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ANTONETTA CARUSO ERBA

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- **ITALY: LIONI, PROVINCE OF AVELLINO**
- **THE US: NEWARK, NJ**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm happy to be here today with Antonetta Caruso Erba. It's June 16, 1992 and we're here in Newark, New Jersey, in Mrs. Erba's home. Antoinette Caruso, her name when she came from Italy in 1920 when she was sixteen years old, is now eighty-eight. (Mrs. Erba laughs.) I'm very happy to be here, and I'd like to start by asking you your birth date.

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ERBA: My birthday is May the 30, 1904.

LEVINE: And where were you born?

ERBA: I was born in Lioni Province, Avellino.

LEVINE: The province of . . .

ERBA: Of Avellino.

LEVINE: E-L-E-N-A?

ERBA: A-V-E-L-L-I-N-O. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Avellino. And do you remember the town?

ERBA: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: What do you remember? When you think of that town, what are the things that you think about?

ERBA: Well, I remember when I went to school. The neighbor, when I used to play, when I used to go with my grandfather in the farm.

LEVINE: What do you remember about your grandfather?

ERBA: Oh, my grandfather was nice. He used to like me very, very much. I was named after him.

LEVINE: What was his name?

ERBA: His name was Antonio.

LEVINE: Antonio.

ERBA: So my name, when I was born, my name is Antonia. But when I went to school, the girls, they started calling me Antoinette. My real name is Antonia, after my grandfather.

LEVINE: And what kind of a man was he?

ERBA: He was a nice old man. Very nice, he was.

LEVINE: Can you remember any times that you were with him, things that you did together?

ERBA: Oh, yeah. And after my grandmother passed away, he came and lived with us.

LEVINE: And can you remember any times with him? What do you remember doing with him?

ERBA: Well, I remember. I tell you, after I come out of school I used to go in the farm, we used to pick up the cherry and all kinds of fruits. That's what I remember.

LEVINE: Was he a farmer?

ERBA: Yeah, he had a, he used to cultivate his own ground.

LEVINE: I'm sorry?

ERBA: He used to cultivate it himself, like all kinds of vegetables and the grain and everything.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And is that what he did for work?

ERBA: Yeah, that's what he did for work, yeah.

LEVINE: And how about your father? What did he do?

ERBA: Well, my father, my father was here most of the time. My father used to back and forth, back and forth. And then 1912 he came and he brought my sister. She was fourteen years old. And then in 1916 he sent for us, but my mother, she had a blind mother and she didn't want to leave her alone, and she didn't want to come. And then he came back to Italy. When he come back he got sick, and he died in 1919. And then my sister, she stand up for me. And then I sent for my brother. He came in 1921. So the rest of the family, they remained with my mother. But then in 1956 my brother sent for my other brother, in 1956. And he sent for his wife and four children. They're all here now.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What was your mother's name?

ERBA: Maria.

LEVINE: Maria. And her maiden name?

ERBA: Oh, such a long name. Portafrano. That's P-O-R-T-A-F-R-A-N-O.
Portafrano.

LEVINE: And how many brothers and sisters, can you tell me their names?

ERBA: Oh, yeah. I had four sisters and two brothers. My oldest sister, her name is Angie. I'm named Antoinette. My other sister Philomena and the other one Ellen. And two brothers, one Philip and one Dominick.

LEVINE: And what did your father do for work?

ERBA: He was a shoemaker.

LEVINE: He was a shoemaker in Italy.

ERBA: Yeah.

LEVINE: And how about when he came here.

ERBA: Oh, I don't know when he came here what he was doing. I really don't know.

LEVINE: And did your mother work at all?

ERBA: No, my mother, she has six kids, she never worked.

LEVINE: Now, tell me about the town. What was the town's name again?

ERBA: Lioni. L-I-O-N-I.

LEVINE: And what was Lioni like?

ERBA: Oh, nice. We had the railroad right in the city. When I was young I used to hear the whistle blow. I used to run near the stages to see the train. It was nice. But after the earthquake everything was destroyed.

LEVINE: The hurricane?

ERBA: The earthquake. Everything was destroyed. But a lot of people, they went back, but I never did. And then I got sick, and I'm not able to travel any more.

LEVINE: The earthquake happened after you left.

ERBA: 1980.

LEVINE: 1980. Uh-huh. Tell me about school in Lioni.

ERBA: Well, I went to school. I graduated on the fourth grade. The fourth grade is like, the third here is high school over here.

LEVINE: Oh. And what do you remember about school?

ERBA: Oh, when I went back I saw my old teacher. I says I'm the girlfriend, all

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married, all have children, when I went back in 1957. It was nice. But it was different than when I was young, than when I left. It was everything different. Because I went back after thirty-seven years.

LEVINE: How do you remember it?

ERBA: I remember, sometimes when I'm alone, my vision, I could see.

LEVINE: Why don't you just close your eyes and have your vision and tell me what you see?

ERBA: Well, I see the mountain. We used to have a lot of mountains, and I used to remember when I used to go and get the water, when I used to go on the farm with my grandfather. All those things I remember. You know, that's the 72 years. It's a long . . .

LEVINE: Where did you get the water? What was that like?

ERBA: That was spring water. The water, that was spring water. You could pick it anywhere. That's another, they have no fountain or anything. It was spring water. It was beautiful, beautiful. When the, and they take in those thing, I remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember games you played when you were little? Do you remember any of the games you played?

ERBA: Oh, yeah. Well, I used to remember things like that. But then my mother, she used to send me to dressmaking. You know, she wants me . . . (she

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laughs) But, to me, we used to come out of school, instead of going there I used to go play with the girls. And I regret every moment. If I would have listened to her I'd know how to sew. Because I have my own daughter, she sew beautiful, I sent her to vocation school.

LEVINE: Did your mother send you to the dressmaker to learn how to sew?

ERBA: To learn how to sew after school instead of hanging around on the street. (she laughs) I didn't go. I started to play with the girls. Now that I'm old I regret it. I said I should have learned it because it's nice to know how to sew.

LEVINE: Is there anything else that you think of when you think of this town, Lioni?

ERBA: Well, hardly anything else. I don't know. When I went back, 1957, I only stayed about a couple of weeks in Lioni, and then we travelled. We went to Sicily, and then my youngest daughter, she went to see something.

LEVINE: Tell me when you decided to leave Lioni. How was the decision made?

ERBA: Well, my father passed away and she wrote to my sister did I want to come to America. So she sent me a thousand lira, in those days, a thousand lira. And then when I come in I got a job. I work in . . .

LEVINE: Well, wait. Before we get to when you got to America, tell me about, how did you feel. What did you know about America?

ERBA: I didn't know nothing. I was so glad to come.

LEVINE: What had you heard about it?

ERBA: Well, the people, my father, they used to talk so much about it. My sister, my sister writing.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you knew, what you thought, what your father had said, what your sister wrote?

ERBA: Well, they said you got to go to work. Everybody comes here to improve, to make money. Well, when I came here I was living with my sister for about two years.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you took with you when you were packing to come here?

ERBA: Oh, yeah. I brought, of course, my mother, she packed underwear, slippers, dress and things like that. But I came dressed in black because my father the year before died, see. But then when I came here my sister said, "They're not used to wearing black dress. They wear any color dress." I got a job right away.

LEVINE: Well, before you left Lioni, did you have a party? How was it when you were leaving your mother?

ERBA: Well, my mother came with me to Naples. She stayed till I got on the boat, and then she went. I didn't come alone. She came with me, my mother.

LEVINE: Do you remember how you felt about leaving?

ERBA: Well, I feel bad to leave my mother and my sisters, you know. But then I was happy when I was coming to America. (she laughs)

LEVINE: And were you travelling with anyone?

ERBA: Oh, yeah. We were about ten people from the same time on the boat. Yeah.

LEVINE: So how did you get to the boat?

ERBA: By train, from my house to Naples we went by train. And then over there we take the boat.

LEVINE: And did you have any examinations before?

ERBA: Oh, yeah. Your eye, your physical, everything.

LEVINE: This is in Italy before you . . .

ERBA: In Naples, yeah. And over here, too.

LEVINE: And so what was the boat ride like?

ERBA: Oh, that was an old junk boat. The name was the Madonna. It was on the French line. In those days, oh. They didn't have, you used to go and get the food yourself. But I was so seasick that I never got up. I stayed in bed all the time.

LEVINE: And what was the bed like? Where was . . .

ERBA: Oh, the bed was like those cot bed that you just lay down over there. It's not like years back with the Conte Bianco Mano and the Columbo, all those, much better ship. That was terrible. They take us almost twenty-five days to come over here.

LEVINE: Were you in the bottom of the ship?

ERBA: Yeah, in the bottom of the ship, yeah. That's where we were. I was seasick. Even if I cross the Hudson River I get sick. That's why I don't like to go on the boat.

LEVINE: Did anything happen on the boat that you remember?

ERBA: Nothing yet. Not on the boat. There was a nice, there was a lot of people from my home town. They take care of me. Of course, I was young. And that was the first time that I ever leave my home, you know. I never go no place. Then when I got here I live with my sister and I went to work.

LEVINE: Well, do you remember when the boat came into the New York Harbor?

ERBA: Oh, yeah. That was in the morning, when we saw the Statue of Liberty. Everybody hollered, "The Statue of Liberty." Everybody got up. Everybody was happy.

LEVINE: Had you heard about the Statue of Liberty before that?

ERBA: No. Uh-uh.

LEVINE: And then when you first saw Ellis Island, do you remember what you thought then?

ERBA: Yeah, when we got there we had to stay three, four days before. Yeah, but there were a lot of people that were there, and then over there they passed the examination in the eye. A lot of people they send back.

LEVINE: Had you heard about Ellis Island before you got there?

ERBA: No.

LEVINE: So you didn't know you were going to go there?

ERBA: We got there, everybody hollered, "New York, New York, New York." You know, I never was out of my home town, and that was a thrill for me.

LEVINE: Do you remember seeing New York, the buildings, from the boat?

ERBA: Yeah, yeah. We saw New York. Everybody said, "New York, New York, New York." And then when we passed the Statue of Liberty it was about three o'clock in the morning, and everybody says, "The Statue of Liberty," and everybody went up and looked. It was nice. Those thing I remember. (she laughs) And this is it.

LEVINE: And when you got to Ellis Island, why did you have to stay there?

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ERBA: Oh, I don't know why. Really, I don't know why. We stayed there about three, four days. It was around Christmas time and my sisters used to bring the food, fruits, you know. And then they come and get me. We had to stay in line. It was something new for me, you know.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you thought with all those people staying at Ellis Island?

ERBA: The first thing, when I saw the colored people, I never saw colored people. I saw on the boat. I was stunned. (she laughs) Because I didn't know. We didn't live in the city. It was a real small town, and I never used to see colored people. I was stunned when I saw it. They were working on the boat here.

LEVINE: Was there any other things that you remember seeing for the first time, or experiencing?

ERBA: No, I don't remember. Only I remember things over here, but that's it.

LEVINE: So your sister came every day?

ERBA: Yeah, my sister come and get me.

LEVINE: What was it like seeing your sister after all that time?

ERBA: Well, my sister, she came 1912. I came 1920. So it was only eight years. I remember her. She was six years older than me. She was born 1898 and I was born 1904. I remember.

LEVINE: And what was your sister like?

ERBA: She was nice. She was nice. She took care of me. I stayed with her till I got married.

LEVINE: So when you were released from Ellis Island you went with your sister?

ERBA: Yeah.

LEVINE: And where did you go?

ERBA: She used to live on Seventh Avenue, my sister, right across from the church. I always lived in this area all my life.

LEVINE: Do you remember the trip from New York to here?

ERBA: Yeah. Well, we come with the Hudson train there.

LEVINE: With the what?

ERBA: We came with the train to Hoboken, and then we come home. I don't know the way. Wherever they took me, I followed them.

LEVINE: And do you remember some of your first impressions of being in the United States?

ERBA: Well, it was nice. I was glad to see my sister and her husband, and she had two little boys. The only relative I had, her.

LEVINE: So then you went to work.

ERBA: I went to work. My sister got a job for me in cigar factory on Morris Avenue. I worked for twenty-five cents an hour in those days. 1921 I worked for twenty-five cents a day.

LEVINE: And what did you do in the cigar factory?

ERBA: I was making cigars. I was a bunch maker. I was making cigars. I stayed there a couple of years, and then I learned a few words. And then through a friend of mine I got another job, a better job. I was making more money. See, at first I was so greenhorn, I don't know nothing. So my sister was working, she got factory, and she took me with her. But then after two years I got friendly with some girls, and she said, "Come and work with me." And I went and worked with her. I was making more money. I was working on production.

LEVINE: What kind of a place?

ERBA: We was making all novelty buckles, for belts, shoes. But then I was working on the machine, on the power press. And I was making more money. And I stood there, ooh, I worked there about twenty years. Even after I was married I went back to work there.

LEVINE: I see. And how did you learn English?

ERBA: I was going to school on Franklin School, up the street here. But my brother,

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a lot of fellows in those days, you know, in those days. He says, "No, you don't have to go to school." Because there was a lot of fellows. I only went for not even a month. And then I learned when my kids.

LEVINE: Well, did your brothers then come over after that?

ERBA: My brother come in 1921. I came 1920. But, you know, the old Italian, that you can't go out alone. That's how they're so used to over there.

LEVINE: I see. So your brothers didn't want you to go out alone to school?

ERBA: Yeah, they didn't want to because there were a lot of fellows that came from Italy. They all went back to school to learn something. But I learned to work with the girls, and with my children.

LEVINE: Tell me the other ways in which your brother was strict with you?

ERBA: I don't know why. He was strict even when I used to keep company with my husband.

LEVINE: What would he do?

ERBA: Like, he'd say, "Nine o'clock you got to be home." That's the old Italian way. But today maybe there's a difference. I don't know. I was strict with my girls. (she laughs) When they used to go out I used to say, "Ten o'clock you got to be home." But the youngest one, uh-uh. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Tell me this, when you were here in Newark, were there mostly Italian

people?

ERBA: Yeah, there was all, that was Little Italy over here years back.

LEVINE: So most of the people you worked with and everything were Italian?

ERBA: Yeah. There were all Italian people, Italian stores that were around here. It was beautiful years back. I saw my Cathy says to me, the girl says, "Mama, forget the past." Sometime I says to them, "See the prize, and the . . ." I said, "Oh, my God." She said, "Mama, forget the past." She says, "They're different now. Think for the present or the future." (she laughs) I had three girls.

LEVINE: Well, tell me how you met your husband.

ERBA: I met my husband, I used to have a girlfriend and he used to work with somebody there. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: Did he come over from . . .

ERBA: He come over from Sicily, 1919. And I used to go out with this girl. It was like her mother. She was the American born. Her mother, she came from my hometown, and I used to go there on Sunday. And they used to live in the same house. And he saw me a couple of times, and then he stopped me. I says, "No, I'm too young," I says. And then once or twice, and then he says, "Where you live?" I told where I live, and he come over the house. And we kept company about a year, not even. And then . . .

LEVINE: Did you like him at first?

ERBA: No. He used to write to me. I never write to him. (she laughs)

LEVINE: He wrote to you?

ERBA: Yeah. He used to write to me, but I says, "I'm too young." And then I decided, I says, "I might as well get married." And he was working, I was working, and we made a nice living.

LEVINE: So what kind of a man was your husband?

ERBA: Oh, he was a nice man.

LEVINE: What was he like?

ERBA: Nice. He loved me very, very much. Even the children. My husband loved my oldest daughter so much. He was nice to them, very nice.

LEVINE: Was he like a typical Italian man? Was he strict?

ERBA: No, well, a little bit. A little bit, no much. A little bit. He was more modern. He was all right. He was all right. He was a very peaceful man. He didn't want no trouble. He was nice. I miss him very, very much. But he was very sick. He died of cancer of the bladder. He was sick a long time.

LEVINE: Well, tell me the names of your children.

ERBA: Well, my older daughter named Maria. My second daughter's name is Eleanor, and my third girl's name is Barbara.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And now you have grandchildren too?

ERBA: I have two granddaughters, two grandson and two great-granddaughters.

LEVINE: Wow. That's wonderful. Well, now, do you remember anything that your mother or your father tried to teach you that you remembered?

ERBA: Well, my father, most of the time he was in America. He used to go back and forth. Every time my father come back, my mother have another child. (she laughs) So he was, most of the time he was in America, my father.

LEVINE: I see. How about your mother? Were there things she tried to teach you?

ERBA: Oh, my mother was nice, sure. The first thing my father used to say to my mother, "Send the children to school." We all went to school. We all know our writing and reading in Italian, yeah. She was a good mother. And then when my father died we were five. And there is not like over here that you get welfare. Over there nobody help you. So we had our own place to live. My mother had her own house, yes. And she managed. And then one by one we came here, one by one. Like a chain. You call me, I call you. (she laughs)

LEVINE: And how do you feel about coming here?

ERBA: I'm happy. I'm very happy here, very happy. We work hard and, my husband

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and I, and then the girls grew up, they go to school. They graduate. Maria, I sent her to vocation school, she know how to sew. And Eleanor, she didn't even finish high school because she wanted to go to work. Barbara I sent to college. She's a teacher.

LEVINE: Are there ways about you that you have kept? Are there certain ways about you that you were like that in Italy and you just kept up those ways, traditions or customs?

ERBA: Well, when you come here you learn, you know, you learn. Over there there's different life than over here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you think you've kept some of the ways that you were in Italy?

ERBA: Not much. I had to change, a different. Over here it's a different kind of life.

LEVINE: What's the big difference, would you say?

ERBA: There's not a difference from here to there.

LEVINE: What do you think are the main ones that you see?

ERBA: The main ones that you're free. You live your own life free, and got nobody to tell you do this or do that.

LEVINE: Did you feel when you were in Italy that people told you what to do?

ERBA: Well, no. When I went back to Italy I see the difference, too. They change

over there. They change a lot over there. I was surprised. It was about 1957, so it was about thirty-three or thirty-four years ago when I went.

LEVINE: Well, is there anything in your life that you're very proud of having done?

ERBA: Well, I'm proud that I worked together with my husband, I educated my kids, we bought a house. I had a beautiful three-family house on Park Avenue here. After he passed away I couldn't keep it because all alone it's too much to me. And then I got sick. I had to go to the hospital. I had a tumor removed. And I wanted to give it to my son-in-law, he don't want it. My daughter, she live in a nice place. She live in Brookdale in Bloomfield. That's a very residential . . .

LEVINE: Well, tell me, is there anything else that you'd like to say about being born in Italy, being in Italy till you were sixteen years old, and then coming to this country and setting up a whole new life. Is there anything else that you can think of that you'd like to say before we close?

ERBA: Well, no. I'm glad that I came here. Don't get me wrong. I'm glad. When my sister send to me, send the money and everything, oh, I couldn't wait to come over here. Because everybody used to say America is nice, you know. And that's it.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, that's a very good place to stop. I thank you very much.

ERBA: Oh, you're welcome. (she laughs)

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine . . .

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ERBA: I says to my daughter, when they come, I'm eighty-eight years old, they might think that I'm a real old lady, but I take care of myself and I take care of the house. I go out, I go to church. I go to church right across the street.

LEVINE: Well, you're very young in spirit.

ERBA: Yeah. And I said to my daughter, I says, the girl that she talked to me, I says to her, "I'm eighty-eight years old." And she says, "Your voice is not like it."

LEVINE: You have a young voice. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm speaking with Antoinette Caruso Erba in her home in Newark, New Jersey. Thank you.

ERBA: You're welcome, you're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW