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SALVATORE LUCA

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SICILY (born Tunis, Africa), 1913

AGE: 7

SHIP: ?

PORT: PALERMO?

RESIDENCES:

- **ITALY: PALERMO**
- **THE US: BROOKLYN, NY**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today with Salvatore Luca, who came through Ellis Island in 1913 from Tunis, where he was living. His family was Italian, however they were living in Tunis in Africa, and he was seven years old at the time that he came to the United States. He stayed in the United States until 1920, and at that time he returned to Italy. I'm very happy that you're here today and we have a chance to have your story.

LUCA: Thank you. I'm happy to have met you and to have known you.

LEVINE: Well, good. Let me start by asking your birth date.

LUCA: My date?

LEVINE: When were you born?

LUCA: I was born exactly February 9th. February 9th of 1906, 1906.

LEVINE: And where were you born?

LUCA: I was born in Tunis.

LEVINE: Okay. And you lived in Tunis up until the time that you came to the United States.

LUCA: From Tunis we returned, my family returned in Italy, because my family was Italian. So I came in the United States from Italy, not directly from Tunis.

LEVINE: You came . . .

LUCA: Not directly from Tunis. My family returned in Italy because they were Italians. And then in 19, uh, 1913, my family came here in the United States, and I with them.

LEVINE: Okay. How many years were you in Italy before you came to the United

States?

LUCA: How old I was?

LEVINE: No, how many years were you in Italy before you came to the United States?

LUCA: In Italy I was, from Tunis I returned to Italy and I was there only two years.

LEVINE: I see. Do you remember that at all? Do you remember those two years?

LUCA: I remember, yes. I don't remember anything of Tunis because it was, but of the years before I came here, in Italy, yes. Because I have something like five, six years or so. I remember.

LEVINE: Now, how about telling me the names of your family members.

LUCA: What?

LEVINE: What were, the people in your family, your mother, your father, sisters and brothers? Did you have sisters and brothers?

LUCA: Yes, I had two brothers and one sister, but they died, are dead now. I was in the teenage. I was, not the eldest.

LEVINE: You were the youngest?

LUCA: Eh? No.

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LEVINE: In the middle?

LUCA: My brothers and my sisters were. I was the less. I was the last child, yes, the last child.

LEVINE: What was your mother's name?

LUCA: My mother's name was, in Italian, Giovanna. It means Jenny.

LEVINE: And what was her maiden name?

LUCA: Huh? Her maiden name? Presti. Presti. P-R-E-S-T-I.

LEVINE: And what about your father? What was his name?

LUCA: My father's name is, was Calogero. You cannot translate it here in English because it's exactly, you know, a Sicilian name. Calogero. I want you to know, it's exactly a Greek word, and it means exactly "a nice old man." (they laugh) That's the meaning of the word. But the name is Calogero.

LEVINE: Is it C-A-R-L-O?

LUCA: What, the name?

LEVINE: Yes.

LUCA: C-A-L-O-G-E-R-O. Calogero.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LUCA: C-A-L-O-G-E-R-O.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, um, now, what were your two brothers' names?

LUCA: My two brothers' name? One was Joseph, in Italian, Giuseppe, Joseph, it means. The other was Carmelo. Carmelo in English is Carmine, Carmine. My sister was Estella, Estella. E-S-T-E-L-L-A.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and that was, they were the four children?

LUCA: Huh?

LEVINE: There were four children?

LUCA: Yes, exactly. We had four. I had two brother and one sister.

LEVINE: Tell me what your father was like. What kind of a man was your father?

LUCA: He was a very good man, you know. He loved his family.

LEVINE: What did he do for work?

LUCA: Eh?

LEVINE: What did he do for work?

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LUCA: He was a businessman. He was a businessman. Everything, in trade, commercial.

LEVINE: Oh, and that's how you happened to go to Tunis?

LUCA: Before, and in Tunis, too. Then returning in Italy, we stayed, we stayed there only two years, I told, and then we came here in the United States. And he always followed his business.

LEVINE: What was he trading?

LUCA: Eh?

LEVINE: What kinds of things was he trading?

LUCA: He was trading, you know, with wagons. He had horses, too. Then came the automobiles, you know, so they were. But he was doing the same business. He was buying, and then he was selling.

LEVINE: I see. And your mother?

LUCA: My mother was, you know, then it was a different world. Now the ladies, you know, work and they earn. But then especially in Italy the mothers were not working, were housekeepers, you know.

LEVINE: Do you remember the house you lived in in Italy?

LUCA: Yes, I remember.

LEVINE: Can you describe it? Describe the house where you live?

LUCA: Listen, the houses there were not especially done. Now we have very large houses. We have apartments with five, six rooms now, in the new buildings. But then, you know, especially 19, uh, in 19, exactly when I came here in 1913, Italy was a very poor country. And so the houses were not large, you know. They were very little, you understand. Because here in the United States, the United States are thirty times larger than Italy. So the United States have grounds. You have here, you know, broad ways, very broad ways. You have, eh, what you want here. There in Italy the streets are very narrow generally, because they were streets of Middle Age, of Middle Age, you understand. In Italy, we are now fifty-five millions. In the United States there are about two hundred and twenty-five millions. But it's thirty times large than Italy. You have all the ground you want. And, you know, the United States is the wealthiest country in the world.

LEVINE: Tell me, where in Italy were you living?

LUCA: Huh?

LEVINE: Where in Italy were you living before you came to the United States?

LUCA: Exactly in Palermo. Not exactly in Palermo, about nine kilometers from Palermo. Kilometers nine means something like six miles and a half, where we had relatives here, and we returned there for my studies because I began to study Italian when I returned in 1920. I was only fourteen years old. I had, my graduation paper of the United States, and then I began to study there. I

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had to study very hard, you know, because I had to study, and then enter to the university.

LEVINE: I see. Before we talk about that, let's talk about the decision to come to the United States. Why did your father decide to come to the United States?

LUCA: I told you. Italy was a poor country. You know, here in the United States have come people of all the countries of Europe, from Germany then, from Austria, from Russia, from Spain and from Italy, because they found my father, and he was right exactly, hoped to find a new, a better life here in the United States. And so we came just for this reason.

LEVINE: Did your whole family come? Your mother, your father, your brothers, your sister?

LUCA: Yes, exactly. Everyone, everyone. My brothers and my sister died here.

LEVINE: And did you leave other family members?

LUCA: Huh?

LEVINE: Did you leave grandparents, aunts and uncles?

LUCA: Yes.

LEVINE: They were near Palermo?

LUCA: They were exactly, you know, near Palermo, six miles. They was living

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exactly, a sister of my mother, so we were a guest in her home. Then we had, we bought our home, and we were near Palermo, where is the university and where is the college, and where is the gymnasium, and so I could study there.

LEVINE: I see. Now, do you remember the name of the ship that you . . .

LUCA: I remember the name of the ship when I returned. It was Dante Alighieri. Dante, you know, is the greatest poet of Italy, one of the greatest poets of the world. Dante, Shakespeare, Shakespeare for English. And so for Goethe, for Germany. Dante is one of the most greatest poet of the . . .

LEVINE: Well then, um, how long was your voyage?

LUCA: The voyage, it was then nineteen days because, you know, it was, I returned in 1920 and the ships were not of those of 1950. In 1950 the ships employed only eleven days. They were very good ships, nine days. But then they were old ships. Dante Alighieri was the best ship then in 1920 . . .

LEVINE: But in 1913, when you first came.

LUCA: I don't remember the name of the ship when I came.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. So it was the Dante Alighieri when you came back.

LUCA: When I returned, yes.

LEVINE: I see. Do you remember when you left Italy . . .

LUCA: When I . . .

LEVINE: When you left Italy to come to the United States, do you remember anything that your family brought with you?

LUCA: Brought with me, what?

LEVINE: When you came to the United States . . .

LUCA: Yes, exactly. I was seven years old, and I began to understand, I was understanding. From Tunis we remained in Italy for two years, and so I understand. I remember, exactly.

LUCA: Did your family take anything with them? Did they take any valuable things that they wanted to have in this country?

LUCA: Well, you know, they have, every family has something that is very dear for them.

LEVINE: Yes.

LUCA: My mother and my father brought was (he laughs) I don't remember this, you understand.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, so what was the voyage like? The voyage to the United States?

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LUCA: It was very bad for me.

LEVINE: What happened?

LUCA: I told you, I had an accident here. I fell down and I broke my arm. So when we arrived, it was impossible to enter into the United States. They stopped us here, and I needed medical treatment. And I remember the doctor. I don't remember the name. He was a very nice doctor. He loved me and I loved him. And I remained there one month, the whole month of July of 1913, in the hospital. And I wanted to see, now. I was there, exactly.

LUCA: Now, was your whole family on Ellis Island? Did your whole family stay on Ellis Island?

LUCA: Yes. My family was stopped here, too, because they could not enter into the United States because if it was not possible for me to have my arm as I had it before, we had to return.

LEVINE: Now, what do you remember about Ellis Island from that month of July in 1913?

LUCA: I was treated, they were treating me very well, you know. I was a boy, and that doctor, especially, you know, loved me. I remember the life that I had here in the hospital was very beautiful days.

LEVINE: Yes. Tell me . . .

LUCA: I thought I was in the family, because the family was not in the hospital, was

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remained here in the Ellis Island because they couldn't enter.

LEVINE: Did you see your family?

LUCA: My mother used to come in the hospital, and my father and my brother, too, used to come, but only for a moment, and they had to remain always in Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Can you describe the hospital? What was the hospital like?

LUCA: The life? It was very well for me because, you know, with that doctor, we loved each other, it was as if I was in my home. No, it was a very nice, a very good life for me.

LEVINE: What was the hospital?

LUCA: Huh?

LEVINE: Can you tell me what, describe the hospital?

LUCA: I told you, I was only seven years. I remember now, in 19, this, in 1913, many years have passed. I remember the hospital very well, yes, exactly. But I cannot say . . .

LEVINE: Do you remember the food? Were you . . .

LUCA: Yes, very well, you know. Breakfast in the morning, and then we had dinner, and then we had supper. No, no, they were treating very well, you know.

LEVINE: Were there other children in the hospital with you?

LUCA: I was only there, because there were people, adults.

LEVINE: Oh, other adults were in the hospital.

LUCA: You know, because it was for my arm. I don't know if there were other children in other parts of the hospital because it was in the part of the hospital, well . . .

LEVINE: For the broken bones.

LUCA: Relating to your . . .

LEVINE: Illness.

LUCA: . . . the treatment that you needed. So maybe there were other children, but in other parts that I didn't see. Where I was, I was the only child, the only child, the only child.

LEVINE: Were the other adults friendly to you?

LUCA: Huh?

LEVINE: Were the other adults friendly? When you were in the hospital, did you see other adults there?

LUCA: Other?

LEVINE: Other patients?

LUCA: Other persons? Yes, of course, we were many there. I was the only child, but there were about, where we were in the room, I think something like twenty. There were many beds.

LEVINE: Were you free to walk around?

LUCA: Eh?

LEVINE: Could you walk around?

LUCA: Yes, always, in the room. But there was a very beautiful view because, you know, from the windows you see the sea, not the sea, the Hudson River. It was very beautiful. It was as if I was in my home. For that doctor, for that doctor.

LEVINE: So then when you, when your arm mended, then where did you go?

LUCA: I told you, one month. All the month of July I had, my arm was so I couldn't stretch it. It was impossible for me to stretch it.

LEVINE: And then where did your family go after your arm was better?

LUCA: We went exactly there in Brooklyn because it was my father, my mother, I and one of my brothers. Because my sister and the other brother were here in the

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United States. They had come here two years before. So when we went out, my father, my mother and my brother and I, we went to the home of my brother, the eldest brother, because my sister had another home for herself. And we went there in Brooklyn. We were living exactly first in Flushing Avenue. Flushing Avenue near was Hamburg Avenue and Knickerbocker Avenue. And there I began to go to school.

LEVINE: Tell me about school.

LUCA: Heh?

LEVINE: Tell me about school in Brooklyn. What was school like in Brooklyn?

LUCA: I cannot say it. I remember only, you know, the school, I think it was 19, no 911. And the school of Elizabeth, New Jersey where we lived two years. But the other school's number, I don't remember. I don't remember if the school where I graduated, but here in Manhattan, when we returned from Elizabeth, if it was number 49, but I don't remember. I cannot say it.

LEVINE: Do you remember any experiences about starting school when you couldn't speak English?

LUCA: Will you repeat, please?

LEVINE: Before you could speak English, was it difficult being in school?

LUCA: No. The first school for me was just exactly the American school, not any other school. It was only the English, the American school. I began to speak

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English very early, you know, because I was a little kid and you learn more and easily.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then did your father stay trading? Was your father in business in the United States?

LUCA: Yes, always, yes. He was always in trade, in commerce. Always.

LEVINE: And what did he sell? What did he buy and sell in the United States?

LUCA: He used to have horses and wagons. Because, you know, we didn't have automobiles then. They were very few automobiles, very few cars. They were only horses, especially, you know, German horses, for the brewers. They were very, you know, heavy and very, they had a very much strength.

LEVINE: And so your father bought horses and he sold them?

LUCA: And the wagons too, and used to sell it, as now they do with the cars. They buy cars and they sell cars, just the same thing.

LEVINE: Do you have any memories of being here when you were about seven, eight, nine years old?

LUCA: Here in the United States, yeah. I remember everything.

LEVINE: What do you think of when you remember that time?

LUCA: I was, listen. When you are a very young lady or young, not young lady,

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young child, I was a young child. It was, for me, you know, as if I had been, as if I was living there in Italy. I liked it. I liked the people, too, the schools, you know, they were very nice rooms. We had teachers that were teaching very well, you know. So I felt to be very well. I was happy. Yes, I was truly happy, until we returned. There I had to study to have, I had to study. Because here the study of the elementary schools only. There were eight grades here. Eight grades in New York exactly, but there in Italy I had to study very hard because I had to learn Italian. Italian, I speak it very well. Not as English, but very more than English. I'm a teacher, you understand. I had to study very hard for the gymnasium, for the college, and for the university.

LEVINE: Well, tell me, why did your father and mother decide to go back to Italy.

LUCA: Listen, it was for this simple reason. He had money then because he had gained something. When a man begins to be an old man he wants to return where he was born, and where he had many friends. It was possible for him to buy a home as he wanted, and so he returned.

LEVINE: I see. Did your mother and father become citizens?

LUCA: Huh?

LEVINE: Did your mother and father become citizens in the United States?

LUCA: They were never citizens for one simple reason, because they always were, had in mind to return here.

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LUCA: I see, I see. And then when you returned you had in mind to study.

LUCA: Where?

LEVINE: In Italy.

LUCA: I had to study because that was what my father and my mother wanted. If they returned in Italy, they returned for me because my brother, my brothers remained here. They didn't return. My mother, my father returned here in Italy, especially for me because they wanted me to study there, and I did so. They had some money, and it was possible. That's the reason. They returned for me. I'm a teacher, I owe that, more of that to my father and to my mother because if I was here, I don't know what I have to do. Because I went here to the high school, but only for ten days because we returned there, only for ten days.

LEVINE: So you left on the Dante Alighieri. You took the Dante Alighieri, the ship, and you returned to Italy.

LUCA: I don't know the, I returned with the Dante Alighieri, but the name of the ship where I had the accident, I don't remember.

LEVINE: Okay. Now (she coughs) you went back to Palermo.

LUCA: Huh?

LEVINE: You went back to Italy outside of Palermo?

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LUCA: In all of Italy I have taught, I have taught exactly, you know, first in the town that is called Alcamo.

LEVINE: Could you spell it?

LUCA: In Sicily.

LEVINE: Could you spell that?

LUCA: Huh?

LEVINE: Spell it?

LUCA: A-L-C-A-M-O, in the province of Trapani. Because, you know, Palermo is a province. Here you have states. We, there we have regions. Sicily is a region. Here you would say "state." In Canada they would say province, province, there. In Canada they don't have states, they have provinces. So Alcamo is in the region of Sicily, but the district of Trapani, of Trapani, the district. There was my first teaching. Then from there . . .

LEVINE: Why don't you say, for the tape, what were you teaching?

LUCA: I was teaching there Latin, Greek, history and geography. Then I won, that was the first competition that I won. When I won the second, then I made two competitions in the same year. So my second and my third competition. But two, in the same year, I won the competition for the gymnasium for Greek, always Latin, history and geography. And the other competition was superior, it was special, you understand. It was for Latin and Greek languages and

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literatures in the college. Not any more in the gymnasium, in the college. From the college the pupils then went to the university. Only Latin and Greek languages and the literatures. Not any more history, not any more Greek, not any more geography. Now Greek, yes. Latin and Greek. Not any more history and not any more geography. But I had studied geography and history, the ancient history, and even the history of the Middle Age, and the Modern Age, too.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. Why don't we pause here while we turn the tape over. We'll pause for a minute.

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: Okay. We're resuming with Mr. Luca on Side B. Mr. Luca, tell me what you're proudest of that you have done.

LUCA: When my father returned, you know, he didn't work any more. He didn't work. He was only, I had to study. He had retired. When we returned he retired here. He was an old man, you understand.

LEVINE: I see. And did you ever marry?

LUCA: No. For one simple reason, I tell you. I loved to study, and I wanted to travel. When I was living here, I was traveling because one of my brothers was living there in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and so I used to go, with the Central Railroad of New Jersey. The railroads there, then, were very good. Now they are not. Now we have the Greyhound here and the Continental. So I was traveling here for reasons of family when I returned there. And when I had my degree of letters, I'd been, I have been always traveling in the United States to see. I didn't want a family because if I had a family it was impossible for me to be free and independent and to travel for my studies. That's the reason. Not only for that, but there was another reason. My mother, she was a very nice lady. She died very early, in 1930. I was only twenty-four years old. I was only twenty-four. But I had my aunt. There was my father, my aunt was the sister of my mother, and so I had a second mother. I didn't have, I was not compelled to marry because I had my aunt that was doing all that was necessary for me. Then I was teaching here and there, and I was always traveling. In Italy, not out of Italy, because I didn't have the time. I had only one month of vacation. For one month I used to go to Germany, to Munchen. I used to go in Austria, that I know very well. Vienna, and Salzburg. And so the other is, Salzburg is where (?) was born, and the other city is Innsbruck. And I used to go to France. To France, in Nice, not in Paris. I didn't have time to go. In Nice, and I had to return in Italy because I didn't have time. I had only one month of vacation.

LEVINE: Now that you're older and you think about this time you spent in the United States, how do you think about it?

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LUCA: I have always loved the United States. It was my mother language then. I always have loved the United States.

LEVINE: What do you like about it?

LUCA: Listen, here are many, here are people of every country. Whichever country, from Germany, from Austria, from Russia, from Holland, and from Lithuania, so, so. It's a large country. You make many, you strike many acquaintances. You strike always acquaintance. You become acquainted with this, with the other man. There are all Italians only. You understand? Here it's another thing. It's a larger, a larger country. You can have acquaintance with everybody. Even your mind becomes richer, you understand? (he laughs)
You think better. You think better.

LEVINE: Is there anything else, Mr. Luca?

LUCA: Huh?

LEVINE: Is there anything else that you'd like to add before we close? Is there anything else you'd like to say about the United States or your life . . .

LUCA: About the United States? I've been always, you know, proud to have been, and to have been educated. My first education was that of the United States. If I had remained here I'd speak better, of course, because, you know, for fifty years, when I returned in 1920, until 1970, for fifty years I didn't speak a single word of English. Because there was no one with whom, because I returned here when I retired in 1970, so after fifty years I began to speak a little of English again. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did it come back to you?

LUCA: Huh?

LEVINE: Did it come back to you?

LUCA: I've come back at least six times now.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

LUCA: I know the United States from coast to coast and from north to south. And I told you I've been all over Central America and all South America. In South America I have not been only in Paraguay, Uruguay and Bolivia because they were out of my bounds.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I thank you. I'm very happy . . .

LUCA: And I'm very happy to meet with you.

LEVINE: That I've had a chance to talk with you.

LUCA: That's the reason I wanted to visit . . .

LEVINE: The hospital.

LUCA: The hospital.

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LEVINE: Yes, we'll do that. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And I've been here with Salvatore Luca, who came to the United States in 1913 when he was seven. This is May 30, 1992, and we're here in the Ellis Island studio.

END OF INTERVIEW