathtub—just a toilet. So that's how I grew up. And I was going to tell you about the armistice in Michigan.

LEVINE: Oh, yeah, go ahead!

PISANI: Yes, well, I remember I was—exactly where I was. And like I said, these big horns used to blow at eight o'clock in the morning, and twelve, and five o'clock at night. But this was, this horn kept blowing and blowing, and blowing, and my brother was with me. And we said, "Gee, that must be a fire someplace, or something." And we went home, and then they stopped blowing, and we had lunch. And we didn't know any—and we went back to school, and Mr. Jeffers, the Superintendent, he was on the stoop of the school, on the steps. And he called, telling us all to gather in around. And he spoke to us, and he said, "The war is over. Today is Armistice Day. The war is over now." And he made a big speech, and of course, we pledged allegiance to the flag, and we sang. And he said, "You're dismissed now. You can go home." And on our way home we'd see all the miners coming. They were all going to get washed, and going home. And that night, all the Italian families, the women, that's when they got together, and they'd kill chickens. And they made a big dinner! And of course, all the young boarders, they all got dressed, and they went to South Range, where all the big things were going on, dancing, and fun. And I remember that well, that armistice. And of course my father, he always liked to talk. Like I said, my mother told him, "Don't get involved in the society things." And so he got up—I don't know if anybody else remembered this. But he got up, and he took a glass of wine, and he said, "You children!"—my father was good for talking! And he said—he looked all around the table, and he said, "You children, remember this! This is the end of the war, and it's armistice, and we have won!" And I don't know whether my sister or brother ever remembered that, but I remember it vividly! And I never forgot that, yeah. And what else can I tell you?

LEVINE: What was the composition like, of the Village? Was it largely an Italian community when you got to it?

PISANI: It was mostly Italian where we were. Like, the Italian sections, they were to the—and then further on, in the nicer part on Charles Street, that was further west, there were the Irish. But it was a mixture of Irish and Jewish people. Jewish people were more on the East Side. And, but we got along with everybody. And so—

LEVINE: What are you most proud of? What gives you great satisfaction, when you look back on your life now?

PISANI: I think everything. I had a good life; I was blessed! I really was blessed. I had a very good husband, very good husband. Of course, we kept company five years! [Laughs] Do you want to hear this story, too?

LEVINE: Absolutely!

PISANI: Well, anyway, I was eighteen when I met him. And he worked in the—actually, it was a speakeasy. Now, you know what a speakeasy is, don't you?

LEVINE: I do, but why don't you say it for the tape?

PISANI: A speakeasy is when Prohibition, you couldn't sell—you were not allowed to sell liquor. And he worked in a restaurant, and they sold liquor, of course. It was mostly that. And we lived on 93 MacDougal—we moved. We got promoted from this 114, where there were railroad rooms. My father got us room on 93 MacDougal, and it was MacDougal and Bleeker. It was a corner house, and we had rooms on the corner. We had all our rooms face the street, MacDougal and Bleeker. And my husband—my boyfriend—he worked as a waiter in a restaurant, in the speakeasy, at 103 MacDougal. I dropped my cane, but it's okay. And he, I guess he used to see me. And we met at a dance, and he asked me out. And I had been asked out, but not for many, because I was only eighteen, but I never went out with anybody. I'd say, "No." But he asked me, and I went out with him the first time he asked me. I guess it was just like what was meant to be. And he was handsome, of course. He was tall and handsome. And so [laughs], this was on a Saturday night. And he was working, but somebody called him up, his friend, and told him that I was there. So he quit his job and he came, and he asked me to dance, and of course, I was very thrilled. I was not a very good dancer, but anyway, I danced with him. And so he said, "Would you like to go out with me?" and I said, "Yes." And he said, "Tomorrow?" I said, "Yes." And we met on the corner. As I, when we came out, I told my sister and my friend Albia, and I said, "You know, that man, his name is Dominick, he asked me to go out, and I'm going out with him." So they all looked at me, you know, gee! So I met him on the corner of Third Street and Fourth—no, it was on Fourth Street, and Sullivan Street, on the corner. It was near Washington Square Park, right there. And he took me to see "Ramona." My children always laugh, because they used to sing that song, "Ramona." I don't know if you—

LEVINE: Yeah.

PISANI: It was a silent picture. Or was it a talking? No. I think it was a talking picture, I think. And he took me to see "Ramona," so I always remembered that. And then after that, we kept going out. And so, the one thing that I'm trying to lead to is here, that I said, "I don't like you to be a waiter." I said, "If you want to go out with me," I said, "You have to get a job, a different kind of a job."

LEVINE: Okay, if we can just stop here, because we're at the end of the tape, but we're going to conclude with a third.

PISANI: Okay.

END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE THREE, SIDE A

LEVINE: Okay, we're beginning here with tape three, and I'm speaking with Mrs. Pisani. We were talking about when you met your husband, at a dance.

PISANI: Yes.

LEVINE: And you said that you didn't want him working in a restaurant?

PISANI: In the restaurant business, right. And he said, "Well, what's the difference? It's a job." But I said, "Well," I said, "When we're married," I said, "And I go to work in the morning, and you're sleeping, and I come home at night, and you're gone, you're working in the restaurant," I said, "And Saturdays and Sundays. We're never together, because that's the restaurant business." And so, it was even Depression in those days. So, but he—he did look around, and he went to work for thirteen dollars a week, and he learned a trade. And it was something in hats. They used to make some kind of—I don't know what you would call it. Like, they would shape the hats on these forms. And then, so he worked, and then finally when he got to making thirty-two dollars a week, that's when we got married. So we kept company five years.

LEVINE: Wow!

PISANI: And we were engaged, and so my father came home one day, and he says, "You know So-and-so asked me when you and Dominick are getting married, and I said to them, I said, 'When they're ready, they're going to get married.'" He said, "Don't worry about it." And so we did. And we had a very good life. It was blessed! Then from there, he went to work in—during the war, he went to work in a machine shop, and they made certain parts for airplanes. And so he was exempt from the war. And in the meantime, of course, I had my first baby. I had Robert, Bobby. And so he—he was working there for some years, and then he—one of the bosses was retiring, and he said, "Would you like to be a partner with the other man?" And so he bought into the business, and now the business is in—my children took over. They're in Hackensack.

LEVINE: Oh!

PISANI: And they're carrying on, and they're—but it's altogether different now. They import all kinds of machineries, machines for different, like laboratory things, and cosmetic machines, all that, which I wouldn't even know how to explain. But anyway, he did get out of the restaurant business! [Laughs] And that's why I kept company five years!

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PISANI: And, but like I said, I was blessed. I had a good life.

LEVINE: Mm-hm, and then you had a second son?

PISANI: And then ten years later I had Arthur. And of course, I wanted a little girl, but it was a boy. And I loved him as much as I would love a girl! And I think God gives you what's good for you, because I have two wonderful sons! They're always there for me, and their wives are very good to me. They're like having my own daughters. And I have grandchildren, and great-grandchildren! And here I am, ninety-four years old, and I'm still going!

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, was Dominick—did he also, did he come from Italy, or his family?

PISANI: Oh, yeah. Oh, that's another story, yes! [Laughs] He was—my husband was born in Piedmonte, Piedmont, Italy. And he worked on a—on steamships, on boats, steamers. And he was like fourteen, and he started to work on the steamers, like busboys. And he learned to be a waiter. And so he was working on this ship, and he was about fifteen—sixteen or fifteen. Anyway, it was 1925, and he—they said, there were rumors that when the ship got back to Genoa, it was going into dry dock. And so he said he wasn't going to go back to Italy, and so he—

LEVINE: Jumped?

PISANI: He jumped ship!

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PISANI: And so he was here illegally. So anyway, he went to school once or twice, night school, and he went to work as a waiter, of course. He didn't—what else was he going to do? And he learned English—he went to school, but he didn't like it, and he learned to read and write, and speak English, by getting the *Daily News* every day, and he would read, and he learned by himself. And he spoke—he spoke English, but he had certain words that he would laugh! [Laughs] But anyway, he was a good man. A good man, a good father, a good husband. And he passed away in 1982; he had cancer. And

so I've been living by myself, and I get along. And like I said, I'm thankful I have good children. I have my niece lives right next door to me. That's my sister's daughter, Diana. And if I need anything, she's right next door.

LEVINE: You mentioned earlier about moving from your first apartment, that was like the railroad--?

PISANI: The railroad.

LEVINE: To a corner apartment where you could see--?

PISANI: Well, we went to move, yes, at 93 MacDougal.

LEVINE: Can you say anything more about, you know, sort of the upward movement? Then what happened, after that apartment, how did you move?

PISANI: Oh, and then, well you see, this is a good story, because in Michigan we had an outhouse, right?

LEVINE: Right.

PISANI: And when we went to Italy, it was worse. It was outside, but even worse. And so when we came to MacDougal Street, at least we had a toilet. We shared, but we had a toilet. But we went—when we went to 93 MacDougal, we had a bathroom: a bathtub and a toilet! And we had steam heat. And—no, we didn't have steam heat yet, no; we had a little coal stove. No, but it was a big—from an outhouse, we had our own bathroom. And now we're living in the Bronx, I had a bathroom and a half! So I have really graduated from nothing to a real nice apartment. I have a nice apartment. And my landlords are Italian. They're Italian Italians; they came after the war. But they treat me like I'm their grandmother there. I've seen the children born and went to school, and they grew up, and they're married!

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PISANI: I went to all their weddings!

LEVINE: Wow! So when you got married, is that when you moved to the Bronx?

PISANI: No, no. No, when we got married—in fact, when we lived on 93 MacDougal, we were paying forty-five dollars, from twenty-eight that we were paying, but we had everything. My father was very conscious of, that young ladies needed their privacy. He was very—I must say, he always thought about his children. So when we got married, we—no, then from there, from 93 MacDougal, there were many empty apartments. You people wouldn't remember this, but it was Depression, and families moved in with their

families. And there were many apartments for rent. And so, and my father said to the—we had this lady, she was the housekeeper. And at night she'd come and collect the garbage, you know, on the dumbwaiter? And so my father—it was the first of the month, and she came for the rent; she would collect rent. And so my father said to the lady, he said, "I'm only going to give you forty dollars," he says, "Because we can't afford forty-five dollars anymore. My daughter is home,"—you know, it was very slow, like, there was not much work. And she said, "Well," she said, "I'll take the forty dollars, but I won't give you a receipt." And she says, "And if the landlord agrees, then I'll give you the receipt." So the next night she comes back with the forty dollars, and she said—I forget his name, "He said he will not take forty dollars. He wants forty-five dollars." And my father said, "Okay then, I'm not paying you forty-five dollars." So we stayed there one month, and we moved, and so we owed the landlord forty-five dollars. But in those days, they used to move, and like, you're four or five months' rent behind, right? And so we went to live on West Fourth Street.

LEVINE: Oh.

PISANI: And then when I got married—that was 168 West Fourth. And then when we got married, I got a nice apartment on 140 West Fourth, and that was a half a block from Washington Square Park. Beautiful apartment! And so we lived there until 19—oh, gee! I forget, but anyway, we lived there until—I can't think. I think we moved up into the Bronx in 1966 or 1967, and I've been there ever since, in the same apartment—beautiful apartment!

LEVINE: Mm-hm. Was the Bronx—did that seem like a move to the suburbs?

PISANI: It was more like country. Even now, they're all small, private houses. And actually we moved up there because we didn't have enough—my father lived with my husband and I. He always lived with my husband and I. Until he passed away, he lived with us. And he was a great father. And I moved up there because we didn't have enough room, and my sister lived up in the Bronx. And she kept saying, "Come and live up here! Come and move up here, near me." In fact, she got the rooms for me, on the same street, Neil Avenue, and I've been there ever since.

LEVINE: Wow. Can you say anything else about the Depression, how it affected your father and your family?

PISANI: Well, I think we were quite lucky, because my father always kept a job. He had—he went to work in the warehouse, and he worked there until he retired. So it was a little tighter, you know, but we didn't suffer, like a lot of people were out of work, and they really had it bad. We still, you know, we still went on. We'd go to the movies.

LEVINE: Oh?

PISANI: And once in a while we'd go up to Broadway. That was, you know—otherwise it was the neighborhood theater.

LEVINE: How about the impact of being born in Michigan, and then going back to Italy, and then coming back to this country? What do you think the effect of that was? Do you think it affected your personality, or the way you approach things, or think about things, that whole experience of immigrating?

PISANI: I don't think so, because I think at that age, thirteen and fourteen and fifteen, you seem to adjust. You seem to adjust and go on with what you have to do. But when I graduated the eighth grade, I was already fifteen, because we had lost one whole year in Italy. But when I graduated, we went to work! I went to work for thirteen dollars a week. And we worked forty-five hours a week. And so I learned how to sew on a sewing machine, and we made doilies, put lace on doilies, and things like that. And then I went to work on ladies' underwear. And when I became pregnant, I stayed home, and I was home. Then I was a housewife and a mother! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, can you say anything about the factory where you were working, on the sewing machines? Anything about what it was like?

PISANI: Well—

LEVINE: Was it big? Were there lots of young women there?

PISANI: Yeah, young women, mostly.

LEVINE: Mostly people who had immigrated?

PISANI: Yes. Well, no. There were women that were older, like they were—a lot of them, they were just born here, and they didn't go to high school; they didn't continue studying. And so they went to work. Most young people went to work at that age. Very few went to high school, or if they did, you know—which, I guess if there was a possibility, if my father could have afforded to send us to continue, maybe we could have got good jobs, because we spoke fluent Italian. The real Italian, not dialects. And we could have got, like, jobs with maybe importing people, or something, because we spoke English, and if we had gone to a trade school and learned typing, and things like that. But we didn't. And I'm still here, and I'm okay! [Laughs]

LEVINE: And what are you looking forward to now?

PISANI: Now?

LEVINE: Yeah.

PISANI: When I tell my children, I say, “You know, when I go,” and they say, “Why, where are you going?” On that long trip, I’m going, someplace. So they laugh, and they say, “Oh, you’ll be here for a long time.” In fact, my granddaughter, she’s married and she lives in Massachusetts, and she has two children. And ever since she was maybe fourteen, I remember her—her brother was being confirmed, and I said, “I won’t be here to see you,”—no, she must have been about twelve. I said, “I won’t be here when you’ll be confirmed,” and she said, “Think positive, Noni.” I’m Noni. I’m not Grandma, I’m Noni. And she said, “Think positive!” And I’m still here. After all these years, I’m still—and she still says, “Think positive,” which I will see her on—the end of this week I will see her and my new great-granddaughter. She’s three months old. Jordan, her name is Jordan. And I haven’t seen her yet, so I’ll be meeting my new great-granddaughter. And then I have, on the extended family, I have twin girls that were born in March. They’re from my son’s second wife’s children. Twin girls, they were born in March. So I’m a great-grandmother.

LEVINE: Wonderful! Well is there anything else. Do you want to ask anything now, Jo?

URION: Well, you had mentioned your sixth grade teacher?

PISANI: Yes, Miss Eilerson [PH].

URION: Can you talk about her?

PISANI: Yes, this is something that—she had, I think she was Swede, and she was very—she was such a nice lady. And one day she brought in cocoons to show us how silk was made. And she brought in these little cocoons, and I said, “Oh, my goodness!” you know. And when we went to Italy, my friend, like I said, when you’re children you make friends right away. This, my girlfriend, her name was Paulina, and her mother was—she was raising silk worms. She had leaves, mulberry leaves, and the silk worms would eat them, and then they would form a cocoon. And she gave me two of them, because I said, “Oh, my goodness!” I remembered Miss Eilerson giving me these cocoons. I mean, rather, showing them to us. And so she gave me these two cocoons, and I put them in a little box. And oh, my goodness, I was so thrilled to have these! And so one day I was talking with my mother, and I went to get this box, and I opened it, and two butterflies flew out—moths. And I said, “Oh, my God!” I said to my mother, “Look what happened!” And she said, “Of course that’s what happens,” she said. Because the cocoons have to be boiled, and that kills the worm inside. Otherwise—what would you? The moth? The butterfly? When that comes out, it ruins the cocoon, because it makes a hole in the cocoon, and that

breaks the thread of the silk. And I learned something from that, from Miss Eilerson bringing the cocoons to school and showing them to us. And when I went to Italy, I had that right in my hand. Look what happens! I mean, you really live and learn! Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Is there anything else? Do you have anything you'd like to say before we close, Mrs. Pisani?

PISANI: I guess when I'm home, I'll remember a lot of things.

LEVINE: Well, it's been wonderful! Thank you so much!

PISANI: Well, I thank you! I think this is so much—it's fun! And meeting Miss Urion.

URION: Yeah, it's a French name, and you're pronouncing it the way it should be. You're right, we talked about that on the phone, didn't we?

PISANI: Yes. You had relatives, or you did have your ancestors in New Paltz?

URION: Yes, yeah.

PISANI: Yes, and my oldest son, they built a beautiful home up there in New Paltz.

LEVINE: Let me just close this off. I just want to say that we're concluding this interview now, with Mrs. Pisani, who has just been wonderful as an interviewee. And at ninety-four years of age, she's just in very good form. And I want to thank—this is Jo Urion, and Janet Levine, and we're closing off for the National Park Service.

PISANI: Well, I want to thank you, Miss Levine, and Miss Urion—I'll say it my way! And it was a pleasure meeting both of you. It's really been a thrill! I think it's a highlight of my life!

END OF INTERVIEW