

EI-1461

MARY SALA

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INTERVIEWER: GEORGE TSELOS

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ITALY, 1907

AGE AT DEPARTURE

SHIP:

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

ITALY:

US: BROOKLYN, NY

US: WASHINGTON, D.C.

SALA: Get nervous (laughs).

TSELOS: This is George Tselos for the National Park Service on Ellis Island on Saturday July 28, 2007, in the afternoon. We're here with Mary Sala, who came through Ellis Island in 1907 as a very young child and we're going to speak to her today about her growing up in the United States as an Italian American and what she recalls – not only about her life but what her parents and older family members had to say about why the family came here. So, perhaps we could start off, Mary, with -- if you would explain to us what your parents said as you and your brothers were growing up, about why they

came to this country, what life was like in Italy, and why they decided to come here.

SALA: Well they -- they knew that this was a better country. And, of course in those days it's said it was paved with gold, you know. So, and they knew they'd get a better living here. They had -- had three children, I think at the time. And um, so uh, they just came over. My father came first and got himself a job and a place to live. And then my mother f-- and then he sent for my mother and she came over with the three children.

TSELOS: Where was he living?

SALA: I don't know where he was living at the time. Some place in Brooklyn, New York. I know it was Prospect Street or Navy Street, or one of those places in the Eastern River Y—East Rivers. And um, with friends, you know, they knew, but that's all I -- I remember.

TSELOS: Where did you grow up? Where was your family living when you were growing up?

SALA: I grew up in Brooklyn, New York in, well we were -- the most address that I remember was on Navy Street, right across from the navy yard. But before that we were living in other, little, smaller places. You know there were tenement houses in those days. And -- and there were seven in our family, so at that time it wasn't seven because a few others came after we were here. You know, there were about five of us, I guess, at the time. So, my father -- he worked and my mother took care of the family. And, that's where we lived most of the time, until I grew up and got old enough to out -- to get a job and work, you know, after school.

TSELOS: Before we get to the subject of your job, tell me about your growing up in Brooklyn. Did your family speak Italian at home?

SALA: We spoke Italian all the time. Then they'd try to pick it up, you know, a little at a time. And we'd speak to them in English (laughs) get an answer back, you know, halfway. But they understood us.

TSELOS: Did you keep up with -- did you have family in Italy that you kept up with? Cousins, uncles—

SALA: [interposed] Well my family did, but some of them, they still lived there, you know. But I didn't know any of them because I was too much of the baby. (laughing)

TSELOS: What do you recall about your school experience? Did you go to a public school or a parochial, Catholic school?

SALA: [superposed] I went to public school. Public school number seven -- and five, I think it was. Here, in Brooklyn, New York.

TSELOS: Were there a lot of other kids from Italian families in the school? A mixture of people of different immigrant groups?

SALA: [superposed] Oh I think there was. There was all kinds of, there was colored, and other nationalities, you know but uh--

TSELOS: Do you remember anything about your years in grade school or higher in terms of what your school experience was like?

SALA: Oh I enjoyed my schooling. I -- I -- I did pretty good in school. I [not understood] bookcase on myself. But I enjoyed my schooling, you know.

And I thought some day when I graduated I could become a teacher. But I didn't get to that because our family was large, and my family needed help, you know, so that was more important to me.

TSELOS: So, when you went to work, what kind of work were you doing and what was that like?

SALA: Well at the time I started I would take anything. The first place I worked at was the Richelieu Pearl place, sorting pearls. As to the color of the pearls, sorting them. That was hard on my eyes and my head, but anyway, I didn't last there very long. But the main place I worked was -- was Brooklyn Medicine Company. I worked there for quite a few years as a bookkeeper. I kept records of the gas uses and when their time was up and they had to pay their bills.

TSELOS: Did you get special training as a bookkeeper in school or was this something they taught you?

SALA: No, whatever I got from school [not understood]. Whatever knowledge I had from school -- I just loved figures when I was a young child. Still do.
(laughing)

TSELOS: So after you started working did you continue living at home with your family for a while?

SALA: Oh yes. Until I got married.

TSELOS: How did you meet your husband?

SALA: Well, the thing is, I was married twice. The first husband, he and my brother were friends -- pals. And we used to go out together and we got chummy

with each other, you know. And he was my birs-- first boyfriend. But then he died after so many years – he came down with TB, and uh, went up to the mountains to take care of him.

TSELOS: Yeah that was a dangerous disease at the time. [superposed]

SALA: I took care of him and stayed with him till he died and of course I came -- came home, and I still went home, to live.

TSELOS: During the years that you were married to your first husband, did you work outside the home also?

SALA: No. Not the first time, no.

TSELOS: Now, what kind of work did your first husband do?

SALA: He was a – he was a musician. Musician -- drummer (laughs).

TSELOS: Did your family – did your family like the fact that you had married a musician?

SALA: Oh yes, sure. Uh-huh.

TSELOS: Now, another question I've got relating to – you had mentioned that you met your first husband through your brother because he was your brother's friend. What kind of social activities did you have when you were younger?

SALA: [superposed] Young? We used to have dances at home. They'd – the boys would all get together with their own band and play and we'd dance or then we'd have coffee maybe later on. Coffee and cake or something, yeah.

TSELOS: Was your family active in the local Catholic church? Was that where much socializing went on or not so much?

SALA: Well I don't think they had much time for that because they had – had too many – you know, had enough children to keep them busy, you know.

TSELOS: So, after your first husband died, you went back to live with your family for a while?

SALA: [superposed] Mhmm.

TSELOS: And, did you go back to working outside the home then?

SALA: Oh yeah, then I went to work to Brooklyn Medicine Company.

TSELOS: How did you meet your second husband?

SALA: Well, I met him through a friend that I knew up there and they introduced us and uh [long pause] so after a few times I saw him he asked me for -- to go out. And after refusing a few times, I finally decided I would. (laughs) And we – we dated after that.

TSELOS: And he was living in Brooklyn too?

SALA: No he was living in Washington. This now -- this is in Washington.

TSELOS: Oh, oh. How did you meet him if he was living in Washington?

SALA: Through a friend.

TSELOS: Oh, I see.

SALA: See I went to Washington to visit this friend that used to come to school in Brooklyn, from Washington. And then when I went to Washing— and then she invited me there, when my husband died. And then when I went there she introduced me to the family and said that there's a nice man she'd like to introduce me to. And that's how that came about.

TSELOS: What did your second husband do for a living?

SALA: He worked in the Brook— in the Washington Navy Yard. He was an instrument maker.

TSELOS: That was quite a skilled job at that time.

SALA: Yeah, very hard on the eyes.

TSELOS: And you had children by your second husband.

SALA: My daughter, and I had two that -- that didn't live. You know, miscarriages.

TSELOS: Oh I'm sorry to hear that. So, when you moved to Washington then after you got married for the second time, you did not work outside the home at that point, or did you?

SALA: [superposed] No, no.

TSELOS: [superposed] Ok.

SALS: Well n – when I moved – no I – not outside of the home. I did get a job, you know, working at the, the uh – the uh, -- the -- oh the market. It was the Brooklyn—the uh, market there in Washington. This friend that I went to

school with – she had – she worked at the market and said they needed a bookkeeper at that time and I could come there and -- and try it out and that's what I did.

TSELOS: [superposed] Oh, I see.

SALA: [superposed] And then I stayed, you know. And worked – worked there for a long time – for fifteen years.

TSELOS: Was that a part-time job then?

SALA: No that was a fulltime job.

TSELOS: [superposed] Oh so – oh so you worked. You continued working as a bookkeeper.

SALA: [superposed] I didn't work no part-time job. It was fulltime or nothing. (both laugh)

SALA: So, was your second husband an immigrant too or was he born in this country?

SALA: No. No he's born in Washington, D.C.

TSELOS: Did you, once you got married, did you speak -- continue speaking Italian at home at all, or not?

SALA: Oh it was halfway, you know you speak half English and half It—and half Italian. Just comes naturally, you know.

TSELOS: [interposed] Sure, sure.

SALA: Certain words t-- sound better in Italian. (both laugh)

TSELOS: So were you and your second husband involved in church activities at all?

SALA: Well not -- not too much but we just kept up, you know. It was whatever we had to do.

TSELOS: In terms of the people that you knew and socialized with once you moved to Washington to be with your second husband, were they primarily Italian-American or a whole mixture of people?

SALA: [superposed] No it was a mixture, you know, a mixture. No 'cause -- you know, going to church you meet a lot of different people, you know, different nationalities. You always get in -- involved in some of the things that go on and you meet them.

TSELOS: What were your experiences during the Great Depression? Was that a difficult time?

SALA: [superposed] That was awful.

TSELOS: Could you tell me a little about what that felt like in terms of the pressures that it put on your family?

SALA: Well that's when I -- that's when I left Washington and came to New York. (laughs) So it was awful because people were throwing themselves out of windows and they had lost everything that they had worked for all their lives. But we didn't have that experience because we did-- weren't involved in anything like that, you know.

TSELOS: And, how about during World War II? I know that some parts of the Italian American community in certain parts of the country had a difficult time because there was a certain suspicion on the part of the government and so on towards -- towards Italian immigrants. Did you run into any problems -- your family run into any problems during that period?

SALA: [superposed] No I don't remember that, no.

TSELOS: And in terms of your kids growing up, did you send your daughter to public school or parochial school?

SALA: Both. She went to um, paro—sh-- I'm trying to think now. She went to um, no parochial school just for kindergarten, I think it was. And then to the pub—the Catholic school.

TSELOS: Now is there anything about your experiences growing up where you felt that there was a particular experience – life experience or point of view – among Italians -- Italian Americans, that made a difference in the way they looked at problems or the way their families worked, as compared to people with other -- from other immigrant groups?

SALA: I don't remember that. Uh-uh.

TSELOS: So, did your second husband continue working through until he retired through the -- at the -- at the Navy Yard?

SALA: [superposed] Yes, till he retired. Yeah.

TSELOS: And when your -- when your daughter grew up and became an adult, did she continue living at home for a while or did she--

SALA: Yeah for a while she -- she did live home until she was -- I forget how old she was -- but she decided it would be nice to have her own place, you know. And she went out for a while.

TSELOS: So that was -- that was down in Washington.

SALA: In Washington.,

TSELOS: So, I imagine the Navy Yard was extremely busy during World War II.

SALA: [interposed] Yeah.

TSELOS: So, was your husband working extremely long hours during that period?

SALA: I don't remember that, I really don't. I don't think he did.

TSELOS: After the war, did more relatives -- anybody that you knew from Italy come over -- in terms of cousins or people like that?

SALA: I knew some people come over but I don't -- I don't remember who they were really.

TSELOS: And when did you retire from your bookkeeping work?

SALA: Where, from where?

TSELOS: No. When, when?

SALA: When? In 19--let's see '72 I think it was. I was sixty-five years old.

TSELOS: Well you had a very long career as a -- as a bookkeeper.

SALA: [superposed] Uh-huh, uh-huh.

TSELOS: So since you retired, have you been living in Washington, primarily?

SALA: [superposed] Yes, ever since.

TSELOS: And in terms of your family with your brothers and so on, where did they end up working and living?

SALA: Where they worked? I – I tell ya everybody's gone but (laughs) I'm the only one living in my family. So they – they've all died. But my – my three brothers worked in the Navy Yard – the Brooklyn Navy Yard – and then the other two worked at Post Office, I believe.

TSELOS: In terms of your family, during the years after you moved down to Washington and so on, did you all remain in touch a lot? Did you visit and come back and remain in touch?

SALA: [superposed] Oh yes, oh yes. I used to go home every week in the beginning. They used to have those excursion trips for four and a quarter so (both laugh) that was a treat.

TSELOS: So, was there anything that -- in terms of experiences that you had growing up or in your working -- period when you were working and so on -- that particularly sticks in your mind as something unusual that you really remember or that you learned kind of a life lesson about? Anything like that?

SALA: Not that I can recall.

TSELOS: Well tell me about how you decided to come here to visit Ellis Island for the first time.

SALA: [superposed] Oh I always wanted to. When I knew that we came over from Ellis Island I wanted to come here, you know. So I finally made it (laughs).

TSELOS: Did it look – what were your thoughts as the boat came here and you saw it?

SALA: [superposed] Oh it was a thrill, it was a thrill. Yeah, it was a good feeling to see the Statue of Liberty and that boat coming in. I knew I -- one day a long time ago I came on that -- one of those boats, anyway. I was a little baby though (laughs).

TSELOS: That's right, that's right. Did your parents talk at all about what their experience was like either coming in as they came into the harbor to see the Statue of Liberty, or when they actually had to go through Ellis Island? I realize you were a very, very young child.

SALA: [interposed] I was little, yeah.

TSELOS: But did they talk about that much?

SALA: (mumbles) No. I remember there was -- I'm trying to think. No, I don't remember anything like that.

TSELOS: [long pause] Did they ever say much about the village or the town that they came from in Italy?

SALA: You mean in Italy?

TSELOS: Right, right.

SALA: Well only -- the only thing I used to hear is that they were poor there and you know, there wasn't much to do and they wanted to come to a better place to live where they could give their children a better [not understood].

TSELOS: [superposed] Yes, that was -- that was a major reason. You know that certainly was the -- that certainly was my -- why my father's brothers and sisters came to this country from Greece. That was certainly the case.

SALA: [superposed] Yeah, yeah. Right, they knew it would be better.

TSELOS: Have you been back to Italy at all?

SALA: Never.

TSELOS: If you were um – if you were going to um -- give any advice to anybody from the perspective of having lived a hundred years and been through all of these different changes in the United States – you know, coming over here, growing up in a working class family, going through the Depression, going through the war and so on and your various experiences – is there any particular advice that you think people should pay attention to in terms of the way they go about their own life and deal with adversity?

SALA: [interposed] (laughs) That's hard to tell anybody isn't it? (laughs) Well all I know is I'll try to live a good life and do the right thing and try – try to do what I was supposed to do, you know. Try not to hurt anybody.

TSELOS: Well that's – that's very good. I mean, there are a lot of people who could take that advice to heart, I think.

SALA: (laughs)

TSLEOS: Well, it's been a pleasure talking with you about your experiences.

SALA: Thank you.

TSELOS: I'm very glad that we had this opportunity to talk here, at Ellis Island, where you came through so many, many years ago.

SALA: [interposed] Many memories, yeah.

TSELOS: And I know you'll be getting a tour around the Island after we're done with this interview, which you'll have an opportunity I think, to see – the insides have been changed a little bit but I think you'll find it very, very interesting.

SALA: I would think so.

TSELOS: So, I think we'll finish this up now and I want to thank you very much for taking the time and agreeing to both –

SALA: [superposed] You're welcome very much. I hope I've been some help to you.

TSELOS: You have been, you have been.

SALA: [superposed] I'm not too much --

TSELOS: Both in terms of allowing us to record this for our oral history program and allowing the PBS production crew to videotape this. It was a very unusual opportunity for them and –

SALA: [interposed] Well I'm honored (laughs)

TSELOS: Well, we are too.

SALA: I felt like a celebrity today. (laughs a lot)

TSELOS: Well, you are. You have been, and we're very pleased that this was all able to be worked out, very much.

SALA: [interposed] Thank you.

TSELOS: And we're very pleased also that so many members of your family were able to come with you—

SALA: [interposed] Yes.

TSELOS: And to be able to observe the whole interview process and take part in the tour.

SALA: [superposed] We're all proud Americans.

TSELOS: Well we certainly are and we're very pleased that you feel that way. At this point I think we'll close the interview. This is George Tselos for the National Park Service. I'm thanking you, Mary Sala, for the time that you spent with us.

SALA: You're welcome.

TSELOS: We will be sending you and your family a tape of the interview --

SALA: [superposed] Oh that's nice.

TSELOS: And eventually we will transcribe it. That is, we'll type it all out and we'll send you a copy of that also.

SALA: [superposed] Right. Oh I'll be honored.

TSELOS: So we certainly appreciate that opportunity

SALA: [superposed] Thank you

TSELOS: Thank you very much.

SALA: Thank you.

GEORGE: Bye now.

SALA: (laughs)

END OF INTERVIEW