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LOUISE MATARAZZO

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MOTHER: CERAMI, SICILY, 1913

AGE: 13

FATHER: CERAMI, SICILY, 1913

AGE: 17

PARENTS' RESIDENCES:

SICILY: CERAMI

THE US: NEW YORK CITY AND MONTCLAIR, NEW JERSEY

LEVINE: Today is August the 2nd, the year 2006. And I'm here in—is this still Tewksbury?

MATARAZZO: Tewksbury, New Jersey.

LEVINE: Yeah, Tewksbury Township, New Jersey. And I'm here with Louise Locasio Matarazzo, who is a second generation Italian, first generation American.

MATARAZZO: [Laughs]

LEVINE: And she has an interesting story on both sides of her family, her grandfather having come to the United States several times, before bringing her father when her father was seventeen. And her mother's side came from the same Sicilian town. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. But we're going to start, and have Louise tell

more of the specifics about both sides of the family. Okay, why don't you start by saying your grandfather's name on your father's side?

MATARAZZO: Okay, his name was Giuseppe Locasio.

LEVINE: Okay, and he—you mentioned to me he first came in 1898?

MATARAZZO: Right, right. Correct.

LEVINE: Okay. And we were talking about birds of passage, and I guess he would qualify?

MATARAZZO: Yes, he traveled back and forth about four times. And one time he stayed—he came in 1898, 1901, stayed until 1904 or '05, and then he came one other time after that. And then finally in 1913 he brought my father, who was seventeen at the time.

LEVINE: And what was your father's name?

MATARAZZO: Luigi Locasio.

LEVINE: Okay, and then did your father stay?

MATARAZZO: Yes, my father stayed. And there was a time when I was around fourteen, I asked him if he would like to go back to Sicily, and he said yes, that he would. But my mother, who was standing at the sink at the time, turned around and said that she would not, okay? And she had a glass of water in her hand, and she said, "Que bel aqua d'America!", what beautiful water from America. And at fourteen, I said, "Whoa, what's so great about, you know, the water?" Until I went back to the town on Cerami, where both of them were born. And one of the things that my aunt showed me, that she was very proud of, was a fountain where the women washed the clothes, and they had to also get the water.

Now, I walked down with my Teva's, and back with my Teva's. but at the time when my Mom was born—she was born in 1896—1898—I imagine they were still carrying the water on their heads, in the earthen pots. And so I can visualize [laughs] my mother and the women of the town walking up there with it. And I can also remember my mother saying, "Que bel aqua d'America," because all she did was turn on the faucet! So she was not a bird of passage! [Laughs] She didn't want to go back.

But my Dad was very interested in the history of his town, and the history of Italy. At night I would, as a young girl, I would get history lessons. It was during World War Two, so I wanted to know, you know, how Italy was entangled in this mess. And my brother was

going into the service; he was in the Army in England. And so, you know, at dinner time, in the 1940's, even though I was like maybe nine or ten or eleven, and my Dad read the Italian paper, and so he got his information from there. And yeah, we were that well-versed in European history from my Dad.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Why don't you say and spell the name of the town that both your parents came from?

MATARAZZO: Okay, it's Cerami, C-E-R-A-M-I.

LEVINE: Okay, and why don't you say something about your father and the skills he brought with him, and what he did there, and then what he did here?

MATARAZZO: Okay, well the stories I remember, that he told me, was he was very proud of the fact that he had a gun. It was called a fucillo or something; I forget what it's called. But anyway, and the reason why he and his Dad had this gun was because they--outside of the town there was the land of the aristocracy, like the woods. You know, think of Robin Hood on royal lands, whatever. And they had permission, they had permission to hunt those lands, and they had the guns to do it. So he, I got a sense that he was a little—in that town, I found out that there was very structured class society. You know, there was the upper class, the Borghese, kind of. They had little shops, or whatever. In other words, if you handled money, you were pretty well off.

But, and then there was, you know, like my grandfather—well actually, an uncle, my mother's brother. He was a shepherd. So he went, you know, when he tended the sheep, he would go off with, you know, an onion and a piece of bread, he told me, for the day. And you know, I don't know what he—and that's what he would eat. And then he would have to come back or stay there. And sometimes he would make a fire out in—because they would have to pasture the sheep. And Cerami is a town that, like many towns in Italy, it's on a hilltop. And then the pastureland is the plains below.

So another thing that these men would do, sometimes they would leave their home for the week. Like, they would go on a Monday, and they would, you know, go out and pasture, whatever, and then they would come back. Or sometimes a month, or two! Because you couldn't leave the sheep alone, because they had to be herded and watched, you know, and probably they had a dog or something. But it was a very hard life for the shepherds.

But my father didn't have that, because it was a big family. He had a very big family in Cerami, a lot of aunts and uncles. So when his father, my grandfather, would come here, you know, he was taken care of. And he was kind of pampered, because he was the only son.

So he was sent to school; he learned how to read and write. He knew all the Greek history, and he passed that on to us, you know, as a young girl in the States. And that's what always piqued my interest. It was more exciting to me to hear the stories about Cerami, and Italy, than, you know, to know that George Washington had false teeth, you know, wooden false teeth! [Laughs] Do you know what I mean? You know, like America history--yeah.

LEVINE: It had more [unclear].

MATARAZZO: Right, it did! It had more, you know, it was a—I don't know; it just seemed more exciting to me.

LEVINE: Well now, where did your father fall, or your grandfather and your father, fall in the kind of hierarchy of--?

MATARAZZO: Yeah, I would say they were like the artisans, because after my father ran away from the monastery, because they made him kneel on these little ceci beans for punishment—and I'm sure he was very spoiled! [Laughs] And so, you know, I don't think anyone punished him at home! He would go to an uncle's woodworking shop. And he learned how to make very fine cabinets. And his father, my grandfather, was a barrel maker, and he made the barrels for the wine. So you know, if you had a trade like that, you were a little bit up on the scale, you know. Not like, my other grandfather, who, you know, he had these sheep, and that was it! You know, and they weren't his sheep!

LEVINE: So was the shepherd comparable to people who were working the land?

MATARAZZO: Yeah, I would say they were the peasants, or the lower classes. And they were looked down upon, even in the town. You know, there was that, because there's a little shadiness about my grandmother, her—my grandfather never married her. So there was this—I'm sure she was ostracized in the town. And then I had, also, another aunt, my father's sister, became pregnant out of wedlock. And she was banned from the town! She went to the next town to live with her husband. And when—I guess that was like in 1920, something like that. And when I went there to visit, she came to Cerami from Garbesi, because it was a big deal to have Americans come. And that was about the second or third time she had been out of that town.

LEVINE: You mean she became pregnant, and she married the person--?

MATARAZZO: Right.

LEVINE: --but she had to go?

MATARAZZO: Oh, yeah!

LEVINE: And how, what would they do? Like, not talk with her?

MATARAZZO: Yeah, not talk with her, and you weren't invited to—also, she couldn't go—the church was very, let's see, a guiding influence in all their lives. And I have read where—and I knew, my Dad told me some stories—of when the men came to the States—young men. We're talking about like a twenty-three year old man, who had, like, left two children, okay? And he went to work on the railroads, or whatever it was. He had no skills, not like my Dad, but had no skills, but a contemporary of my Dad. And he—in fact, this one young man was sent to Buffalo, New York, to work on the railroads. And when he got there, my father told me, it was the company store. They had, like, say you got five dollars a week. Well, by the time—when you went for your check, they took a dollar out for the laundry, you know. They took for your food. And then you were left with nothing.

Now this young man in particular could not read or write, okay, so he would have to have somebody write a letter for him. And they charged for that. Maybe they charged fifty cents a letter, whatever, but they're not making that much anyway. And so he never wrote to his wife and two children back in Sicily. Now, when my father's town—my father and grandfather—well, my father's town, they seemed to congregate, everyone stayed together. If you were from the same town, you lived on the same street in New York. They lived on Cornelia Street, okay. And so there was a conclave of Italians, the Sicilians. And so they got word from Sicily that this young man was missing. And since she was from the same town as my Dad, you know, they were all concerned that he hadn't written to her. I forget his name; I wish I knew his name. The last name was Priolo.

And so my Dad found out where he was through whatever connections he had, and he sent to someone to send him money to come back to New York. And then, I don't know if he found a job for him—you know how they all helped one another—he found a job for him, and then he was able to have his wife come over, with the two children, and they were reunited.

LEVINE: Hm. Well you know, I think you have so much information. I want to just—I just want to mention that you've been back twenty-four times.

MATARAZZO: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

LEVINE: Why don't you start out by saying your activities in and around finding out more about the history of the people like your parents?

MATARAZZO: Okay, the research part?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MATARAZZO: Yeah, the research part was pretty interesting, because I had started it many years ago, but with, you know, child raising and everything—so now, I have time. And I looked at my—I had gotten the manifest, the ship's manifest, for my Mom and my Dad, like in the seventies, from Washington, which was a really big deal.

LEVINE: Wow, good for you!

MATARAZZO: Yeah, it was really—I mean, you had to go, I don't know, Varick Street—I don't know; my sister and I did it. Anyway, we got them in the mail. And one day I was looking at my Mom's, and it said Guitana Scalaci; that was her name. and she was fifteen years old when she came in 1913--same year as my Dad, but they didn't know each other. And Carmella Campion was her mother. So it said Carmella Campion, mother, Guitana Scalaci, daughter. And I saw the dichotomy of the two names were different. So I kept asking around, thinking that it was like the Spaniards. You know how the Spaniards keep the mother's name? You know, they take—in Spain, I know they do that. So I figured that that was it.

But in 1985 I went back to Cerami with my sister, and I asked—I have an aunt there, and an uncle; he died now. And I said, "Do they do that?" And she said that she didn't really know. I said, "Well you know, I'd like the birth records of my Mom and Dad." And I had a researcher from here, from the States, go to town, and I also did. So it was like double—I wanted to make sure that there were, like, no mistakes. And I sat with the priest in the mother church, the main church, and went through this wonderful book of all the marriages and births. And he could not find a marriage certificate for my grandmother. So there was no marriage to this Scalaci. So I got my Mom's birth certificate, and this is what it says—not exactly, but it says that Sebastiano Scalaci, my grandfather, announces the birth of a baby daughter, Guitana Scalaci, from a woman whom he is not married to, nor is he related to.

LEVINE: Hm!

MATARAZZO: So then I got it. But still, this grandmother, Carmella Campion, I knew, because I was seven years old when she died. I mean, my mother came to the states with this Carmella Campion, her mother. We called her La Nana, the grandmother. So I said, you know, "What is it with these names?" So then I found out! He had this child, with

somebody or my grandmother, didn't want to give her the credit, his name, or whatever.

LEVINE: What's so surprising, it seems, that why he announced it instead of the mother.

MATARAZZO: Yeah, well it isn't that he announced it. I said it that way. On the birth certificate, it says that on the day of January 1st, 1898, was born to, I would have to read it exactly. You know, because it doesn't—it comes right out and says that I don't know who the mother is. I don't know who my grandmother is. But this mother that raised her. So I would have to go back, if you have a minute, to find out. So then, I said, "Well, let me find out about these Scalaci's," okay, who they are. So I found out that Sebastiano Scalaci, my grandfather, was married before. And I have his marriage date, and who he was married to: a woman named Agatha. He had four children with her: Domenico, Philipo, whatever, Guitano. And then the last one was Angelo. And in the records, which are very well kept in Italy, when this Angelo was born, like I think in 1889—I don't know; I can't remember right now—Agatha died in childbirth, okay? So here, this man, Sebastiano Scalaci, is left with four kids. Like, one is, you know, six, four, two, and the baby.

So in those little towns, of course, they get a woman who is single or whatever to take care of them. Sometimes for the baby they'll get a wet nurse, whatever. Anyway, the way I figured it out was that he asked my grandmother—you know, she was a young woman. I think she was about twenty-seven, unmarried, you know, which was pretty unusual. So she was kind of like a spinster. And her Mom and Dad, I found out, had died, so she was like alone with her sister. So she was like the perfect candidate. So she goes to live on Via Zafarano, which I found out, to take care of these kids.

Now three years later, my uncle Antonio was born, Antonino was born. And I have his birth certificate, and it does say on his birth certificate that Sebastiano Scalaci is the father, and the mother is Carmella Campion. So he claims Nino, this Antonio as his son. Doesn't marry Carmella, but it clearly states on his birth certificate that's who his mother is. Then about three or four years after that, my Uncle Mike is born, Michaele Scalaci. I get his birth certificate. That's just like my mother's—no, you know, he records the birth of Michaele. He's the father, but the mother is unknown. In Italian it says Sconosciuto Ignoto [PH], unknown; the mother is unknown. And then on my mother's, it says that, on her birth certificate, that he's not related. He put it in those words, or the Town Clerk did, you know.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

MATARAZZO: And they have witnesses. I have a copy of it, and [unclear]. So, you know—

LEVINE: So that was your quest?

MATARAZZO: Yeah, actually that's what really got me going.

LEVINE: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

MATARAZZO: Because I needed—I wanted to know who I was. And I think a lot of immigrant stories are that way. Because we seem—someone told me once that I had been robbed of my identity. And I think so many—if you have a sensibility for that kind of thing, you feel--not ripped--but you feel, like, torn. Like, when I was growing up, I lived in this little conclave of Italian Americans, and Irish, Jewish. My Dad always worked for Jewish employers. There was a—we had a wonderful community. There was always parties, and you know, we just—there was a feeling of connectedness.

LEVINE: Is this Cornelius Street?

MATARAZZO: No, this was in Montclair, where I was born. But on Cornelia Street, they had their own. My Dad would tell me, you know, at night--they took their village, and put it on the streets in New York. At night, you know, in Italy, still, you know, you have late dinners. They were having their late dinners, which is, you know, very posh now, you have an eight o'clock dinner. Well, they've been doing it for centuries, you know, because it's a great time to get together, and talk. No TV, no radio. All they had was each other, a mandolin, and good food! And that's the nostalgia that I want, you know.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

MATARAZZO: I'm sure there was banditry [laughs] and there was all kinds of stuff! But there was community.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MATARAZZO: And so that's the yearning.

LEVINE: I see.

MATARAZZO: You know, but not everybody has those sensibilities. But they're very, very strong with me. So going to Italy twenty-four times, besides the fact that I'm an artist, I'm doing some writing. But the art is just a vehicle to get, to be there—an excuse to go! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Do you paint or write when you're there?

MATARAZZO: I'll paint there. Yeah, both, yeah.

LEVINE: You do both, uh-huh.

MATARAZZO: Yeah, so.

LEVINE: Well, can you say anything else? It's so fascinating about, like, these women who gave birth to children and were not married—how they were treated? Apparently the births were recorded by the church.

MATARAZZO: Yes.

LEVINE: But they weren't given--?

MATARAZZO: Well, there's another thing really interesting, especially about Sicilians, you know, omerta, where you don't talk about your misfortunes. You don't. you don't talk about your misfortunes, and you don't complain. And also, secrets. I mean, in any nationality I know there's secrets. But these are not secrets, oh, we don't talk about them. They're so buried, you don't even know they're there! So, you know, would I ever ask a question, you know, about my--? You know, you just wouldn't ask those things.

But I'm finding out—I wrote a little story about my grandmother, and I sent it to some first generation Italians. I think, yeah, I sent one. And she said that was very common in those villages. Now, my great-grandmother, on my grandmother's side, if she indeed is my grandmother, was married when she was thirteen! Now that, I think, was to secure the families. You know, not that they had much money, but they must have had property, or something, where they wanted to join these two families. Which I never thought of, because every story that I heard about Italian American immigrants was that they were these poor people, with those bags over their shoulders. Poor things! And you know, totally unaware of where they were, on the ship. And I was getting those stories from my Dad.

You know, my Mom did say the trip was horrible. But you know, she wasn't my Dad, who had his father here four times, back and forth, who prepared the way! When he came here, he had a skilled job. And in four years he was married. Let's see. He came in 1913. In 1921, three—what's that, eight years? He had built two homes in Montclair, my Dad. So the foundation, and you know, it was a modern—it wasn't a cold-water flat. It wasn't the immigrant experience. Even in New York, on Cornelia Street, at night, they would—my sister Mary, who's eighty-five, and she said, "Oh, yeah,

Mom and Papa, they would go dancing on the roofs.” You know, the flat roofs? Yeah, because they would go to work, they would come home, and they would go dancing.

LEVINE: So your sister was on Cornelia Street? She was born there?

MATARAZZO: She was, right after. Right after, yeah. When they came to Montclair. My Mom and Dad were born in 1919, on Cornelia Street, which I think is pretty interesting, because I’ve been there. And they got married in 1919. And the church is like two blocks down on Bleeker Street. So I’m imagining. My Dad didn’t have a car then, so they must have walked. How beautiful! These brides, walking! And you should see my Mom and Dad’s wedding picture. I think her hair is even bobbed! You know, in the twenties? I mean, she just wanted to be so American and modern, you know. And my Dad is white gloves, you know. It’s just a gorgeous picture, and I keep it around to remind me of, you know, that they really had a good life!

LEVINE: Your mother wanted to be American. Did your father want to keep the old world--?

MATARAZZO: No, but he had more of a nostalgia. He had a little bit more nostalgia. No, no, he didn’t keep the old world. No, he was very modern. Because they were in New York, and I think my Mom had a lot of freedom, because her Dad—and remember, she’s in Cerami with this, you know, mother who—and all these kids, all these older stepbrothers, whatever! [Laughs] And her father’s going to Argentina. So I think she was kind of let loose on the street, you know. And I’ve talked to her friends, you know, growing up, and she had just a wonderful time. So there was this liberal—it isn’t the old stories that I—no, it’s not!

LEVINE: I was just going to say, you don’t hear that about Italian young women.

MATARAZZO: No, no!

LEVINE: [Unclear] to be freer.

MATARAZZO: And I think it’s because she wasn’t restricted with a father home. And my grandmother worked in a grocery store. I mean, the town looked down on her, but the woman had to make a living, you know? [Laughs] And she collected herbs in the countryside, and probably sold them, or you know, did some kind of medical--I mean, she was like on the edges of society. But for my Mom it was great, because she was free!

LEVINE: She didn't have to conform.

MATARAZZO: No, she wasn't home crocheting. My mother didn't know how to crochet when she came here, because she had these brothers that pampered her. And she didn't know how to do anything. She didn't know how to tie her shoes until she was like ten years old.

LEVINE: So your mother's the one who said the wonderful water? [Laughs]

MATARAZZO: Right, yeah! [Laughs] But her brothers came here with her; the two brothers came here with her, yeah. Yeah, she didn't want to go back, because I guess they were ostracized. And when I went back one more time, I interviewed an aunt of mine, a great-aunt, my Dad's aunt. Okay, so now that's a different family. That's the Locasio's, and then you have the Scalaci's, my Mom's. And I asked this Locasio woman if she knew my mother, and she said no, she did not know her. Now, this town is small! [Laughs] I mean, you're bumping into everybody! And so I said, "But you know, Scalaci?" I said, "She lived right here." I said, "Didn't my father--?" "Well," she said, "We did get a picture of your Mom." And it was my Mom's engagement picture, which I have. "And so that's how I know her, you know, from that." And then I found out from a cousin that the Locasio's were very upset when my Dad sent news that he was going to marry my Mom, because it was like she was, you know, lower class, or had a past, or whatever. But yeah, you could be three blocks away, and it's like those people, you know, those foreign--! [Laughs] They really had a structured social—

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

MATARAZZO: You know, but I'm putting, you know, going back has helped me see how they lived. I went back in March, and I thought it would be, like, springtime. It was cold and damp, so, and my aunt, this great-aunt that didn't know my mother [laughs]—she's wonderful! We sat there with a gas—they're called bombolas—like a gas heater? She has a lovely home within the structure of an old medieval town. You know, inside it's all modern; outside it, you know, they keep the same structure. And we sat around, and that was the only heat that they had. This is in 2005. And then—or, 2003. And then at my aunt's, where we went to sleep, we had another one in the bedroom. It was freezing. It was so cold, because the damp and the wind, in March. I

went to bed fully clothed, with like four blankets on! [Laughs] And I was still cold. So can you imagine? It gave me a sense of: how did they stay warm? Years ago, they just had a brazier. I was told that they had a dish that they put coals in, which my Dad also did that. They made charcoal in those woods, where they would lease the land. They cut down the trees, and then they'd build a pit, and then you'd make charcoal. You'd put the wood in there, and slowly, slowly it has to cook, and then you come out with this charcoal they used in these braziers.

LEVINE: Mm-hm!

MATARAZZO: And that's not too long ago!

LEVINE: No! Are there other things that you got a sense of? I mean, you mentioned like the problem with carrying water on their heads.

MATARAZZO: Yeah, the water on their heads.

LEVINE: And just no heat to speak of. The classification of where people fit in, socially.

MATARAZZO: Mm-hm.

LEVINE: So you really did get a sense of some of the elements that the immigrants kind of talk about, but they don't go into it to that detail, because I guess it was just expected, you know?

MATARAZZO: Yeah, well I think that's why I went back, because yeah, exactly, you're right. That was the way it is, you know?

LEVINE: Right.

MATARAZZO: If somebody came from Mars, and said, "Wow, look at that [unclear] going around!" or something, we would take it for granted, but to them it would be maybe a revelation.

LEVINE: Yeah. So I take it your mother was very happy in this country?

MATARAZZO: Yes, yes. And she was also very active in—she did have to go to work during the Depression, because my Dad was in business; he lost everything. So he even lost the house that he had built.

LEVINE: In Montclair?

MATARAZZO: In Montclair. And then he had to buy it back from the bank. So she had to go to work, and she worked in the garment district. Now like I said, she didn't know how to sew, and she came from a town where all the women were fine seamstresses. So she, but she knew everybody from the town, and they took her to work in New York. The Lackawanna Station there went right into New York. And she did learn. Now when my niece at the time needed a job, she was fourteen, and it was during the Depression. And they were working, and my Mom was working in a—they were making dresses. Maybe a paisan owned the factory, and hired these women, where they would travel to New York every day, and come back. It was seasonal, though. It wasn't like they did it all year.

So anyway, my cousin Carmella, who's still alive, and told me this story, that she was fourteen, and they needed the money. They were very poor; they had no resources. When they took their house, they had to go live in an apartment, and they had to move. And she said they could only have a little bit of milk in coffee at night, you know. My father had more resources, so it was a different story. But anyway, this young woman had to go to work. So my Mom, either she was active in the union, but she knew the union delegate for the Garment Workers of America, or whatever—I.W.W., I think it was. And she invited this gentleman for dinner at our house. She became like the Pearl Mesta of the neighborhood, because she was just a social, very social person. And of course, my Dad had the means to do it, also. And she invited—my cousin Carmella remembers his name: Morgan, or somebody. And my mother spoke to him, and they falsified her papers, and they said she was sixteen. And then she was able to go to work, and help the family.

Now I found out another story from immigrants, that if you paid somebody—say you were fourteen, or underage, and you couldn't work. Then if you paid, then they would change the papers. But my Mom didn't do that. She gave him a nice dinner! [Laughs] And then so my cousin Carmella got—I have a sister named Carmella, too—but my cousin Carmella did get the job. And she's a person that I'm interviewing this month, when I can see her again, because she has—you know, she has great stories.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MATARAZZO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, do you know anything about the social clubs, or organizations that they were a part of?

MATARAZZO: Yeah, yeah. My Mom and Dad, when I was little, I was dressed up—I remember, when I was seven years old—into a gown. And we went to

New York. And it must have been a fundraiser for like, I guess, immigrants, or whatever. It was a big, big fundraiser with a band and everything. I do remember that. And also, within Montclair, there was the Triangle Club, which was a political club, and then there was the Saint Sebastian Society, which was the festival, to keep up the—which my Dad was very active in. So there were those two clubs there. And then there was the church club, like is that the Knights of Columbus, or something? We weren't—something like that, where they kept up, you know, traditions of, you know, the old country.

But mostly the people themselves kept up those traditions. Like my sister Mary remembers, say in 1927, or 1930's they had what they called a serenade, where young men with come with guitars, the mandolins, and would serenade the young women. And that's when my sister told my father, "Don't tell them to come. I'll pick my own husband." Because, you know, she was more modern! But that was the romantic, you know, kind of thing. And my brother, who's eighty-two now, eighty-something, we had a serenade almost every week on a Saturday night. And they would wake you up. Like you would be in bed, maybe nine-thirty, ten o'clock, and they would, you know. And then you would have to invite them in, and my Mom would have to make coffee, or some kind of dessert, or a little anisette or vermouth. And then they would sing and dance.

LEVINE: This was in Montclair?

MATARAZZO: Montclair, yeah. Yeah, so they kept that up. And I remember, of course, the feasts, and just people and food and cooking, and Sundays, and all the other—just a lot of food, and a lot of people! [Laughs] You know, that, they brought the communities to the States. And they stayed very close.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MATARAZZO: And they were—I was thinking of another social club.

LEVINE: Did they do things like help families in need?

MATARAZZO: That's—yes, definitely. I know that they would send packages to Italy for the people. They always have a funny twist to things. My Mom would, you know, especially during the war, World War Two, and even before, you know, because they were making money, they would send money. They would send hard cash, and goods, too--you know, like material and things. And one time my mother sent something, and somebody sent a letter back that they didn't like the color [laughs] or the fabric! And my mother said from that day on if they were going to be selective, she wasn't going to, you know, send them any more

stuff! But it brings back the memories of, you know, the packages, the brown packages, with the ties, you know, the twine. And I remember bringing them to the Post Office, for my Mom, you know.

Another thing I remember about my Mom. She did not become a citizen, so she had this book, and every January you had to go to the Post Office. It was an immigration—they had to keep an eye on these people! [Laughs] These foreigners! Yeah, and she had to go and have it stamped, or something. And we did that until one year I said, “Mom, we didn’t go and do this.” It must have been in the fifties. She says, “If they’re going to send me back now, you know, forget about it!” [Laughs] You know, because she was so afraid she wasn’t a citizen. And my Dad was like, you know, you should be a citizen.

LEVINE: He became one?

MATARAZZO: Oh, yeah, right away. He got his letter. I have his letter of intention, and I have his citizenship papers. Yeah, because he was in business, you know. He had to everything proper with all his papers, and stuff.

LEVINE: So his business was making furniture?

MATARAZZO: The pianos—yeah, furniture. And then when he came to Montclair, I guess he had enough money, they bought property in Bloomfield, and they built houses, for speculation. And Glenridge, they built these big mansions. See, because he had, he was very skillful. Like, you know, in these homes they have these beautiful staircases? In fact, he took me to one once, just to show me the staircase. And also, in the showrooms in New York, when my Dad was young, you know, there weren’t ready-made clothes. So what the women, the wealthy women would do is they would go, after the designers had been to Paris or Italy, they would come back with the patterns. And then they would adjust them, whatever, have drawings, and make a garment. And then the women would come in and see what they liked, and then they would have it made in the color they wanted, whatever.

So these showrooms were gorgeous. And my Dad did a lot of the paneling, like oak paneling, cherry paneling, the floors, you know. It was like a salon, you know. So that’s the kind of work he did. And the workers then, as in Italy, you wore these blue—in fact, I have a painting—garment—like the shirt you have on. You know, they’d wear these jackets, and that was an honor, because you were an artisan. You know, you wore that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MATARAZZO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, can you think of any values or attitudes that you think you got from your father, that he tried to pass on to you?

MATARAZZO: Yeah, a sense of history, which I still carry with me. Because I think it's very important to know where you came from, and why your ideas are that, are the way they are—how you perceive the world. And you know, I'll watch documentaries about the Jewish Diaspora, like after the war. And it always hits me that after the war, nobody wanted the Jews. I mean, I should have got that. Like, you know, they were in Poland, you know; they were walking. They were walking around because nobody wanted them! And I think of the Italian and Sicilian people who were governed by the French, the Spanish, the Arabs, the Carthaginians, the Greeks. They had all these people who had ruled them and formed them.

And America, to them, was the place where yeah, you had to work hard, but at the end of the week, that dollar was yours. You didn't have to share it with anybody but your family. Even if it was only a dollar. Whereas in the old country—and I'm sure it was the Germans, and that's why everybody came here, is because even though you're on the lowest rung, there was a sense of freedom. Also, of social taboos. You know, I think my mother, also, because I'm sure socially she was apart from that village.

And so here in the States, I guess everybody was escaping something. You know, there's that sense that you can start a new life. So, she wasn't the only one, you know, and she also was very charming, and whatever. So, I mean, she wasn't sitting home behind closed windows, knitting. No, this woman was out there! [Laughs] And, but she, this was the place that she could do it. She couldn't do it in her town. She couldn't! There was no place for her. And when I think of that, you know, that's why I love America, and the freedoms we have.

So it isn't like I want to go and live in Italy, but I love those old values, you know. And I love the sense of community. And here we're a little dispersed, and there's a lot going on, you know. But my father always said, you work hard, stay within the parameters of goodness, and ethical—you know, we were taught all those ethical things, you know: do good, you get good. I was really, I'm really proud of my family, and those values that they gave us, because they weren't embittered people.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

MATARAZZO: And anything I read about the old, like Gauthier and Bromage, and all the English writers who went to Sicily and southern Italy, and even Henry James—he wrote that here he is in Genoa, and there's this wonderful guy, Italian, with his hat cocked, and you know, walking

along. Oh, the merry little Italian peasant, you know, with no worries. Well when he talks to him, the man's a communist, and he's against the government. Don't get him angry, because you know, there's that dichotomy of this wonderful life! Yes, eat, drink, and be merry. But underneath, there's more; there's so much more. And I think that's the part that I am attracted to.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

MATARAZZO: Is that intellectual, compassionate, understanding—and I'm learning that—I wish somebody would do a study about Italians—is that in our family, every one of the young people is in a social—like a teacher. In a—I'm trying to think of the word. In a giving occupation.

LEVINE: Everyone in your family is socially involved—

MATARAZZO: Yes, right, right, right.

LEVINE: Huh! Mm-hm.

MATARAZZO: In one family, one niece's family, everyone's a teacher: the father, the mother, the three daughters, the son! [Laughs] I mean, everyone! They're music teachers. I mean, that whole family!

LEVINE: Yeah.

MATARAZZO: What do you call it when it's—when you're--? Community minded, I guess. Yeah, they're all, everyone, is giving in that way, or works for the government in some way. Now, my husband's side, the Matarazzo's, they're entrepreneurs. They're business people. They're the true American, out to make money! [Laughs] And increase the wealth of the family, and whatever. So that's a different thing, and a different—but from my perspective, in this little town where my parents came from, everyone—there are doctors, lawyers, from this town. Something interesting about Ellis Island—if you could check this out: every entry on the—

LEVINE: Manifest?

MATARAZZO: --on the manifest of the people from this town, it says, you know, where you're going to. So there are only like two addresses. One is 50 Glenridge Avenue, Montclair. I mean, everybody's going to fifty! So, and I found out that there was a ship's agent. I think his name was Landolfo. So evidently they must have gone to the towns, because they needed workers, okay, to these towns. Maybe one person came, and said, "There's opportunity here." And they would

conscript the people that wanted to come to the States. And they would write, you know, their names down, where they were going, and everything. And they needed a destination. And this, 50 Glenridge Avenue, was this man's destination. Because these people didn't have, many of them, a place to come. I mean, the very first ones, right? They didn't have any. So it's like, "Boy," I said, "Everybody's going to 50 Glenridge Avenue!" And then until later—and I know that my Mom didn't go to 50 Glenridge Avenue. But they must have had to secure an address that was known. And they probably had to pay this agent some money. And what they did was they, many times, the agents would loan them the money, and then when they got here and got the job, they would pay him back. But it seemed like my grandfather was here so early, 1898, and he was the only one on the ship's manifest from this town, Cerami.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh, so he was one of the first?

MATARAZZO: So that's pretty adventurous.

LEVINE: Yeah, very adventurous.

MATARAZZO: And so, you know, maybe he—and not, there weren't a lot of people in the beginning. But then there seemed to be many, many people from Cerami, so much so that in Montclair, from Cornelia Street, they all lived in the same area in Montclair. And so their social clubs were all from the town. In fact today, in Montclair, there's still the Saint Sebastian Society, because that was their patron saint. And you have to be from the town to be in that group, or that club. But now it's dispersed, you know, everyone's moved, so now they've taken some other people. But that's how clannish they were. That's just an example of how clannish.

LEVINE: Well, it's interesting. I guess it was an upwardly mobile move, to go from Cornelia Street to Montclair?

MATARAZZO: Montclair, yeah. Well, the opportunities were better there. And also it was country. It was, you know, there was hills. Now, in late 1800's, George Innis was still here. I'm talking farms. They moved to farm land. Even when I was a kid, we used to go to the farm for our eggs and our milk. We used to buy it in bottles, you know, in cases, because that's what my father wanted. He wanted to have us have a, get out of the city. And Montclair was advertising—Montclair was a bedroom community of New York. Like the Astor's, the people—not necessarily the Rockefellers. I'm trying to think of—the Forsman, Forsman Wool. They wanted to get their families out of the city.

So of course, a lot of them went to Vermont or Connecticut, but these people wanted to commute back and forth. So the very wealthy railroad barons built the railroads, and they built them right to Montclair, New Jersey. And that's where the first Lackawanna Station was. And now, they wanted to build these mansions. Montclair is built like this: there's lower Montclair, and then there's upper Montclair, okay? So they built mansions all along Upper Mountain Avenue. Now they needed service people to service these people, so in Virginia—I wish I had it—they would put up signs: Come to Montclair, because they wanted the black servants. There are jobs in Montclair. And of course, there were trains that came right there. And I'm sure agents met these people, and then they were, you know, sent to work on these estates.

LEVINE: And by the same token, I guess the Italian community there were artisans, and they were doing work also for these very wealthy?

MATARAZZO: That's right, right. My husband's grandfather was a gardener, and he would walk from the lower part of Montclair, which was a great house for him, but go to these—I mean, these are gigantic mansions—and work there. Yeah, that's when, you know, they didn't have crews. And they had these wonderful gardens, like the Van Vleck Estate. Because I grew up on Montclair, so I know all these places. And yeah, they serviced the community.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

MATARAZZO: So that's—and I think that's what happened with Cerami, this little town, that they came to Montclair. It seemed like the whole town! So they had to have like one person. I don't know, do you find that with any other ethnic groups?

LEVINE: Yes, yeah, they often went to the same place. In fact, talking with Sonya, they went from a silk manufacturing town in Poland to Paterson.

MATARAZZO: I read about that.

LEVINE: Well, we're getting near the end of the tape, but how do you feel? I mean, you're very insightful in some of the things that you've been talking about.

MATARAZZO: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

LEVINE: Because I hear these things, but as we said earlier, you know, people took them for granted, and they didn't, like—

MATARAZZO: Make the connection!

LEVINE: --say anything! Right, make the connection.

MATARAZZO: Yeah, make the connections, right.

LEVINE: Which you've made, and it's wonderful. But I'm wondering, just personally, for you, in your quest to understand more, and learn more, and make more connections. Do you feel you've made a lot of progress? Has it affected you personally by doing this?

MATARAZZO: Yes, that's a good question. I—it has affected my whole life, because what I do now is, at my age there's a certain amount of reflection. Before, when you're young, and you're raising your own, like, children, whatever, there seems to be a going and a doing and a getting, and a moving, and you know. And now it's looking back, and what do I want to hand my children? Which I never thought of before, you know.

LEVINE: Your feeling as though what you've learned here you're going to pass it along to your---?

MATARAZZO: Definitely.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MATARAZZO: And the school systems, anyway, in New Jersey, they are having all the young people, by the eighth grade, you go back to your—I'm sure you see it at Ellis Island, all the school trips.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MATARAZZO: Each child has to go back and—

LEVINE: Oh, in your own family?

MATARAZZO: Yeah, like I just had my grandson Milan here. And he wanted to know, you know, "Grandma, who's this, and who's that?" So that keeps it up. And I also take my grandchildren. When they turn twelve, I take them to Italy, so that they see. Because the world is smaller now, and I'm not crazy about this global society! [Laughs] But, and we're losing; we're all going to lose. We're all going to start looking like each other. And that's another reason why I go to Italy, is because you cannot, architecturally you cannot change the outside of the building. So when you walk into Rome, that's why you see the ruins, and you see eighteenth century, seventeenth century. When I

went to Cerami, the houses are exactly, the cobblestones are there, and there's such a nostalgia about it. But inside, you know, they have modern electric and marble, and blah, blah, blah, whatever. In Rome there's these gorgeous apartments, and there's just this little door in this kind of building! [Laughs] But they're keeping, yeah, you can't touch anything.

In the United States—which is wonderful; it's a different way. You knock down; you put up new. But it has, you know, taken away a lot of the charm. So that's another reason why I take the kids back, so they can see how life went on, you know. And who knows? We might not have electricity and gas and everything in ten years. And maybe they can see how they lived there, right? [Laughs]

LEVINE: Okay, well want to thank you—

MATARAZZO: Well, thank you!

LEVINE: --for a lot of good connections, which, you know, will feed into the other interviews in this collection.

MATARAZZO: Good, good.

LEVINE: So we really appreciate it.

MATARAZZO: Yeah, that's fine!

LEVINE: Okay, so I'm speaking with Louise Matarazzo, and this is Janet Levine. It's August the 2nd, 2006, and I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW