

**EI-141**

**MICHAEL CIANSI**

**BIRTH DATE: JULY 13, 1907**

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**INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.**

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**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 3/1993**

**ITALY ( born ARGENTINA ), 1923**

**AGE: 15**

**PORT: NAPLES**

**RESIDENCES:**

**FURCY, STATE OF ABRUZZI**

- **BOLIVAR**
- **THE US: NYC**

**Oral Historian's Note: The building where Mr. Ciansi lived was undergoing major exterior renovation during the taping of this interview, creating much background noise and distractions. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Oral Historian, 3/19/1993.**

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, April 28, 1992. I'm here in Greenwich Village with Michael Ciansi, who was born in Argentina and came from Italy to America in 1923 when he

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was fifteen-and-a-half years old and was detained at Ellis Island for five days. Mr. Ciansi, good morning.

CIANSI: Good morning.

SIGRIST: Could you please tell me what your name was?

CIANSI: My name was Angelo Miguele Ciansi.

SIGRIST: And what was your date of birth, sir?

CIANSI: My birthday is July 13, 1907.

SIGRIST: Where were you born?

CIANSI: I was born in Bolivar, Province de Buenos Aires, Argentina.

SIGRIST: Now, why in Argentina? How come you were born in Argentina?

CIANSI: I don't know, my parents happened to immigrate there.

SIGRIST: When did they go to Argentina?

CIANSI: Well, it must have been, if I was born in 1907, it must have been in the 1900s.

SIGRIST: Do you know why they went to Argentina?

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CIANSI: I don't know the reason. I couldn't tell you. Maybe the better conditions.

SIGRIST: Did they have other family in Argentina?

CIANSI: Yes. They had some relatives.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any stories that your mother or father might have told about being in Argentina?

CIANSI: Not for the first, not that I could recall.

SIGRIST: Did they like Argentina?

CIANSI: They must have liked it. I was young.

SIGRIST: All right. Well, why don't you tell me, when you went to Italy, how old were you?

CIANSI: We went the year I was about eighteen, two years old.

SIGRIST: Two years old. Where in Italy did you go to?

CIANSI: We went to Abruzzi, the state. The town named Furcy.

SIGRIST: Could you spell that, please?

CIANSI: F-U-R-C-Y. Furcy.

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SIGRIST: And why there?

CIANSI: That's my, the home town of my grandmother, grandfather and my, it's, my relatives came from there.

SIGRIST: Is that the town that you stayed in until you came to America?

CIANSI: Came to America, yeah.

SIGRIST: All right. Well, good. Let's talk about your parents first. What was your Dad's name?

CIANSI: Named Nick, Nicola.

SIGRIST: And what did he do for a living?

CIANSI: He was a shoemaker. He was a shoemaker.

SIGRIST: What did your father look like?

CIANSI: Well, I don't remember him, because he died very young. I was young, and he passed away.

SIGRIST: How old were you when he died?

CIANSI: I must have been about ten.

SIGRIST: What did he die of?

CIANSI: I don't know. He died in Argentina.

SIGRIST: Oh, did he go back to Argentina?

CIANSI: Yeah, he went back. After he took us back to Italy, he went back to Argentina. We never see since.

SIGRIST: Okay. What was your mother's name?

CIANSI: My mother's name was Dominica.

SIGRIST: What was her maiden name?

CIANSI: Her maiden name was Radomile, R-A-D-O-M-I-L-E.

SIGRIST: And was your mother from this town in . . .

CIANSI: Near. She came from Abruzza, same state, but there's different town, nearby.

SIGRIST: What was your mother like? What was her temperament like?

CIANSI: Oh, she was a doll. Big and womanly. She was a very kind woman, small. ( sound of hammering ) That's outside.

SIGRIST: Let me just make a note. The noise that you hear on the tape are people doing work on the building, on Mr. Ciansi's building. Well, let's talk about

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your mother for a little bit. The house that you grew up in, what sorts of things did your mother do?

CIANSI: Well, she was a good woman, a good mother. She was a good family person, yes. She was a good church woman.

SIGRIST: She was very religious.

CIANSI: Yes.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about church when you were a kid?

CIANSI: Well, I remember when I received my First Communion in my town. I remember when I went in my elementary school, and then I went another place for the first year high school, which I recall. And then I came here.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the church that you used to attend?

CIANSI: Yes. I remember the church. I used to sing in the choir. ( he laughs ) Yes.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the church? Do you remember?

CIANSI: Beato Angelo.

SIGRIST: Was this a big church?

CIANSI: Yeah, it's a big church. It's the main church of the town. Beato Angelo.

SIGRIST: Do you have brothers and sisters?

CIANSI: One brother. He passed away.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

CIANSI: He was Anthony Cianciosi.

SIGRIST: And was he older or younger?

CIANSI: Ten years older than me.

SIGRIST: Ten years older.

CIANSI: If I would be living, he would have been ninety-five. I'll be eighty-five in July, he would have been ninety-five.

SIGRIST: Was he born in Argentina, or was he born in Italy?

CIANSI: No, he was born in Italy.

SIGRIST: So they went to Argentina.

CIANSI: They did with him. He was young. He was a young kid.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you remember the house you grew up in?

CIANSI: Yes, I do, very well.

SIGRIST: Can you describe it for me? Walk me through the house.

CIANSI: Well, walking. There was like an arcade. Through a short block, and then you walked through an arcade. That was the entrance to my house. You know, an arcade, like a tunnel. There were doors, the apartment, on both sides. It was our own house.

SIGRIST: How many rooms in the house?

CIANSI: We had one, two, about four.

SIGRIST: So it was a good-sized house.

CIANSI: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was it made out of?

CIANSI: You know, the European stone. It was natural stone.

SIGRIST: So it was basically, as you remember, just the three of you living there. Your brother, your mother and yourself.

CIANSI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Were there any other family members in that town?

CIANSI: I remember my grandmother.

SIGRIST: Oh, what was your grandmother's name?

CIANSI: Daniela.

SIGRIST: And is this your mother's mother?

CIANSI: Huh?

SIGRIST: Is this your mother's mother?

CIANSI: No, it's my father's mother, and my mother's mother was named Rosa Bellone.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your father's mother?

CIANSI: Oh, I don't know. My grandfather I don't remember. He died in Hornell, New York. My grandmother, he died in the state of New York. He died in Hornell, in the first World War, 1915, and I was young.

SIGRIST: So he had come to America.

CIANSI: He came to America to live with his sisters.

SIGRIST: So what do you remember about your grandmother?

CIANSI: I remember very distinctly both grandmothers. I remember when there was a feast I used to go see in our town, to celebrate the saint of the town. And we

had a grandmother that lived with us. It happened to be my father's grandmother.

SIGRIST: Did you have a close relationship?

CIANSI: Yeah, very close. Very close.

SIGRIST: What did she look like?

CIANSI: Kind of a small woman, dowager, family, you know, affection.

SIGRIST: Was she a good cook?

CIANSI: Yes, an excellent cook.

SIGRIST: Was there something that she cooked that was your favorite?

CIANSI: No, not particularly. You know, usually the we eat, it was a long day, they used to eat peasant food, you know, in Italy, in the small country. They used peasant food. Pasta and vegetables, chicken sometimes. Rollatine meat they used to make. There was a variety.

SIGRIST: Did you have a garden?

CIANSI: No, we had no garden. The garden was outskirts of the town. We owned a farm on the outskirts of the town. They used to grow wine in there. He had a vineyard in the town, a farmer with about a few acres.

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SIGRIST: Was there a marketplace in town where you went . . .

CIANSI: No, it's a small town. The town is only three thousand, and all the people live, they got their own farm on the outskirts. They live in there.

SIGRIST: Oh, so they had land out there.

CIANSI: Yes. It's like out west, you got a little house, and they got a little land down here. In a small-town village, they owned two, three, five, six acre of land, ten acre, you know, they raise wheat, corn and fruits, vegetables. That's how they live by.

SIGRIST: Did you have your own plot of land also?

CIANSI: Yes. We had our own, my people.

SIGRIST: So did you used to have to work out in the field?

CIANSI: No, I never work on the field. I used to go to school, and I used to go to see sometimes. We used to hire the people to, like if there's grape time, to make wine, and they used to cultivate corn and grain. They used to hire men, so much a day with the meal.

SIGRIST: What did you do for fun growing up in this town?

CIANSI: Well, there wasn't any fun. You play with the boys in piazza. You play ball, you know, the usual routine that a young kid would do.

SIGRIST: What, where was the church in town?

CIANSI: In the town, what do you call it, about a block away, a block-and-a-half away.

SIGRIST: So you walked.

CIANSI: Walked right there, yes.

SIGRIST: Talk to me, you talked a little bit about school. Was there one building in town that was the school?

CIANSI: No. It was on the, it was part of the building, the school, the place.

SIGRIST: Part of the church building?

CIANSI: No, it wasn't in the Catholic church. The school was in the square, like I call a piazza. And there was a big building, they rented one of those places for school.

SIGRIST: When you think about going to school in Italy what sticks out in your mind? Do you remember something that happened at school once, or any of your teachers . . .

CIANSI: No, not as far as I can recall. I remember the teacher, I remember when I went back to Italy I still saw a few of my old schoolmates which I remember. I recognize them, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit, when did your grandfather go to America, do you know?

CIANSI: My grandfather, he went to New York. My aunt lived in Hornell, New York. It's sixty miles from Buffalo, fifty miles from Rochester town. And I would say, I came in here 1923, he died in 1915. He must have come . . .

SIGRIST: Long before you.

CIANSI: In the 1900s, when I was a baby.

SIGRIST: When you were a little kid, what did you know about America?

CIANSI: I didn't know a thing, not a thing. Just a dream. Just I happened to made my decision. You want to know the mistake, why I happened to be on Ellis Island? I will explain.

SIGRIST: We'll get to that.

CIANSI: I was going to go, what can I say. When I, I heard that the Italian quota was closed, and they told me the Argentine quota was open, and that's how I decided to come to America, because they go by quota. See, at that time, 1923, the Italian quota would be closed but the Argentine quota was open. Being I was born in Argentina. Since Argentine, I took the advantage and came here.

SIGRIST: So you had, did you have an Argentinean passport, or . . .

CIANSI: No. Now I'm going to come to that. I happen to be a nice liar. That stupid agent, he's supposed to know the following the procedure of the travelling.

He went to the Argentine consulate. He fixed all the papers. But he gave me the wrong passport. He gave me the Italian passport. When I got to 57th Street, my boat docked. Everybody got out except me. I saw a priest and I went to him. I says, "How come everybody want?" He says, "Let me see your paper." When he saw it, he says, "What are you doing with this Italian passport? The Italian quota is closed." That stupid agent, he give the right paper, but he give me the wrong passport. He should have went to the Argentine room of the Argentine counsel and released me an Argentine passport. When I would have come I would have come out. So they took me the island. And I went there five days. They had a court jury. I had to prove to . . .

SIGRIST: How did you feel when that happened?

CIANSI: How did I feel? I was kind of disturbed, you know, for a young kid, fifteen years old, you know, to get the island. That's a mistake, that's all.

SIGRIST: Now, were you travelling alone when you came?

CIANSI: No, I had a fellow, a man from my town, guaranteed, older than me, you know, like vouch than me.

SIGRIST: Who was this person?

CIANSI: Oh, it was a friend of the family.

SIGRIST: Did he already live . . .

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CIANSI: He already lived on that. He went to Italy, and he came back again. And he took me with him as guaranteed.

SIGRIST: Where did you leave from? What port did you leave from?

CIANSI: Naples.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the boat?

CIANSI: Columbo.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what line it was?

CIANSI: It was the Italian line. Not the Consulate Line, it was not Lloyd Sabato. It must have been Italian Navigation.

SIGRIST: And what were your accommodations like on the boat?

CIANSI: It was pretty good. Sixteen days.

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep on the boat?

CIANSI: On the second. It's first, second and third. I slept in the second.

SIGRIST: Did you have a cabin?

CIANSI: Yes. I had a regular cabin, a bath. It was a good boat. It was sixteen thousand tons, so it was a small boat, a little over.

SIGRIST: Is that, what, a two-stack, two smokestacks?

CIANSI: Two smokestacks, them days. Yes.

SIGRIST: Did, this gentleman that was travelling with you, did he share your cabin with you?

CIANSI: Yes. He slept on one side, I slept on the other. We had the same cabin. We had our own beds.

SIGRIST: And there was nobody else there?

CIANSI: Nobody else.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little more about the boat. What do you remember about the boat ride? Did anything happen on the boat?

CIANSI: Yes. It happened once, the boat stopped in the middle of the night. Because this boat, for the first time, we ran a on naphthol. You know what naphthol? Oil. Before that the boat ran on coal. Now they changed from coal to oil, and it's on the ground. But still we made it in fourteen, fifteen days.

SIGRIST: Was that, did they tell you what was happening?

CIANSI: No, they didn't say nothing. They just, it's going to be a delay, that's all. I said, "For what?"

SIGRIST: What did you do on the boat? What was there to do?

CIANSI: Oh, plenty activity. There was a guy playing piano, music, singing, you know, there was plenty of activity. Shuffleboard, they had, you know. They had a swimming pool.

SIGRIST: Did you go up on deck?

CIANSI: Yes. I went on deck. I was on second. The third was the last. First class is considered the best.

SIGRIST: Was this the first time you'd ever been on . . .

CIANSI: The first time I traveled in my life, boat.

SIGRIST: Did you get sick?

CIANSI: Yes, once. One day, not much.

SIGRIST: So it wasn't a rough trip.

CIANSI: No, it was not a rough. It was a pretty good, pleasant trip.

SIGRIST: And you said it lasted sixteen days.

CIANSI: About fourteen, fifteen days. I can't exactly recall.

SIGRIST: And you got to the 57th Street pier.

CIANSI: Yes.

SIGRIST: And they shipped you off to Ellis Island.

CIANSI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me what happened at Ellis Island. What was there?

CIANSI: Very impressive. You see, all types of people, from Orient, from Africa, you know, sleep. Different atmosphere. Kind of, what would you say, it was kind of scary, yeah.

SIGRIST: Your sponsor, the gentleman who was with you, did he go to Ellis Island?

CIANSI: No. He got out on 57th Street. He went his way and left me alone.

SIGRIST: Oh, well, how did you feel?

CIANSI: How did I feel? I couldn't do nothing. So after five days my brother met me in Ellis Island. He came with my uncle, there. They had a court case which they relinquished me.

SIGRIST: They had a court case at Ellis Island?

CIANSI: On Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Do you remember that?

CIANSI: Yes, I remember. I was there in court, with a judge. My uncle, my brother. They testified that the passport who made wrong, you know.

SIGRIST: Did they have an interpreter for you?

CIANSI: Yes, they had an interpreter.

SIGRIST: Do you remember eating at Ellis Island at all?

CIANSI: Well, it's like, I would say in prison it was the same thing. You know, you could see it, one of those Ellis Island types. What can they give you? They don't give you mignon. ( he laughs )

SIGRIST: You said it was really unusual to see all these different people.

CIANSI: Different people, you know, it's kind of scary for a youngster.

SIGRIST: Do you, did you see anything that you had never seen before at Ellis Island?

CIANSI: No. I was impressed, outside Ellis Island, to see the water, and to see the panoramic of New York City. The city, you know, to see the skyscraper, you know, which you never see. Yeah, that was very . . .

SIGRIST: So you said your brother came to . . .

CIANSI: Yes.

SIGRIST: But he was already . . .

CIANSI: My brother already lived in New York. I lived with him, I lived.

SIGRIST: I see. When did he come to America? Do you remember?

CIANSI: Oh, he came to America when he was twelve years old. He lived with my grandfather in Hornell, and then we came to New York. He was a tailor and he worked himself up.

SIGRIST: Had you not, so you hadn't seen your brother in a long time.

CIANSI: No, the first time I saw him.

SIGRIST: What did that feel like?

CIANSI: Well, I was kind of surprised.

SIGRIST: Did you know what he looked like?

CIANSI: Yeah, he was about, shorter than me, about five-foot-five man, a very kind man.

SIGRIST: So where did he take you when you left Ellis?

CIANSI: Ellis Island, we went, we lived 321 East 28th Street. We had a three-room apartment.

SIGRIST: Was he married at this point?

CIANSI: No, he wasn't married. He was single.

SIGRIST: All right. Well, tell me a little bit of what it was like getting adjusted to America and New York. What was it like being in the city?

CIANSI: It was kind of very different for a boy to come from a small town and then come to a big city and see all the traffic. You know, it's very different. I got used to it.

SIGRIST: What was something you really didn't like about New York?

CIANSI: No, I used to like. One day I walked Fifth Avenue the first time. To see Broadway, all the lights, the amusement lights, the theaters. I got used to it.

SIGRIST: How did you learn English?

CIANSI: Just by experience. Oh, I learned one thing. You know, to eat you had to go to work them days.

SIGRIST: And what was the first job you got?

CIANSI: The first job I got I was in a clothing factory working for Brokaw Brothers.

SIGRIST: And what were you doing?

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CIANSI: I learned how to baste camps on the coats.

SIGRIST: How to baste?

CIANSI: ( Addresses Mrs. Ciansi, concerning the outside construction ) Please, Nancy, don't start that baloney. Don't cut on me. Everybody does it.

SIGRIST: Were there other immigrants working in that factory?

CIANSI: Oh, sure. Mostly immigrants from Europe. They would . . .

SIGRIST: And did your brother work in that factory also?

CIANSI: No, my brother worked on custom. He was a custom tailor on Fifth Avenue, made to order. He did clothes for all celebrity, he used to work in them days. Paul Whiteman, the band leader, Leo Carillo. They used to have a society, wanted to build, they used to come in. The place where we worked, called Mays, it was a very wonderful, One Fifth Avenue.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about the neighborhood that you lived in.

CIANSI: Twenty-eighth, First Avenue and Second Avenue.

SIGRIST: Immigrant neighborhood?

CIANSI: Immigrant neighborhood, all kinds. Armenian, Greek, Irish. Those kinds, them days.

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SIGRIST: What . . . ( construction in background ) My train of concentration just got thrown off. When you were in New York, did you stay with your brother for a long time?

CIANSI: Yeah. I stayed in New York for a long time, mostly time.

SIGRIST: But with your brother.

CIANSI: And then I decided to go where I went. I went to Connecticut. I was a young twenty, and I became an assistant window trimmer, and I went into the display business through him. I came back to New York, I started to build my own route with the local individual stores.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you went to Connecticut?

CIANSI: I was about twenty, twenty-one.

SIGRIST: So not that much longer after you got to America. So by then did you speak English pretty well?

CIANSI: Well, a little. Not the best. Managed.

SIGRIST: Did, what did you do for entertainment in New York? Did you go to the theater?

CIANSI: Yes. I used to, you see, I love the piano. I used to go to Town Hall, Carnegie Hall. I was a big piano lover. I used to listen, like Paderewski, them days, you don't remember. All the famous pianists then. I liked even

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the jazz pianists, like Frankie Carle, Teddy Wilson, I became, all those, Oscar Peterson.

SIGRIST: Of course, those were the days of great . . .

CIANSI: Carmen Cavallerro, Eddie Duchin. I got all these records.

SIGRIST: Did you come from a musical family?

CIANSI: No, not exactly.

SIGRIST: Did you play yourself?

CIANSI: Yeah, I played by ear, that's all.

SIGRIST: What kind of religious life did you have once you came to America?

CIANSI: I was a Catholic, a Roman Catholic.

SIGRIST: But did you go along with . . .

CIANSI: Yes, I went along, but not to exceed myself like a fanatic. I did respect my religion according to the tradition of my people.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what happened after you went to Connecticut. Just kind of fill me in on . . .

CIANSI: When I went to Connecticut I was working in a clothing store. And display, I

worked with the display man, and then I decided to come back to New York. I went to a company, named the Joseph Hilton Company, in a chain store. That's what I experienced myself for a time. Then I went on my own. I decided to, what they call the word, freelance trimmer. And, thank God, I really built myself a good route.

SIGRIST: While in the course of your professional career, did you ever experience any kind of prejudice because you were from another country?

CIANSI: No. Not at all, not at all, not at all. Because after all, New York in them days, it was all foreigners, if you really want to know. Now it's a different here, but sixty-five years ago you had Armenian, Greek came. You had all type of Russians, Ukrainians. Like First Avenue it was Little Italy. Avenue A, Avenue B it was Russian, Polish. Second Avenue was all Jewish. Them days it was different. Now it's different. Now it is "No habla Yiddish."

SIGRIST: ( he laughs ) Now, did everyone get along? You're talking about all these different groups.

CIANSI: Yeah. They got along.

SIGRIST: Well, let me just ask you one final question. Are you happy that you came to America? Was that the right decision?

CIANSI: Yes, I'm very happy. Because things in Europe in them days were very bad, very bad. Especially after the war, the First World War.

SIGRIST: Do you remember things . . .

CIANSI: May I cut in? You're asking me if I'm happy. After World War I they had immigration from Ukrainian, from Russian, Poland, Italy, France, they immigrated. But you don't see no more immigration. In Europe now they live better, they claim they live better than we do, they are. Because I was in Italy. What a change in Italy. People making money, working, driving a car. You don't see no French or no English come here no more. There's nobody. In them days you come here by the thousands, boats all over. Things were rough in Europe.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the war, World War I, as a kid in Italy?

CIANSI: I remember part of World War. I remember Franz Joseph from Austria. I remember when Verduma, the attack of Verduma. I remember when Hitler went to war against Austria.

SIGRIST: What about you personally in that town at that time. What kinds of things did you suffer because of the war?

CIANSI: Well, we didn't suffer much because we were in the central part of Italy. Mostly they suffered in the northern part of Italy on the border of Austria. That's where the war, they used to fight. I was more near the Adriatic sea. We're not north, we're not south. We were what you call the central part of Italy.

SIGRIST: So you suffered no food shortages?

CIANSI: We managed. There was food shortages, but the people managed.

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SIGRIST: Did your parents or your mother ever come over to America?

CIANSI: No, never.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go to visit her?

CIANSI: Sure. I went about a few, quite a few times.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what year the first visit was?

CIANSI: The first visit was in 1958.

SIGRIST: Oh, so it was a long time.

CIANSI: Yeah, '58. Then I was '62, '64, '66. We were there about three and a half years ago on a tour, me and my wife.

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would have been different if you had stayed?

CIANSI: Huh?

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would have been different had you stayed in Italy?

CIANSI: I don't know. It's a tough, it's a prediction to make. You know, it's like you need a crystal ball to predict your future.

SIGRIST: But you think you were better off here?

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CIANSI: Here at that time. Now a day people live better than we do. You are a laborer, you do better in Italy. They make big money. You take a bricklayer that makes a hundred dollars a day American money. A mechanic, a plumber make eighty, a hundred a day. A hundred thousand lire a day, they're making. They don't come here. They're living, they're making money.

SIGRIST: Well, Mr. Ciansi, I want to thank you for letting . . .

CIANSI: It was a pleasure.

SIGRIST: . . . the house, despite the banging on the window.

CIANSI: My wife gets excited. She thinks she's the only one. There's other people that hear the same noise.

SIGRIST: Well, it frightened me too.

CIANSI: It's got to be done. It's just it might be a nuisance.

SIGRIST: It's all right, because actually we do use these interviews mostly on paper. I'll take this interview and transcribe it, and people generally read them rather than listen to them. Anyway, thank you very much.

CIANSI: It was a pleasure.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service.

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CIANSI: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW