

EI 1465

AMADEO ERCOLE VITANZA

BIRTHDATE: NOVEMBER 19, 1925

INTERVIEW DATE: AUGUST 17, 2007

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 81

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY and EVAN TAPARATA

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: ROBERT BROSIUS

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

COUNTRY, ITALY, 1927. RETURNED TO ITALY 1931. 1948.

AGE: 2, 22

SHIP: RETURNED ON *PATRIA*. THEN *MARINE PERCH* IN 1948

PORT: PALERMO

RESIDENCE:

ITALY: CASTELL'UMBERTO, PROVINCIA DI MESSINA

U.S.: THE BRONX, NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK

SOUTH AMERICA

U.S.: MELBOURNE, FLORIDA

LEVINE: Today is August the seventeenth, the year 2007 and I'm here in the studio at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. I'm with Amadeo Ercole --

VITANZA: Ercole

LEVINE: --Ercole Vitanza. He was here at Ellis Island for three days in 1948 - February Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth.

VITANZA: Right.

LEVINE: And he remembers which room he was in.

VITANZA: Right.

LEVINE: Right. He was in the Italian Army and was twenty-two years of age at the time that he came here. I want to say I'm Janet Levine for the National Park Service and Kevin Daley is the recording engineer with the assist of Evan Taparata who is learning the equipment so we can be much more efficient.

LEVINE: Okay, let me start at the beginning by you giving your birth date please.

VITANZA: My birthday is 11/19, 1925.

LEVINE: And where were you born?

VITANZA: I was born in Mess – Castell'Umberto, Provincia Messina, Sicily.

LEVINE: And did you live in Messina until you joined the army?

VITANZA: Well I lived in Castell'Umberto until I joined the army. After I joined the army, when I come back, I live in Messina until I came to this country.

LEVINE: Is it Castel?

VITANZA: Castell'Umberto

LEVINE: Castell'Umberto. Is that a small town?

VITANZA: It's a small town. The name of it was – the name was a prince of Italy, a king of Italy.

LEVINE: Oh.

VITANZA: Cause there was a castle for Umberto. Umberto was the last king of Italy.

LEVINE: Where is that?

VITANZA: In the mountain, Provincia Messina.

LEVINE: It's not too far from Messina?

VITANZA: No, it's a about ki – miles away.

LEVINE: And that's where you grew up.

VITANZA: Right, that's the – I don't know if you saw the film of Patton.

LEVINE: No.

VITANZA: George Patton, World War II. There's a town – Vuolo [sp?] – that Patton had a lot problem with the Germans and my town was alongside it.

LEVINE: Let's first talk about your early years, before you even went in the Army. What was your mother's name?

VITANZA: My mother's name was Barbara. She died 1933 when I was eight years old.

LEVINE: Do you know her maiden name?

VITANZA: Mussari.

LEVINE: M-

VITANZA: M-U-S-S-A-R-I.

LEVINE: A-R-I?

VITANZA: Mussari.

LEVINE: Okay, your father's name?

VITANZA: Calogero Vitanza.

LEVINE: How do you spell the first one?

VITANZA: C-A-L-O-G-E-R-O. My father was in this country since 1915. My wife came – and my mother came to this country. And I came to this country in 1927, I was here for two years. See, I was an American citizen because I was three years old. And when I went back to Italy I lost my citizenship.

LEVINE: You weren't born here?

VITANZA: No, no, no. My father –

LEVINE: Now your father came here before your mother?

VITANZA: Right.

LEVINE: And why did he come when he came?

VITANZA: He came to look for better life.

LEVINE: Better life. And did he have family or friends here?

VITANZA: Oh his father was here.

LEVINE: So your grandfather was here.

VITANZA: My grandfather was here and in 1925 went to Italy got married. And then I was born. In 1927 he brought me and my wi – my mother here. My mother came through Ellis Island and maybe me when I was a little boy – I don't remember that.

LEVINE: So you were two or so?

VITANZA: Two years old and then I went back to Italy.

LEVINE: How long did you spend in this country?

VITANZA: From '27 to '29. I went back – from '27 to '31. I went back to - '31 I went to Italy with ship Patria.

LEVINE: That's the ship you went back on?

VITANZA: Right, Patria.

LEVINE: Do you remember that at all?

VITANZA: Well I have pictures.

LEVINE: You were about four?

VITANZA: Five years old.

LEVINE: And you have pictures?

VITANZA: Oh I have pictures. I have a lot of pictures and letters and that – that the Department of Justice sent to my father. Cause my father wants me to come back here. And those are the letter was sent to my father the reason why I can't come in. This and that. Finally they give the visa from Palermo. And I left from Palermo and I came here. On a ship Perch Marine.

LEVINE: Merchant Marine?

VITANZA: Perch Marine.

LEVINE: And what year was that?

VITANZA: 1948.

LEVINE: Oh that one. So the Merchant Marine was a troop ship?

VITANZA: Troop ship, right.

LEVINE: When you came here when you were two years old and you stay here about two years, then you went back with your mother?

VITANZA: My mother.

LEVINE: And did your father stay?

VITANZA: No, he took us to Italy.

LEVINE: He went back with you? The whole family.

VITANZA: Right.

LEVINE: Were you the only child?

VITANZA: No because while he was here he had two more child. One in 1928, my sister. And 1929 my brother. And we all went to Italy, stay in Italy and he came back here.

LEVINE: I see, he went back with you to Italy and then he came back, but you stayed there.

VITANZA: He came back, right. We stayed there.

LEVINE: Do you know why?

VITANZA: My mother didn't like this country.

LEVINE: How come?

VITANZA: Well she was young kid. She was twenty-four years old I think. Twenty-four, twenty-five. She want to come back. My father says Okay I'll take you back and that was him.

LEVINE: And what was the plan? He would stay and work and go back and forth?

VITANZA: No he's stay here.

LEVINE: He'd just stay.

VITANZA: And eventually the work come up we can all go back and have more. But he stayed because he had a – he was working the construction at the time. And then he got a little money and he opened a studio photograph [sic] on Forty-first Street at Sixth Avenue. And then he opened a second one in front of Radio City, in New York City.

LEVINE: A photograph –

VITANZA: Photo. By – he had an apartment over on Forty-first street. Between 41st and 42nd Street on Sixth Avenue, right in front the library. And that's where I live uh, two months. Live him. And then from there I moved out, I got married right away. I got a girl and I got married.

LEVINE: (laughs) Okay now wait a minute. Was your father's plan to pretty much stay here after he brought the family home?

VITANZA: Yes, oh yes. It was fa – his plan to stay here.

LEVINE: Was it kind of a breakup of the marriage because your mother didn't like it here?

VITANZA: Oh no, no, no, no. Those days th - they don't go for that. Now she want to go, she go that's it.

LEVINE: There's no divorce.

VITANZA: No there wasn't - they don't want to fight or anything like that. But one day she took care of the three kids.

LEVINE: Okay, you may remember a little about the *Patria* going back?

VITANZA: Well I remem – we used to live in the Bronx. Little Italy in the Bronx.
Tremont Avenue [ph] – Tremont Avenue.

LEVINE: Which street?

VITANZA: Tremont Avenue. We had an apartment there on the third floor I remember.
And one night there was a big crash downstairs and the firemen come in. I
was five years old I remember that. And I remember when I went to Italy on
the ship. And we stop in one of the ports, and we get out. And those days
they had to ground [?] the ship they had to have a big stairs going down the
side of the ship.

LEVINE: A big stairs?

VITANZA: Stairs. Going down for the ship. And the Patria no have any place to go, just
the stairs on the other side. And those stairs would move.

LEVINE: You mean when it went into the port?

VITANZA: Right, when it went to the port, right.

LEVINE: And then what? Did you get picked up by a tender or a ferry and brought in?

VITANZA: No, it was tha – right on the port. Right on the port.

LEVINE: Against the dock. Was that ship crowded, the one going back?

VITANZA: Oh was it crowded? Yes.

LEVINE: Well you were only five, but were people going back to stay back or to visit?

VITANZA: To go back and forth. The visa and come back. Those day – those days it was easy to go back and forth.

LEVINE: Yeah. So you went back there and stayed there until –

VITANZA: I stayed there back – back there until 1948.

LEVINE: Well then could we talk about your life before you went into the army?

VITANZA: Yes. In Italy we were poor. We had nothing to eat, things were bad. Na - 1940 I was fifteen years old. And I was draft in the army when I was fifteen.

LEVINE: You were drafted.

VITANZA: Fifteen.

LEVINE: Can you remember the build up to the war? Do you remember anything about what was happening in your little town?

VITANZA: Well, we knew about the war that Mussolini was a guy that would help everybody with this do this. And everybody (claps) clap their hands, but we don't wh -- where we're going. We know we're going to war sooner or later. I remember when I was – Let's see that was fifteen years old - I remember exactly where I was sitting when he – he made the speech that he declared the war.

LEVINE: Really?

VITANZA: Oh yeah, June 4, 1940. I remember where I was sitting is I mean.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything he said?

VITANZA: Oh yeah, I remember what he said.

LEVINE: Like what?

VITANZA: Like uh, "*Camicie nere del orbe, uomini e donne, ascoltatemi. H - Ho una parola a dirvi. Le dichiarazioni di Guerra sono state presentate nelle mani degli ambasciatori di Inghilterra e France*". [Black Shirts of the world, men and women, listen to me. I have something to tell you. The declarations of war have been presented in the hands of the ambassadors of England and France.]

LEVINE: Wow, can you translate?

VITANZA: Yeah, le dichiarazioni. The de – declare war in – the declaration of war were put in hands of the ambassador of Inghilterra – England – and France. In other words he had give them the notice of war. That was June 10, 1940.

LEVINE: How come you remember that so much?

VITANZA: Well, that – because I still have books around. But I remember. I remember exactly what happened. I remember many ti – I was in Italy when uh, the English were coming every night to drop bombs. It's not a nice thing to see at night when they on top and drop bombs. [ph] I remember.

LEVINE: You remember that? Did people have places they went in case the bombs were coming?

VITANZA: Oh yes, we had a – we had a place where you can go in on the ground. But, sometime it was a no good.

LEVINE: So did you see casualties? Did you see people –

VITANZA: Oh yes, I saw casualty. In 1940 – 1941 I went to the army. And the first night I went in the army I went to North Italy. I was sixteen then. I went in the barrack, I got my uniforms to dress up, there was the night. I went to barrack to go to sleep. And when I go in there, I try taking my clothes to go to bed. C- Couple guys – I was the youngest one in the battalion – Couple guys said to me “Where you going?”. “Well I go to sleep.” “No, no, no take your clothes off, you keep it on because at 12 o’clock Mr. Chooch [ph] is gonna come up.”

LEVINE: To the barrack?

VITANZA: Yeah, the airplanes.

LEVINE: Oh the airplanes.

VITANZA: They say “Mr .Chooch [?] will be around 12 o’clock. And exactly 12 o’clock the English bombers came in and start drop bombs. It was cold. It was freezing, but you had to go out because we had the anti-aircraft. And we’re doing that all night long – boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. The next morning you get out you see uh – what’s the name? – ammunition from the guns on the floor. And at night one airplane come down from the British airplane. That wa – that was the life. What can you do?

LEVINE: And that happened every night?

VITANZA: Every night, every night. That was in Turin, Italy. It’s the north part. Every night.

LEVINE: So you were really just a child when you went. Sixteen years old.

VITANZA: That's right, that's right. Well I remember 1940 – 2 when the American came to Rome to drop bombs. I can see the airplane – there were about 300 planes on top – gone. There were about three – four Italian planes went in, but one can do nothing. And then one time drop bombs in Rome. And the next day you can see they drop one bomb at the cemetery where the Pope's father was buried. And the Pope came out with the white gown, with blood on his gown. If you look the history of the Pope you can see that. He came out gown, stained with blood. That was in 1943 – '42.

LEVINE: How did he get the blood on the gown?

VITANZA: Cause there were deads around the cemetery. He went to the cemetery to see the grave of his father – family. And while he was there, there's people dead which he bend down too – on the way out. Pope twelve. Pope twelve. Eugenio Pacelli.

LEVINE: How did you take in all of this extreme life as a young a boy.

VITANZA: Well, well when you're fifteen – when you're fifteen years old you don't care what's come up in front of you. You fight anything – everything's good. You just hero. Bu – when you reach forty then it's different you start thinking about. But to me, at that time, fifteen years old, I got – I had nothing to lose. I had no mother and my father was in the United States. I was legal in my hands. That's why I went in the army because we had no food, we had nothing to eat. And once in a while Mussolini will give you a pound of spaghetti.

On those days we used to live with the cars [?]. And those cars will show you bread, spaghetti – anything to eat. There was no coffee. There was no sugar. Now they would give you once bread a day. Now you not gonna buy one ounce in day. You wait a week to go and get a pound of bread and you

eat it in one day. The same way was spaghetti. There was – the life was really hard. Now there was coffee – we had no coffee at all. We used to make a coffee from chestnuts, from peanuts. So long we had something hot it was coffee. But no sugar. Eggs – we wait for the – for the chickens lay an egg. And that egg will last a month before we eat. Now the chicken will last a month because they grow that chicken then kill it. And when they kill they put 'em – we had no refrigerator – they put under cold water and they stay there. First they make a broth, you eat the broth. Then they – they cook – they make something else with chicken. Then you make a sauce, then you get the spaghetti at the end of – fifteen days. Well that was something which I never forget. Now today you – I see a lot of food get wasted. That's bad. That's bad.

LEVINE: Who were you living with?

VITANZA: My aunt. My aunt had three boys. We were six that lived in the same house.

LEVINE: Your brother and sister?

VITANZA: My brother and sister and the other three.

LEVINE: Was her husband there?

VITANZA: No, the husband died in World War I.

LEVINE: So it was just your aunt with three children.

VITANZA: Right, right. She took over the custody of us when my mother died.

LEVINE: How old were you when your mother died?

VITANZA: 1933, eight years old.

LEVINE: Eight years old. And do you remember that?

VITANZA: Well I remember when she died. She was sick. And I remember when I take her to the cemetery. And I remember when they buried, was uh - the cemetery was on the hill. There wasn't a graveyard [sic?] near. See for that my father changed, but then the first time she was buried over the hill.

LEVINE: Was there a particularly ceremony you remember?

VITANZA: Uh no, in those days they weren't making a ceremony. The only thing they would do a funeral, they make some cooking – the visitors are gonna come and they stay all night and then we eat. But no ceremony. But once you eat, yes we go to the cemetery in November first. To lit the candles, or to the grave.

LEVINE: Now you were the oldest child –

VITANZA: Right, I was the old child.

LEVINE: - so did you have certain responsibilities because you were the oldest?

VITANZA: No, no, no nothing. Nothing at all. I was going to school, I think I didn't pass a couple times. But finally I graduated 1938. Then for that there were a couple priests that like me to become a priest. I went to the seminary for a year and half before I went to the army and that was – that was it.

LEVINE: Did you decide you were not going to be a priest?

VITANZA: No because I had a girlfriend. (laughs)

LEVINE: So you joined the army because –

VITANZA: We'll get something to eat. Or something like that. And we get paid. Got money.

LEVINE: And what was it like being in the army with a whole bunch of men from different places that were all there to fight?

VITANZA: Well I remember when I first went in the army, we went from Torino, when we had the bombs come down, went near Rome and the first couple nights I slept in the caves. See now, when I see the caves in Afghanistan I remember I sleep in one of those myself in Italy.

LEVINE: Near Rome?

VITANZA: Near Rome. We had caves here. The old Romans had caves and they ba – battalion came and one day [?] and they were sleep in those caves.

LEVINE: How did you feel about army life? What about army life do you think about most?

VITANZA: Well having life in those days for us was something whether we're gonna do. We gonna fight the Bristish. We're going to do something sp – special, because the - the leader wants. Young, we don't what the he – what we're doing. What we're doing.

LEVINE: At the time did you think Mussolini was a hero? What was that somebody you looked up to as a child?

VITANZA: Well in those days Mussolini was hero. Because he did a lot for Italy.

LEVINE: Like what did he do?

VITANZA: He did roads, he did houses, he did cities. The only stake [sic] he made to join Hitler. If he didn't join Hitler, Italy was in good shape. But he made that mistake of course Italy dra ... Whatever we got from Hitler was potato skins. We had nothing to eat, but Hitler would the German the potatoes and would send us the skins. I ate skin potatoes. No potatoes, just the skin.

LEVINE: That's the healthiest part you know. (laughs)

VITANZA: Right, right. That's all we had. Then we had to go to Africa to get coffee because we had a place in Africa where to get the coffee. But to get the coffee we had go through Suez Canal. We cannot go through because the British don't let you go through. That's why the war started. But the – [inaudible] – until then 1940 Mussolini was alright, but after that – was a disaster. Was a disaster fo – 'cause he went to the war

LEVINE: Why do you think Mussolini teamed up with Hitler?

VITANZA: The sanction.

LEVINE: The what?

VITANZA: The sanction. 1936 Mussolini went to Africa. And the United Nations at the time put a sanction against Italy. In other words nobody will support to Italy. And Italy will nothing from no countries. The only country who sent something to Italy was the German. That's why he joined.

LEVINE: So it was an economic decision about sanctions?

VITANZA: Right.

LEVINE: When you look back on the army life, is there anything about it you think was a good thing for you?

VITANZA: Well it was not a good thing. But natural as young men you don't think what's what. You just want to get out from the house and join something. Because it was going from one city to another. From a town to another town. You had a good time that was the end then. But if I – if I was thirty years old then it would be different. Different.

LEVINE: I see. Were there men in your army – battalion – that were older?

VITANZA: Everybody was olders. See the ba – the battalion I went in there was sixteen. And they were forty, fifty, sixty years old. They were old people. There was the end of the draft. In other words Mussolini drafted everybody and then they would pick it up whatever's left.

LEVINE: And they were drafting people who were forty or fifty?

VITANZA: Oh yeah forty, yeah.

LEVINE: So were you treated as the mascot?

VITANZA: Oh yeah, I was the mascot, yes. A lot of them I was a clerk in the office. I would get uh, the payrolls for the soldiers. And I was one of them. And I had a privilege. I used to go in the kitchen I was the first one to eat.

LEVINE: That must've been very welcome.

VITANZA: Oh yeah. Whatever – Whatever I was the first one because I was respected.

LEVINE: You were respected because you were more or less a child?

VITANZA: Yeah, yeah. And then in 1943 when the war was over I was near Rome. The war was over, but my battalion stayed there to fight the Germans. Now there was – Italy had give up. But couple battalions stay in Rome to defend the Rome to fight the German. And one battalion was mine. One morning the Germany gave the order to drop the arms and go away. We didn't do. The next day they come in – a big tank came in front, in front the barracks. And that tank was faced to us. 'All get out, or we liquidate.' That was September 7, 1943.

LEVINE: And that's when you left?

VITANZA: And I left. And then I had to go home. There were no trains, there were no planes, but just to walk home. I left, I left Ancona, Italy the 14 September and I arrive home in Sicily the 18 October.

LEVINE: You were walking?

VITANZA: Thirty-seven days I walked. It was a pleasure to walk because there million million people walking down home. But I ran into trouble when I – arrive at the end of Italy to cross to Sicily. There were no ships to cross to Sicily. But I had some money because I sold the binoco [binocolo is Italian for binoculars] to somebody. As the money we took a boat, six people, to cross. Was one of those –

LEVINE: Rowboat.

VITANZA: Rowboat. And we cross to Messina, Sicily.

LEVINE: How long did it take to cross in a rowboat?

VITANZA: About six hours. Six hours. And that's a danger because there's a time that the water in the straight [?] –

LEVINE: There's a current.

VITANZA: Current, right. But we made it. Then I got home. I went to the house, I was told to report to Palermo. At Palermo was the headquarter of the Seventh Army, George Patton. And I was a prisoner of war.

LEVINE: A what?

VITANZA: A prisoner of war. For the American.

LEVINE: And the war was over?

VITANZA: In Si – no the war wasn't over. Now there was when Patton invaded Sicily. He picked up a lot of the Italian soldiers. All the Italian that were in the uniform, you had to report to his headquarters to regist [sic] as a prisoner of war. And that's, I regist [sic].

LEVINE: Now what date was that? That was October?

VITANZA: That's about October 20, something like that. Because I arrived to Sicily October 18, but two days later I went to Palermo.

LEVINE: That was 1945?

VITANZA: '43. See the war finished in '45. '43 was the Italian campaign.

LEVINE: So you didn't expect the reason you were going to report?

VITANZA: No, I wasn't expect. Natural – and for that I joined the ar – the Italian Army again in 1945 to fight the Germans.

LEVINE: In 1943 –

VITANZA: The Italian disbanded. The army finished.

LEVINE: You were taken as a prisoner of war?

VITANZA: Right, but send me home. And then for that the Italian government, the new [?] started form divisions to fight the Germans under the English – British. And I joined the Fifth Army with General Mark Clark.

LEVINE: You mean you could join with the English or the Americans?

VITANZA: I would be in Italian uniform. My battalion was with the Americans. We stayed with the Americans until the war finished. And when the war finished I went back home.

LEVINE: Now those two years from October '43 until the war was over – you were signed up in the Italian Army under the Americans – what went on then, in terms of your experience?

VITANZA: Well we had two divisions. One division was to fight with the British against the German. And my division was fight against the German with the Americans. Right by Monte Cassino – Cassino. We went up to past Rome. Then when we got to Bologna the war was over, were sent back home.

LEVINE: When you were fighting with the Americans, how did that work?

VITANZA: On the Americans no.

LEVINE: Were there Americans with you all the time?

VITANZA: No, no. The Americans was one side and we were the other side. But naturally we're close to the Americans.

LEVINE: You were being commanded by –

VITANZA: Italians.

LEVINE: - but they were in communication with the Americans. So you were coordinating your efforts.

VITANZA: Right, right. There were Americans, there were Australian, Pollack – the American divisions were the head.

LEVINE: Were the others like the Polish and the Australians army divisions under the Americans?

VITANZA: Under the Americans.

LEVINE: Just like you were. Under the Americans, but they had their own army.

VITANZA: Right, they had their own army, right. Cause the Pollack is the one that took Monte Cassino.

LEVINE: I see. So did you fraternize with the other armies?

VITANZA: Oh yes, yes. The only one we didn't fraternize was the English because we had to fight all the time. But the Americans were okay.

LEVINE: So you had a little taste of America –

VITANZA: Oh yes.

LEVINE: - when you were a little boy.

VITANZA: Right. And then what happened – and then the war was over and went back to Sicily. And in 1945, October, I joined the army again. The reason I joined the army was because there was a battalion gonna go to – to Asia – to fight against Japan. And my intention was maybe I go there ‘cause the times I was over I could disappear and go in America. It was my intention to come here. But the war – then it was over I just went back to Italy. Then my father was here, start fighting to get me here. And I have a – as I said letter on me – from the Jus – the Justice Department telling my father what’s the what, what I expect, what to expect [?]. Mentioned about me being in this country 1927, I went back to Italy with ship *Patria*, I have all that. And then I got a ticket I came this country with *Marine Perch*. A troop ship. 1948.

LEVINE: What was it called? The Marine –

VITANZA: Marine Perch. Cause there were about six, seven marines, troop ships.

LEVINE: So you were father was here at the end of the war and he was trying to get you here.

VITANZA: To come here, right.

LEVINE: Do you have those papers that went back and forth?

VITANZA: Oh yes, yeah.

LEVINE: If we could have copies of those we would love to put that in your file.

VITANZA: I can you send you boxes, I'll send you a [inaudible].

LEVINE: Let's see, so you thought you might be able to come here after the war was over with Japan, but it didn't turn out that way. So you went back to Italy.

VITANZA: To Italy. And then my father start fighting and he tried to get me back.

LEVINE: And did you have a girlfriend there then?

VITANZA: Oh yeah I had a girlfriend since 1940 when I was sixteen years old.

LEVINE: The same girlfriend?

VITANZA: Yeah. Until I left and I came to this country.

LEVINE: So you left by yourself?

VITANZA: My brother and my sister came before me. Cause my brother and sister were there. And my father got my brother and sister here because they were American citizen 'cause they born here. They're born in New York City. But me, I had to wait, because I was Italian man. Now when I got the visa to Palermo consulate in 1947 – '47, my father sent me the ticket – which I have the ticket home yet [?]. He sent a ticket on Marine Perch and I went – I had to go to Palermo to the ship in December – no January 28 I think it was. Took me eighteen days to cross from Palermo to New York.

LEVINE: Really? Why? Was it a slow moving ship?

VITANZA: It was slow moving ship, yeah. Then natural we got the ship in Palermo and we stop at Azores, we get out in Azores. In that ship there a lot of soldiers that were coming from German. American soldiers. And I got friend with a

couple guys which a year later I met them in New York someplace. But that ship was, I think, about a something that goes up and down. Stay at the table and everything that's up there will come right top of you. You sit at the dining room, the dishes will go back and forth because of the sea we go up and down.

It was a – it was sad you see the suitcase that will fight from one person to another , but we never get to New York. When are we going to get to New York? Finally we arrive one morning we see – land. We were happy. We see land and we are in New York City. The ship dock on 49th Street I think it was. It docks there and we got screened by the immigration and were put on one side.

LEVINE: What was the screening? Was it physical?

VITANZA: No, the papers – the papers. Always the papers, the paperwork, the passport. Then my father was downstairs waiting for me, but I couldn't see my father. Finally at the end of night when it got it dark, we got out of ship and they put us on a bus, went to Battery Park. Battery Park we took a ferry. It took me and the corps over to the place [this phrase was inaudible]. We get out here. At that minute I was not hap – happy because it was better for stay Italy because I think I would have a lot of problems. And during the night they finally end up giving me a room, a bed. And during the night I can see the Statue of Liberty flame. It's all I can see – Statue of Liberty flame. I get up the next morning I come over here in the big hall – it was filled with people. And most of the people were from Israel – not from Israel, from Jewish origin –

LEVINE: Palestine?

VITANZA: No, Jewish maybe from Russia something like that, that came to this country. And they were in the same position I was. And actually they all be up together [?]. The other thing I noticed that was different is tha – that they were talking with their hands all the time. In It – in Italy no we don't talk that way. (laughs)

LEVINE: (Laughs) That's a joke isn't it?

VITANZA: (laughs) That's a joke, yeah right. And you can see everybody with talking with hands. Then you look outside, it was snow. [inaudible]piece ice outside. I was here three days, finally I went in front the judge and the judge asked me *questa* [this], 'Are you fascista? Are you this? Are you like go back with Mussolini was in?'. I don't like go back any place. I'm here to see my father and live with my father. That's the end of it. Finally they gave me the OK, I get out. And I met my father at Battery Park.

LEVINE: Let me just ask you a few questions. You remember the room you were in.

VITANZA: Right at the first floor.

LEVINE: By the great hall?

VITANZA: Right. You can see the Statue of Liberty.

LEVINE: Were there a lot of people in your room?

VITANZA: Well there were about ten – fifteen people sure.

LEVINE: Were there a lot of people in your situation? That had been in the Italian Army?

VITANZA: Everybody was my situation, Italian guys. Everybody of them.

LEVINE: And the people that came in the next day, these were the people you said from Jerusalem?

VITANZA: Well they can be from Jerusalem. In other words they were Jewish uh, religion. Something like that.

LEVINE: And they were here. And a lot of Italian ex-soldiers.

VITANZA: Right, right. Yeah, soldiers and everybody else [?].

LEVINE: And were you the two groups that were here then? Were there any other kind of people you can remember?

VITANZA: Well I remember a lot of people, but I can't remember – but the only thing I remember was the Jews, because of they had the hat.

LEVINE: Could you speak English then?

VITANZA: No, no way, no. Then I came here, I just to get out. I met my father. Then I went to sleep at the house of my father. And now at his place, the first day I sat down in the there [?] and I watch the Radio City. The second day my father said 'Go to the movies', he gave me five dollars. Now I want to look for a job. My father knew a person. And he – she took me to employment office – the one in Horn and Hardart – and I started work three days after I was in this country.

LEVINE: At Horn and Hardart?

VITANZA: Right.

LEVINE: Was that something new that you'd never seen before?

VITANZA: No, no. Well I went in and I started washing dishes. And I enjoyed washing because nobody bothers me. Nobody's telling me what to do. I know what it was. But the barman no – noticed that I, I was a good worker maybe. Now I want you go upstairs and do this. No I'm not go no place. Finally he convinced me to go upstairs. I go upstairs and they want make a sandwich. Next day he took me some other place and finally he took me in the cafeteria. I was in charge of cafeteria.

LEVINE: But you still couldn't speak very well.

VITANZA: No, but I was in charge of cafeteria. And after that they would transfer me from store to the other 'cause they know what I was doing. Then I start go to school and I start speak English a bit. And three years later they made me assistant manage. And I was the assistant manage – the youngest assistant manager in the company. And everybody the whole they were there they'd get jealous because I get a diff – a position and that was no good. Well I worked for them eighteen years. Then I worked for another company.

LEVINE: You worked for Horn and Hardart for eighteen years?

VITANZA: Eighteen years, yeah.

LEVINE: What would you say about Horn and Hardart? Is there anything, any opinions you have about that?

VITANZA: Well, Horn and Hardart was a good company until 1955 – no six – '70. But before then were good. Everything was fast. Everything was made there. We had a recipe, nobody knew the recipe. They won't give it to you.

LEVINE: Their baked beans was a special recipe right?

VITANZA: Baked beans, right, the baked beans. The macaroni, the beef stew, the beef pie. And then after that I'll be gone manage and that was – one of the bet – the best, just to transfer me from one place to another. To make thing rights. And I worked eighteen years, after that I went to work for another company. I retired as a vice president of the company. For long lease. Bickfords, Bickfords was another company -

LEVINE: Bickfords, was that an eating place?

VITANZA: Yeah it was comp – it was competing with Waterhouse [not understood] right. I worked for them, too, at the end. And then I retired. I went to South America. I went to Argentina.

LEVINE: Why did you go there?

VITANZA: My wife was from there. My second wife was from there. But one day I bought a house, I bought a farm. But I didn't like the things that were going because down there they don't care about anything. If they got two dollars in the pocket they don't work for the work. Now you go to the bank, you got to make a line. And while you're on line, it's twelve o'clock and they close the window on you, you come back the next day. I'm not for that. Used to – if you live in this country, it's the best country in the world, you don't want to change anything [?]. Now I know. Next, after that I went back to at Malta [ph] , Florida and there where I am. Florida.

LEVINE: Did you ever go back to Sicily?

VITANZA: Well I came in 1948, I didn't go back until 1968. Twenty years later. I went back twenty years later everything was changed.

LEVINE: In what way?

VITANZA: Well, the system. The people live better. Now – everybody got a house, brand new house. Things we don't have here. I went back in 1990, again. And the – the kids that were living with me, they got better house than I have here. And everything is homemade, special made. They go in the kitchen shelves just to make to order. Everything marble. The stairs are marble. And everybody has in the house.

LEVINE: Why didn't you want to go back there?

VITANZA: Too late. Too late.

LEVINE: Too late?

VITANZA: Because I've been com – twenty – I've spent twenty years here [inaudible], I didn't mention Italy again. When I arrived in this country I forgot about all my friends. I forgot all about everything. I forgot that I ever had a house there. That was it. I didn't write to anybody.

LEVINE: Why do you think that was? That you just cut your ties?

VITANZA: Well I was disgusted.

LEVINE: Why?

VITANZA: Because we went to war, we fight a war and then at the end they were just refugee. Just – we had nothing. The country –

LEVINE: After you put your life on the line –

VITANZA: Right. The country – the country was at the end. But, but I'm glad I'm here.

LEVINE: Do you think you keep up some Italian or Sicilian ways about you? Are there certain attitudes or values that you keep?

VITANZA: No -- well I can cook. I can cook. I can make Italian lasagna, Sicilian ziti, things like that. I can do that. But everything is American what I'm doing right now.

LEVINE: So you married?

VITANZA: I married in 1949.

LEVINE: Did you have children?

VITANZA: Three. One is here and two more.

LEVINE: Who did you marry?

VITANZA: A Puerto Rican lady.

LEVINE: A Puerto Rican lady, you had three children, and then you married again at some point?

VITANZA: This one I married in 1949, I married. I had a boy this one in 1949.

LEVINE: What's his name?

VITANZA: Uh, Carl.

LEVINE: Carl and he's here with you today with his wife and children.

VITANZA: Right, right. Now we – I got married. And I got a boy and I wasn't an American citizen. I become American citizen through my wife. She was a Puerto Rican, she had her citizenship. And I become a citizen in 1950.

LEVINE: In 1950. And of course all of your children were born here.

VITANZA: They all born here, yes.

LEVINE: Okay, when you first came you were living with your father –

VITANZA: Right.

LEVINE: On 46th street?

VITANZA: 41st Street and 6th Ave right in front the library.

LEVINE: The main branch of the public library.

VITANZA: Right. See now the one of 6th Avenue was one apartment only.

LEVINE: A what?

VITANZA: On 6th Avenue, only had one apartment and that's where my father was live. Everything was office and business.

LEVINE: You were certainly in the center of New York City.

VITANZA: Right, right. Then I got married and I went to live on the 26th street on the West Side. Then I went to live in the Bronx. Then I went to live Staten Island and that's the time I separated with my wife. And then I stay alone for a

couple of years, then I got married the second wife. But uh, we had one children – one boy. And that little boy's my grandchild.

LEVINE: Ok so what has brought you a great deal of satisfaction that you've done in your life?

VITANZA: Well, satisfies you get to be in this country. To find things you cannot find in another country. You find the work and place you go. I had no problem finding work. There was a time I had two jobs. While I work for one I had to work for somebody else at night. Because in those days I was only making twenty-five dollar week. And uh, you have a wife and a kid and you need more money. And I was working for White Towers. I worked for Bickfords, I worked in lots of coffee shop in 42nd Street and cafeterias.

But I enjoyed living here, here freedom. Do whatever you want. I used to go the track once every night. And get twenty dollars in my pocket well I'm going to spend the night at the track. If the twenty dollars go, I go home. If it don't, I stay until I finish. But I – I spend the night.

LEVINE: You didn't make money on that, did you?

VITANZA: Oh no, no money, you don't make no money on, on the gamble. But the job was good, I had the pay, they pay me good. They give me a lot of attention because I never say no. It was – it was nice.

LEVINE: How did you learn English? How was that for you?

VITANZA: For a year I went to school. In 1949 I went to school, in high school. But I didn't learn much, but I learned a lot where I was working. When I work, nobody speak Italian. Si ne Si [?]. I never bought an Italian newspaper, I will buy a English newspaper. And from there – there was a cook when I first

started working at Horn and Hardart – Italian. He didn't want talk to me at all in Italian. And I appreciate that. I appreciate it. And when I become manager I went to that store I was glad to see him because of him and I was happy that he pushed me to learn English.

LEVINE: You told him that?

VITANZA: Oh yeah. He was the one that pushed me to learn English.

LEVINE: Were you in an Italian community where you lived? Did you socialize with Italians?

VITANZA: Not at all, not at all. I didn't want too. 'Cause I wanna, I wanna learn English. I used to go to Little Italy but just to go there eat and get out. That was it. I want to speak English and the only way to speak English not to work in Italian places. They offered me lot of jobs in Italian restaurant but I won't go there.

LEVINE: So you're glad you did that?

VITANZA: Oh yes, yes.

LEVINE: How do you feel about your Italian – side.

VITANZA: Well, uh, right at the moment it doesn't come to my attention. I love Italy, I love this country. Now if I see Italian flags, don't mean anything. If I see a soccer game, like the Italians is in the World Cup they win, I might pay attention to it. But everything else, no. The Italian politician, not a question. I no – doesn't bother me.

LEVINE: Do you get involved with politics much here?

VITANZA: No, no. Well I got involved years ago when O'Dwyer was mayor –

LEVINE: O'Dwyer?

VITANZA: yeah, was mayor. Then I went to Vinny Impellitteri when he running for mayor. I was giving pamphlets out for Vinny Impellitteri, That's the only time I got involved in that.

LEVINE: So do you vote? Do you feel like a full citizen?

VITANZA: Oh yeah I vote, I vote. I vote any ti – any election. I belo – I belong to a party. I make sure I vote for that party. You know, I want to vote for that. I'm an American all ways.

LEVINE: Right, I was going to say in what ways do you feel like you've become American.

VITANZA: American, right. As I say when I first come here I started working, the only thing that was the American flag. I can look for the American flag. I look for the Americans. And uh, and through the years I was – I came here, I join the army because in those days it was a draft in this country, 1948. I was a draft in 1948. I was ready to be sent to Korea.

LEVINE: You were drafted here?

VITANZA: Sure I was drafted here 1948. '49. During the Korean War.

LEVINE: And you were supposed to be sent to Korea?

VITANZA: Korea. And then this boy born, I wasn't sent. When I had this boy I didn't go to Korea.

LEVINE: Oh this is the boy from the second –

VITANZA: From the first wife.

LEVINE: From the first wife, I see. So you didn't have to go.

VITANZA: I was ready to go, but because he born I wasn't sent there. They – I remember there, there – the officer was there – the army was at Whitehall in Manhattan. That's where I went when I was draft. Well I got all those papers I still have them. I can send some papers.

LEVINE: Well Horn and Hardart must have been quite a novelty with those little places –

VITANZA: Right, in those days it was good, I remember we worked for them they would treat us good – they used to give a bonus every year. And the bonus was something we looked forward. Then I got involved in the union they cut the bonus, that was the end of it. But then that was good. You went in for the nickel you get the macaroni, you get this. On my days off I used to go in there eat. I'd do it for the dime, the nickel, whatever be. ... [?] was a nickel. I used to go to Yankee Stadium to watch the game five nickel – five cents for a beer, five cents for hot dogs, [?]. That's where I'll go tonight, Yankee Stadium to see the game.

LEVINE: Oh great. That's nice.

VITANZA: Yeah.

LEVINE: So were you involved in the union in any big sense of that?

VITANZA: Nope, no, none. I never voted [?] for the union. Cause you know we had the money, we had the bonus, we know we're gonna lose it.

LEVINE: So is there any else, when you think back on your life here, of things that made a difference, or things that stand out in your mind?

[coughing]

VITANZA: Well important was that this country, you work, and at the end when you retire you got something coming to you. That's still true.

LEVINE: We hope that continues.

VITANZA: Right. That's the money – see I retire in 1982 and I'll be collecting social security since then. Now I'm 82 years old, but I still get a check every month, which, if I was in Italy, I wouldn't get it. And here this country we get it. And that's things you look for, when something come to you. While you work all your life, you suffer a lot, but still something to look for.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Well I'd like to thank you very much.

VITANZA: Ok, you see this boy. This boy he had high school, he went to work for the Justice Department, was in charge of corrections facility New York. He retired with \$40,000 a year pension. He retired ten years ago. He got another job, live like a king. What you can do, in the United States. You cannot do other place, right? But I'm glad to be here. Can you send me a copy?

LEVINE: Oh, absolutely. Ok is there anything else you'd like –

VITANZA: If you want any – if you want any letters from the Justice Department I have, I will send you.

LEVINE: Ok, well thanks so much. I'm very glad you were able to do this. Now wait a minute. I'd like to say I'm speaking with Amadeo Ercole Vitanza and he came here as a twenty-two year old directly out of the Italian Army and this is Janet Levine signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW