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ELENA DANISI CRIMI

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BORN IN US

Oral Historian's Note: Elena Crimi is the wife of Charles J. Crimi, EI-IA.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist. I am now interviewing Mrs. Crimi. We are here on Thursday, just a little bit later in the afternoon. Mrs. Crimi, could you please state your full name, and the place where your parents came from, please.

CRIMI: Well, really, I'm named Elena after the Queen of Italy. I'm very proud of that, Danisi. And my parents come from Apulia, and a small town called Palo del Colle. And it's between Rome and Greece. Therefore our culture is Roman and Greek background. Many of our words are Greek and Roman.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what your father did, or perhaps if both parents worked, what was their life like before they came here?

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CRIMI: In Italy, I really don't want to brag, but I must. My parents, our both families were the leading families of the town. Danisi and San Girardi is my mother's name, and they called us "the family of professors" because there were so many teachers. Now, I have a book that I'll show you later, how the background goes, Danisi, San Girardi, the mayors of the town, the doctors of the town, and their . . .

SIGRIST: So it was a prominent family.

CRIMI: Thank goodness for that. Now, I was lucky to go there three years ago and everything was just wonderful. Now, I, what else?

SIGRIST: Your father's profession.

CRIMI: Oh, now my father was what they called a "teacher of cabinetmaking" in Europe, all over Europe. They were learned the trade when they were very young, and they usually knew the name of the tree first, and then worked on wood, and so forth. And he designed everything. For instance, he designed that desk, not desk, but that's a little vanity. It had a mirror. And he designed everything first, and then he made everything by hand. There were no machines then, or anything like that. And very nice work. And he's called the teacher in the town.

SIGRIST: Why did they want to go to America?

CRIMI: Well, he was the only one. My father was an adventurer, I would say, and he liked everything and everybody in the entire world. And I think I take after him. (She laughs) And the thing is that he was the only one who left the family, or left the town. The rest all stayed there. We're a very large family, both sides. He came to America with my oldest sister, and he

left . . .

SIGRIST: What year was that?

CRIMI: I think it was about 1905, something like that. Now, before he left my mother said, "You know, we have two houses." This shows the financial background. We have a townhouse and a country house. You know, the best thing we could do is sell one of them so you go to America with some money, and not, make it a little better for you." And my father was so happy to hear that. He said, "Well, as soon as I get to America I'll see what I can do to send money back." And that's what he did. Gradually, he sent money back. And he and my sister were here. After . . .

SIGRIST: Was your mother working at all, or was she basically . . .

CRIMI: My mother, they didn't work in those days, of course. But my mother was raised in the convent, French convent, and learned all the fine arts of the ladies of those days.

SIGRIST: So we're talking solid upper middle class.

CRIMI: I would say.

SIGRIST: For that time.

CRIMI: Yeah, thank goodness. I feel very proud and fortunate.

SIGRIST: So she really did not have to work in any way while he was in America?

CRIMI: No, not at all. My father sent whatever he could to her.

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SIGRIST: I see. What was he doing?

CRIMI: He was a cabinetmaker.

SIGRIST: So he got work as a cabinetmaker once he got here.

CRIMI: Oh, he continued working here. And the first letter that he received, I must say this. My mother said, "We're having another baby." Which meant another mouth to feed, but that's all right. So when they, he worked and took care of . . .

SIGRIST: In New York?

CRIMI: He worked in Manhattan a lot, yeah, and also in the Bronx. And he worked also on pianos. He liked music and somehow he did very well, and he worked till the age of seventy-six, something like that, because he didn't want to stay home. He was, he liked his work. Now, after a while . . .

SIGRIST: He's sending money home to your mother.

CRIMI: He's sending home money to Mother.

SIGRIST: Is your sister, who is with him, is she working there also?

CRIMI: Yes, I must say, my sister, Ogenia is her name, she worked in making delicate work in white blouses, because that was the fashion in those days. So the two of them made out pretty well. But I must say this. Before my father came here, one of the paisani, from the town, said, "You

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know, my two daughters are going to America alone. Would you watch over them?" And that's what he did. This was the trust of those days, you know. So my father was kind enough, with my sister, and they all had a little apartment together, and that was all right. Then eventually some cousins started to come, and my father took care of them. He made them find work, and all that kind of thing. Then, after a few years he sent for my mother with the four children.

SIGRIST: So she came by herself?

CRIMI: She came by herself.

SIGRIST: On what boat. Do you know the name of the boat?

CRIMI: I must find the two passports. I feel very, I'll xerox it for you, because the dates, everything is authentic. It's the real thing, you know.

SIGRIST: Did she come steerage class, or second class?

CRIMI: She came, I don't know what class, but it was a long, long trip, and people weren't too happy. It was one of those up and down boats, you know. I don't know which was; I don't know the name. I would find it out.

SIGRIST: Do you know what port she left from?

CRIMI: I think she left from, well, everyone, I think, left from Naples then.

SIGRIST: Naples was the major port.

CRIMI: Now everyone leaves from Rome with the planes. That's the change.

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SIGRIST: Right. So, and when did she and the four children arrive?

CRIMI: When they arrived, after maybe 1908, something like that, and they started to settle, you know. But my father was the original one to come here. He had a spirit, you know.

SIGRIST: Did he meet them? Do you remember them talking about any of this? Did he meet them when they came through?

CRIMI: Well, he managed to have a little apartment ready for them. He did the best he could, you know. He didn't speak the language. Now, that was the thing in those days. The Italians, who come here today, everyone speaks Italian all around the place. There are Italian areas and all. But then it was difficult. But he did, my father always did well. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: How about the sister? Did she learn English more readily?

CRIMI: Ogenia started to learn English too.

SIGRIST: How old was she when she came?

CRIMI: Well, I think she was maybe eighteen.

SIGRIST: I see. A young lady.

CRIMI: A young girl, yeah. And then she, my father was the supervisor where they did these fine cabinets and things, and in came a young man, from Italy of course, and he taught him the trade. Then he said to him one night, "Would you like to come home and be with us?" Because he had

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no one at all, this young man. So he came to visit, of course, the Italian style, eating and so forth, and all he had to do was see my sister and that was it. He married her, and it was fine. A very fine man. In fact, he made that other little thing that's there, you see. That's all, you see that, yeah. That's all made by hand. Each little piece. And then the family grew.

SIGRIST: This little side table? Wow. Could you talk a little bit about some of the textiles that you were showing me?

CRIMI: Oh, my mother was a very fine worker. She, they . . .

SIGRIST: She learned this as a child probably.

CRIMI: She learned that in the convent. Because in those days there weren't schools, there were convents. And the sister was French. I'll show you her picture. And, Mother Superior. But of course they went home at night. And she learned all the embroidery and laces and crocheting and knitting.

SIGRIST: And she did, now, what you showed, what, two pairs of socks, I believe . . .

CRIMI: Well, they were quite a few pairs of socks. And capes, my mother liked capes and I still like them, and I wear capes myself. And there are two capes there. One was for the christening. We were four sisters. And we all wore that at christening day. And the other ones was to go out with. Now, that christening cape, the grandchildren wore them on the christening day, which was third generation. And they were all made by hand, very fine work. Now, she made all our clothes, you know.

SIGRIST: Did, since we have so little time let's talk a little bit about you now. You

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were born . . .

CRIMI: I was born in Manhattan. I'm a native Manhattanite.

SIGRIST: After they were here.

CRIMI: Well, I should say this. I was the surprise, born after my parents were here about two-and-a-half years. And my brother always told me how happy my father was that he had number four daughter. The more daughters the better, you know. (She laughs) And that was wonderful. And European style, the parents, the first boy was named on the father's side and the mother's side. The father's side, mother and father. Then came the mother, with her father and mother, you see? And then all the aunts and uncles. So there were so many that they doubled my sister's name, Rosa Maria, one aunt from each side. Then when I was born my brother-in-law said, "You know what? Let's give her the name of the Queen of Italy." That was the last queen. And they agreed. And that was the story.

SIGRIST: So as a child growing up, were you mostly surrounded by Italian being spoken in the house, or this dialect from where you came, or . . .

CRIMI: Well, I must say that I'm so glad you asked me. We had to speak Italian at home because they said . . .

SIGRIST: A family rule, sort of.

CRIMI: Well, they said, you know, whoever is Italian doesn't understand you, and it's bad manners. Now, when you go out of the house and go to school, you'll learn, which was just fine. Now, I always wrote to Italy all my life,

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since I learned Italian because we had Italian books, newspapers, everything Italian. But, of course, my father was very devoted to America, too. Now, it's not that he shunned for Italy. He didn't do that. And as you entered the house we had the king and queen on the wall and the Pope. That was a necessary thing. And of course the cross near the bed. That's the, that was definitely . . .

SIGRIST: So he was speaking English then? He made an effort to learn the language?

CRIMI: My father spoke, I wouldn't say fluently, I must be honest. But he was, he was understood, and he was supervisor at his work. So there were many Italians there, so you really don't learn English that way. There's no need, you see.

SIGRIST: You as a child, and your sisters, who were a little bit older, did you find it very easy to pick up English? Did you do it in schools or on the street with your friends?

CRIMI: Very well. I went right into the American language easily. And I was very fortunate. I graduated from 151 Public School, which is very fine. And I was always the one that had the paper on top, and so forth.

SIGRIST: In two minutes can you tell me who . . .

CRIMI: Then I went to Washington Irving, which was great. It was equivalent to, this is important, to college of today. The courses we had there were wonderful, and we had to take French. We weren't allowed any other language but French as a foreign language. And we had a professor . . .

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SIGRIST: Well, you're already speaking two languages: English and Italian.

CRIMI: Already two, yeah. So I, we had this Professor Guthrie, from France, and he used to make us converse in the language. He was a very fine French teacher. And I graduated from there. It had the most wonderful courses you could imagine. I enjoyed every bit.

SIGRIST: And that was a very important part of your girlhood, then, attending that school.

CRIMI: Very important, because we grew up, I grew up in Yorkville, which was just a fine neighborhood and still is, you know. And all we had to do is walk to the park, Fifth Avenue, the museum. We had a very fine neighborhood, wonderful.

SIGRIST: Okay. In one minute, could you just make a final statement.

CRIMI: Well, I'm very happy to say that we had such a wonderful childhood. Families were very important, and the closeness was very, very wonderful.

SIGRIST: Do you ever wish that your parents had stayed in Italy, for instance? You know, was there ever a longing to . . .

CRIMI: Well, my longing, I'm more European than American, believe it or not. Because we grew up in the European way, the Italian manners, the mannerisms, and so forth. Especially Christmas Eve was a very, very important thing in our lives. There were no phones or no cars or anything. But Christmas Eve everyone came to our house, like they did in Italy. They would say, "Let's go to the Danisi house Christmas Eve." And this only happened two years ago or three years ago when I went to Italy, they

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still continued. And all the townspeople came, and they had figures of, life-size, you know. And over here I continued. And everyone New Year, Christmas Eve came from all over. Paisani, friends, relatives. And we had the procession around the house, just like you do in church. We still had it now, with the great-grandchildren, fourth generation. So I keep that up. I have the statues and so forth.

SIGRIST: Okay. We have to stop now.

CRIMI: That's all?

SIGRIST: I want to thank you very much for giving us this information. And just signing off, this is Paul Sigrist with Brian Feeney in attendance, and we are at the Crimi household, and we are signing off with Mrs. Crimi. Thank you.

CRIMI: It was nice talking to you.

SIGRIST: Boy, I wish we had more tape. I'd love to get into the Christmas Eve stuff.

CRIMI: Oh, I'll show you pictures.

SIGRIST: It's very interesting that your parents, so many people who came . . .

END OF INTERVIEW