

EI-210

ROSE De LUCA MATASSO

BIRTH DATE: MAY 21, 1913

INTERVIEW DATE: 9/2/1992

RUNNING TIME: 1:00:04

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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INTERVIEW LOCATION: NORTH ANDOVER, MA

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 10/1994

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, 9/2006

SICILY (BORN U.S.), 1920

AGE 7

PASSAGE ON "THE DANTE ALIGHIERI"

PORT OF EMBARKATION: PALERMO

RESIDENCES: SICILY: SANTA MARIA DI LICODIA

US: LAWRENCE, MA

LEVINE: Okay. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today with Rose Matasso at her home in North Andover, Massachusetts. Mrs. Matasso was born here in the United States. At two years of age she went to Sicily with her mother and father, and they came back to the United States five years later in 1920 when Rose was seven years old. They came back on the Dante Alighieri, and today is September 2, 1992, and I just want to say I'm very happy that I was able to speak to you today, and I look forward to hearing your story because it sounds very interesting.

Okay. Let's start by you telling me when you were born.

MATASSO: I was born May 21, 1913.

LEVINE: And where were you born?

MATASSO: I was born in Lithurn, Mass., in the United States.

LEVINE: Now, when had your mother and father come here, before you were born?

MATASSO: They came here in 1911, and I had relatives here.

LEVINE: Were they married when they came?

MATASSO: Oh, yes. They were married in Italy in 1911.

LEVINE: And so they had been here for, let's see. You were born in 1913.

MATASSO: '13.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay. So they had been here two years when you were born. And then tell the reason why the family then went back to Italy.

MATASSO: Why we went back? That was . . .

LEVINE: Was that the Army, right?

MATASSO: The Army part.

LEVINE: That's all right. Take your time.

MATASSO: That's, the war started, probably in 1915, and my father had been in the Army before coming here. So when the war broke out they, the Italian government called him to serve his country. He could have gone from here, because Italy and America were allies, but he preferred to go there because he could speak Italian better than he could English. It was easier. So the government, the Italian government, paid for the trip for my father to go back to Italy, and that's why we went back, my mother, my father, my sister and myself went back to Italy in 1915 so my father could be in the service there.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, what do you remember, well, let's say, what town did you live in when you were back in Italy?

MATASSO: In Italy we were living in Santa Maria Di Licodia.

LEVINE: Can you spell Di Licodia?

MATASSO: Santa Maria, Di D-I, Licodia is L-I-C-O-D-I-A. That's in Sicily.

LEVINE: Could you describe that town? What do you remember of it?

MATASSO: I remember cobblestones on the streets. The houses were made out of stone, mostly stone. Where I lived it was a corner house. The train, the tracks were on one side, and the street running up and down. The train used to go from one little town to another, and it went right by our house. My father had built a stone wall so that would separate us from the tracks, the train going by, but it was so close to the wall they could touch my mother's plants that were on top of the wall. And the house, of course, was only one big room. And we had three steps going into this house from the road, and a long courtyard, and as we passed the corner house where we were, attached to it was a smaller house where my grandmother lived. And after that there was another house that my mother rented to these two young people that had lost their parents. And we could see Mount Etna from our house. The train used to go on one side, the Mount Etna on another side, it was a nice. But my grandmother that lived there, in Italy the houses are owned by, you know, they are always owned by the people living in it. And when those people died it goes down to either your daughter or your son, the oldest. So when my

mother married she inherited that house that had a job. When the train went by, it would blow a whistle at the station before it, which wasn't too far. You could hear the whistle, and she had to go out and lock the gates. First there were gates, so people would not come down the street and get hurt. The train, you know, going by. Then they put chains, so she had to go, the chain would be there. She would have to go and hook it on the other side, so nobody could go by to cross the tracks to the other side of the street. So I remember that. I remember she had a little grotto right on the corner. I remember the three steps going into the courtyard where, our house was right there. And those steps, when I was, you know, living there, I was playing ring-around-the-rosy with the other kids. And then we'd let go of our hands and fall wherever we did. And when I let go I fell and I hit my face right on the corner of that stone. I've got a scar right here. So I was screaming, and my mother ran out, and my face was full of blood. She almost got hysterical, you know, for my eye. But, thank God, that was okay. That's one of the things I remember there. And, of course, in the house it was a big room, and we had two big beds, a bureau, a trunk,

all full of different nuts. My mother, my father had a lot of land, and the land produced, they had trees there with fruit, with nuts. And when they would bring in the nuts, my mother used to put them in this trunk. We had chestnuts and walnuts and all kinds of nuts there. We had the table and the water jug, because they had to go get the water at the fountain.

We used to have the water there. And the two beds, I slept in one bed with my sister, who was older. My brother had a crib over my mother's bed. And she had like a string or a rope from the crib, it was kitty-corner, you know. And if he'd get, you know, she had to rock him, she would just pull the rope and the cradle would rock over her bed. And when he was older, that he'd get up, he would fall over, and fall on her bed, which was right underneath. That was cute. I remember playing, you know, on the street there with the kids.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you played, what kind of games you played?

MATASSO: Well, I remember that game where I split eye. I don't remember . . .

LEVINE: Did anybody tell you stories, as a child?

MATASSO: Well, my father was a great storyteller, and he had so many stories, because my father had been in China in 1900. There was a war in China or something or other. I have papers, his discharge papers and all that. He got a medal, a medal of honor, when he got discharged from China in 1901, gave the medal to my brother. And he had a lot of stories until the time that he died. He was eighty-six years old here, that people, our neighbors always used to come over and tell my father to tell them the stories of the war, and what the experiences he had.

LEVINE: Can you remember any stories they told you, particularly that you liked when you were little?

MATASSO: Well, I, there were so many stories that he said. I remember the living, when he was home again, somebody wanted to adopt him. But, you know, when he was a little boy. And my grandmother said, "You've got to be kidding." You know, they liked him. He, my father was a nice-looking man. And that, he used to say that a lot because these people were well-off, and they wanted to give them like a better home and education

and all that. He didn't go to school at all, but he did go to school here to become a citizen. And when he was growing up he said, all the kids there, they used to go for a walk and pick flowers, wildflowers. And one time they made, you know, like the Hawaiian leis? They put it around his neck. ( she laughs ) They all liked him. They all, they all loved my father until he died.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

MATASSO: Salvatore Luca.

LEVINE: And your mother? What was her maiden name?

MATASSO: My mother's maiden name was Bonacci.

LEVINE: B-O-N?

MATASSO: B-O-N-A-C-C-I, Bonacci.

LEVINE: And her first name?

MATASSO: Grazia, Grace. Grazia.

LEVINE: And how would you describe your mother?

MATASSO: My father was, I was going to tell you the difference.

LEVINE: Yeah, that's fine.

MATASSO: My father was very reserved. He would tell you stories that you would laugh and, you know, everybody loved him for that, because the way he said the stories, and making them laugh and all that. My mother was the opposite. If she wanted to tell you something, she would laugh. You'd have to wait until she stopped laughing, before she could talk to continue what she wanted to tell you. But she was quick-tempered when my father was not. She wouldn't take anything from anybody like, you know, nobody could fool her, put anything over her head. She had an answer for everything. I took after my father more or less. But she was nice, a beautiful woman, and she was very nice.

LEVINE: How was she to you? Especially during those years when your father was off in the Italian Army, when you were back in Italy?

MATASSO: Well, she had to take care of my sister, myself, and then my brother came, you know. She had the three of us to take care of. So that was the job, you know, no men in the house. But she did very well because ( she

sighs ) she did all the cooking.

LEVINE: Do you remember what she cooked?

MATASSO: We used to have spaghetti with meatball sauce. Over there you don't buy meat like over here. On a certain day they, you go to the slaughterhouse, not even the slaughterhouse. Somebody would go to the slaughterhouse and bring the meat, and they would hang it up in the square, and somebody would come around and say, "The meat is ready." And people would go and buy it there. So we had meat. Not every day, but we had meat. But my father always owned land that he, we got everything, you know, to eat. Even here in America, my father always had a piece of land in Pleasant Valley where you in-buy, and we used to have everything. Raised the tomatoes, raised our potatoes, the onions, the garlic, we had everything. Beans, we never lacked anything, because he was good, you know, for that. My father was a stone mason to begin with, from Italy, when he was a little boy, so he worked on construction, like, with stones, building solid cellars, the stone work for cellars. You know, years ago they used to do that. Now they do it with cement, or whatever. So he always made a pretty good living.

LEVINE: Now, how about when he was in the Italian Army. Was your mother growing food, or how did he get . . .

MATASSO: No. We had enough. We always had enough, because she used to make her own bread. You know, you buy the flour, and make your own bread. We never lacked anything. She used to make homemade macaroni. Even over here, when we were here, she always did that, too, until she got old and sick. And we really never lacked anything, even when he was away. But this I remember, that, like, once a week I used to go with my sister. See, my sister went to school there, I didn't. I was younger. But we used to go to the school where she went, and we used to bring a dish towel, say, you know. And they used to give us hard bread there with cheese. Yeah, and we used to bring that home. So we did that, and then one day my sister came home sick from school because that day soldiers went in the school, you know. When these kids saw all these soldiers with guns and everything they got so scared. I don't know why they went. But, anyway, she got sick. She lost her hair. She got an infection. I don't know what happened, you know. She was very, very sick. That's why in this picture my sister's got

short hair, but it's grown. She had lost her hair. My mother had to do different things, too, what the doctor said to do, you know. She got her hair back.

LEVINE: Were there doctors in the town?

MATASSO: They had a doctor.

LEVINE: Was it a, what did most people do in the town for work?

MATASSO: The women didn't work. They were home. I mean, like my mother, you know, they made bread. They made their own macaroni. They sewed their own things. My mother crocheted, a lot of things. I have a spread, but she didn't do it there. She did it when we came here. She started it there probably, because I've had it for forever, a crocheted spread. I have it in my room. And they were busy, you know, with house things. They cleaned the house, but they didn't have much of a house to clean because it was only, as I said, most of them, one room.

LEVINE: And did they go to the fountain to get their water?

MATASSO: Yes. They had to go get the water from the fountain, and they used to wash their clothes at the fountain.

That I remember. I used to go with my mother. Then they come back and, well, while they were there they washed their clothes, then filled the jugs with the water, and come home. And when they went to get the jugs, fill the jugs with the water, their clothes would be on the grass someplace so the sun would dry the clothes. And when the clothes would be dried they'd fold them and bring them home in a basket. Sometimes they used to put the basket on top of their heads, and carry the jug with the water.

LEVINE: Was that a social place for women to meet, at the fountain?

MATASSO: Well, yeah. You had to go there if you wanted water, drinking water. You had to get it there. And washing clothes, you washed them there. Because there was a, this fountain. See, the water was coming out of pipes from this wall. And then the tub. There were no tubs. They had these slabs of stone on this side and that side, and the water's coming down into this. So, like, my mother said, "Let's go early." She'd get up very early and go there, because you'd get the first place, the water's clean. The first water, because then it would be a whole, long row here, and the rest

of the people, women would come, they'd have to be after you after, they would get just suds. You know.

So my mother said, "Let's go early," and she'd have first place. That I remember. I saw that when I went twelve years ago. They still have that, and her washboard was a slab of stone, you know, when you're washing, the water's coming down, and then the next person would get your suds.

LEVINE: And what about the men? What did they do, mostly, for work?

MATASSO: Well, the men would be working at, they had land, you know. They had their own, to cultivate their own land, or work for somebody else.

LEVINE: So they were mostly farming one way or the other.

MATASSO: Farming, right. Agriculture, things like that. And the women would sew, you know, and they would sew. I have cousins there that are still doing it. They'd bake bread and sell the bread. People would come early in the morning and buy bread, you know, or pastry. They would all do these things, and today they all have nice homes, most of them, anyway. And . . .

LEVINE: How about religion? Did that play a big role?

MATASSO: In church, they were mostly all Catholics.

LEVINE: Did your family go to church a lot, or . . .

MATASSO: Oh, yes. My grandfather, my mother's father used to take care of the, he was a Sacristain. Is that what you call him? To take care of the church, you know. Put up the candles and light the candles, blow out the candles. He had a long stick with a black thing here, blow the candles after Mass. And that was our church there, right in our town. And I went to see it when I went twelve years ago, I went there. There's no benches like churches here. There were chairs piled up by the door. When you enter, you'd get a chair and put two cents and bring your chair where you want to sit. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: Huh. And what did people do for entertainment?

MATASSO: Oh, they had a lot of fun, they do. I mean, they celebrate a lot of things, like we have Halloween here. Well, there they have some kind of a mardi gras.

LEVINE: Were they dressed up?

MATASSO: And they'd dress up, oh, yes. They'd dress up. And they'd go different houses, and they played the accordion, and then they'd sing. They really had a good time for themselves. I mean, they don't go out here and there, but just between the people, they are very friendly, sociable, and all that.

LEVINE: And how would you describe the men and their sort of social life, and the women and their social life? Were they different in any way?

MATASSO: Well, the men would play bocci. You've heard of that. Wherever there would be a place. Usually it's in the center of the town. They'd have a common, and it's nice, beautiful, but they'd go play there. Or if they have a place near the house, you know, on the street or something. They'd play bocci, and they'd play cards a lot. The women don't go out much. They'll crochet a lot, a lot of things. They gave me a lot of gifts, too. They'll sit, but when they sit this was funny. They'd sit facing their door. The sidewalks are very narrow. They'd put a chair there, but you're facing inside your house. They don't sit facing the

street. Right. I saw that even now when I went twelve years ago.

LEVINE: Do you know why?

MATASSO: I don't know. Maybe the men don't like their wives to be looking. ( she laughs ) But they still do it. They still do it.

LEVINE: Do you remember your grandmother, who lived in the little house?

MATASSO: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: What was her name?

MATASSO: Rose. I'm named after her.

LEVINE: What was she like, especially with you, when you were over there?

MATASSO: Oh, well, she loved me. I used to stay with her a lot. See, in Italy they didn't leave old people alone, or put them in a nursing home or anything like that. My grandmother was there. My mother was right next door to her. And she used to let me stay with my grandmother, sleep there. My grandmother was never alone. And when she knew we were coming to America,

she didn't like it. She didn't want to, she didn't want me to go. So she used to tell me, "Don't go to America. I will buy you a pink dress. I will buy you a blue dress. Don't go. Don't leave me." So I would go to my mother, and I would say, "I'm not coming to America." And my mother would say, "Why?" "Because I'm going to stay with Grandma. She's going to buy me a blue dress and a pink dress." My mother said, "You're coming with me." And this went on and on and on. My mother said, "I cannot leave . . . ." A lot of people left some children there, because people that had three, four, five children could not take them all in one trip. It cost too much. So they would leave some with the grandparents, I know a few, and then they would come later.

LEVINE: Was your mother happy in that little village?

MATASSO: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: She had been in America for a while, so she knew the difference.

MATASSO: But she was here just a short time. But, see, her mother was there, her brother was there, her other brother was there. Her sister was here. We found a

sister here, but the two brothers were there. One was like a police chief in another town. That's a town right near Santa Maria Di Licodia, right near there. The other brother lived near my mother, and my two cousins that I went to meet were his two daughters, when I went twelve years ago. But I lost another cousin now, so there's only one of my first cousins, but I have a lot of second cousins and third cousins.

LEVINE: Did your father tell you anything about what it was like being in the Italian Army during that period?

MATASSO: Oh, he, there were a lot of stories that he told us, but I can't repeat all of them, you know. Like, I'll tell you one thing. That he, you know, they had to go on hikes, a lot of hikes. And one time he was too tired and everything, he didn't want to go, but he had to go. So he pretended he was sick, but he had to go, so that took care of that. And another time he said, he woke up, I don't know, maybe one o'clock in the morning, and he thought it was five o'clock. So he went to the one that's supposed to have reveille. He went to get him. He says, "How come you didn't do that?" You know, call us to get up. He says, "It's

one o'clock." He says, "Oh, no, it isn't, it's five o'clock." So the guy got up. ( she laughs ) And he got everybody up. My father went back to bed. So when they went to find out who did that, you know, the man said, "Salvatore." They went after him. He said, "I don't know anything about it." ( she laughs ) He was sleeping.

LEVINE: So when your father got out of the Army, did he stay in Italy for any length of time, or did you come right back here?

MATASSO: Oh, we came as soon as possible.

LEVINE: Yeah. He wanted to get back here?

MATASSO: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Now, his mother was here?

MATASSO: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay. So . . .

MATASSO: His mother was here, his sisters were here, his brother was here. And my mother's sister was here, her husband, their two sons, and the daughter.

LEVINE: Was your mother, was your mother looking forward to coming back here, too?

MATASSO: Oh, yes. We all wanted to come back, yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything that your mother packed when she came?

MATASSO: A lot of clothes. I don't remember, that I don't remember. I remember that trunk.

LEVINE: Do you remember any objects that she took?

MATASSO: She must have taken the clothes we had, that we needed. That's about it.

LEVINE: Do you remember leaving the village? Was there a farewell, or people . . .

MATASSO: I don't remember leaving, except my grandmother, because she was there, and she cried. And I don't remember too much of leaving, leaving the town, I mean. I don't remember that.

LEVINE: Do you remember getting to the boat from the town?

MATASSO: I remember getting, no. I can't remember that. I should remember that. I remember the ocean. I

remember that was Palermo, right. And I remember the ocean, and we were on, we were up high, and there was a, going down, looking at the water when we were up there. And my father says, "That's Palermo." You know, we were in Palermo. But, see, I was small, and he was holding me by the hand, and I was scared. I was scared. But I remember after, that's where I saw some planes come in and landed on the water, because I always wondered about the planes. We didn't come by plane. We came by boat. But on the boat, we don't remember getting on the boat.

LEVINE: What was it like being with your father, after his having been away for so long?

MATASSO: Well, he was away. He came home on furlough a few times. And I remember this. My father was a tall man, husky. And he picked me up, sat me on his shoulders, and took me for a walk by the tracks. I told you, the tracks. And there were almond trees. And as we're walking, he's walking and I'm on his shoulders, he pulled the branch of the almonds, pulled the almonds, and he gave them to me. The almonds were not ripe. This was the outer part that's like velvet. It's got a shell of velvet that's green. Then when

that dries up they take them off, and then you get your almond. And he gave them to me. And I remember I had my arms around his neck, walking on the tracks there. I remember that. I remember the people that lived across the street from us, then we met them, they came to America, too, after. I said I remember that.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything on the ship, on the Dante Alighieri?

MATASSO: Uh, I remember when we were in the middle of the ocean, this is, my mother said this, we were in the middle of the ocean and the waves were high, and whales were coming up. And we were on deck. This I saw. We were on the deck, looking out, and there were, the boat was swaying quite a bit. People were sick. They were throwing up and everything. So I asked my mother, "What's the matter?" You know, and she said, "This is the middle of the ocean. The water is very deep, and the boat is going like that, so people get sick." And that's why they were sick. So she took my sister, my brother and myself, my father was with the men, and she took us down to where we slept. There was a tiny room with a porthole for

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light, a bunk bed, or something like that. And she put, she told us to go to bed, that way we wouldn't get sick, being up there.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

MATASSO: But I remember the whales, and her telling us that. Then I remember on the boat they made all the kids that were there sit on the deck, on the floor, and they put on a movie. Yeah. I remember a screen, and we were all sitting down on the floor and watching that. I remember that, on the boat.

LEVINE: In your cabin that you were in, was it just your family in there?

MATASSO: My, when we went down, I don't remember my father there. But my mother, my sister, my brother and myself.

LEVINE: No other people.

MATASSO: No, just us.

LEVINE: Then did you go to a dining room for meals?

MATASSO: I don't remember where we ate, but we must have eaten

someplace.

LEVINE: Do you remember coming into the New York Harbor?

MATASSO: Yes, that I remember, the Statue of Liberty.

LEVINE: You remember seeing it?

MATASSO: I remember that the boat is getting closer, and everybody's up there, out there, waiting. They knew about the Statue of Liberty. I didn't yet, you know. So as the boat is nearing the harbor there, it was very foggy, and everybody's screaming, you know, they're waiting for the Statue of Liberty, but you couldn't see it. And then gradually as we're getting near you could see it, and then it's right there. Everybody was screaming, cheering, waving their hands, crying. I remember my mother, you know. And it was the most beautiful sight. Everybody was crying, and I could see why.

LEVINE: And do you remember going to Ellis Island?

MATASSO: Then we went to Ellis, we got off the boat, and then we went to. But that picture of the Statue of Liberty stayed in my mind forever, you know. We went to Ellis Island. It was a big room, a great, big room, a lot

of people here, there. And that's when they were examining everybody. My father was holding me by the hand, and my sister there, my mother, my brother. But they didn't examine us. I don't know if they just touched our heads or something like that, but they didn't make us undress. That I know. And that was it. And then we left.

LEVINE: Did somebody meet you, or . . .

MATASSO: No, not in, not there. We came by train from New York to Boston, and I think Boston, my father had a, came by train to Lawrence. I even called my sister, she's in California, to make sure about that, how did we get from New York to Lawrence. I said, "It had to be New York, because all the papers said New York and Boston." You know. So, we did.

LEVINE: Do you remember the train ride at all?

MATASSO: I don't remember the train, but my sister said we came by train. I remember being in Lawrence. See, the Boston and Maine train station will take you right into the main part of Lawrence. My father knew his way. And I remember being in, sitting in the common in Lawrence, and my uncle, my father's brother, came

to pick us up with a horse and buggy. He got the suitcases and the trunk came later, I remember. And we lived in his house, when we came in 1920, we lived at my uncle's house in Pleasant Valley, that's in Methuen. I was born there. I was born right near where we lived after. And we stayed at my uncle's house for a while. That day when we arrived my aunt was there, my uncle waited for us. And I had cousins and neighbors there. They all came, they were all excited. They were all hugging each other and all that. Nobody bothered with me because I was blonde. ( she laughs ) They thought I was one of the neighbors that had been playing outside and came in because there was all the excitement going on in the house. So finally my aunt said to my mother, "Who is this girl?" You know. My mother said, "That's my daughter!" "It's your daughter? She looks like she was one of the kids out there." Because nobody knew who this girl was.

LEVINE: You were the only fair child?

MATASSO: Well, my mother had light hair. My father had black, curly hair. My daughter took after. My sister, black curly hair. My mother had brown hair, and my hair, I

wasn't really a blonde, you know. But I had very light brown hair. So that's my experience of that. And I remember my mother giving me a banana after. I didn't want to eat it. And she said, "Eat it. This is good. It's a fruit." And in Italy they have the prickly pears. She said, "In Italy we eat the prickly pears. In America you eat the bananas." She told me that.

LEVINE: Now, was this like a special dinner and everything because you had come from Italy, and the family got together there?

MATASSO: Well, they always had, oh, yeah. We always had dinners, you know, the family. And we continued that until they started dying, you know. My mother, even if they're in Methuen, where we lived with my uncle for about a year. I went to school, we must have gone by it with the car. I went to school there, first grade, and half of second grade. Then I moved to Lawrence. And every holiday was spent with the relatives. My uncle lived there in Pleasant Valley, and all the summer holidays we would go there, and we'd eat outside. My mother would get up at four o'clock and make homemade macaroni, and then my aunt

would get up and make a sauce, meatballs. And my other aunt, I told you that she was here. My grandmother was there. We were all together. And then the winter holidays, we would go to my aunt's house in Lawrence. She had a big kitchen, and they would empty one bedroom where my cousin slept, and we would put, rather they would put a table for all the children to be together in that room, and all the grown-ups would eat, all the holidays. Easter, Christmas, you know, and the summer was at the farm.

LEVINE: Did you ever encounter any prejudice for being an immigrant when you went to school, or anywhere else?

MATASSO: No, because, no such thing. Where I lived, I lived on Middle Street, which there were a lot of Lithuanians, Polish, Germans, Italians. A lot of Polish people on Common Street. We went to school together. Some of my best friends were Lithuanian girls. I lost one of them now, two years ago, we were friends from third grade on. I mean, nothing. We all loved each other. Beautiful.

LEVINE: Yeah. So you went to school, and did you, do you remember learning English? What was that like?

MATASSO: I learned, I went to school, as I said, in Pleasant Valley when I, and I was seven years old when I started. I was a little older, probably, than some of the other kids that were living here. And I didn't know one word of English. But this girl that took me to school, one of our neighbors, I'm still good friends with them. She took me to school, and she said, she's the one that registered me. But then one day we had to write a story, a little story, in English, you know, and I couldn't. She gave me the story. I, let's see. We had, let's see, "I have a chicken. She laid an egg. I ate the egg." Those were . . . ( they laugh ) She taught me, that was my first story. Well, my sister started school with us, too, but she had gone to school in Italy. She was twelve, thirteen years old, I was seven, all right. We all, my cousin started school the same day, first grade. By the time I got to the second grade my sister got married. She went to the, she had double promotions right along, because she was too smart for, to be there with us. I was smart in school, but in two years I was in the second grade, but her, in two years she was up to the seventh. The first time she sat down the teacher told her, "Go in this other room,

Miss," I don't remember her name, "and get a seat, get a seat." She went there, and she went to the teacher, and she says, "My teacher wants a seat." She meant for her to sit down, and that's how she got from one grade to the next, to the next. So by the time I was ten years old, my sister was fifteen, that she got married, I'm still going to school. But I was very smart. I can say that. I have report cards to prove it. I graduated from the Oliver School here in Lawrence. This is North Andover. I went to high school just about September, October, November, December. My father made me leave because they didn't believe in a girl getting an education in those days.

LEVINE: Was your father strict?

MATASSO: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: In what ways was he strict?

MATASSO: Well, we couldn't go out. I never wore a bathing suit. If we had company, like on Saturday somebody would drop in, and if I had no stockings on my father would tell me, "Go in your room and dress up." Nobody could see my legs. ( she laughs ) And I grew up that

way. I couldn't go to school, and I wanted to go to school. My marks were very high. My teacher, the eighth grade teacher wrote at home to, for my folks to send me to school. If they could not afford it, they would give me a scholarship. I could apply. They would see to it that I would get a scholarship, but, "Please, let your daughter go to school." But my folks wouldn't hear of it, because I was a girl. They wanted my brother to go. My brother went three years of high school. He didn't want to go, you know.

LEVINE: So did your mother think you shouldn't go, too?

MATASSO: Well, they just didn't believe in a girl getting an education. They figured a girl will get married, and then what good is the education? Today we think differently. We think an education stays with you all your life. My daughter is a teacher here in North Andover High School.

LEVINE: What did you, how did you feel? Do you remember, about not being able to go?

MATASSO: Oh, I was, I wanted to go. I cried. I said, "If I can't go to school, let me go to night school." But I couldn't go out at night, so I couldn't go. I got as

far as going one night to register. The next day they changed their minds. So I had to stop that. Then I went to, we had industrial school. When I was older, I still wanted to go to school, do something. And these were all free courses, and I took as many as I could. I went sewing. I loved sewing. I still sew. I sew all my clothes and drapes and things. I went sewing school. I went cooking school. I went interior decorating, knitting. I took all the courses that they had for that, which the rest of my life I've been doing my own things. We're do-them-yourself people, you know what I mean?

LEVINE: Were you angry? Would you have fought with your mother and father?

MATASSO: I never was the fighting type, you know. I never was assertive. Like, say, I want to do this. Today they'd leave home. Then we wouldn't think of anything like that, you know.

LEVINE: What kind of a little girl, like at seven when you came back here, were you, how would you describe yourself?

MATASSO: I was quiet. I wouldn't talk the way I'm talking to

you. I wouldn't, in school I was smart. I could get in front of the class and talk, and all that. But outside of that I wasn't very talkative. I studied a lot. I read a lot. I still do. I love books.

LEVINE: Were you shy?

MATASSO: I was very shy, yes. I didn't like to go in front of people and talk.

LEVINE: What about, how did you meet your husband?

MATASSO: Well, we got married quite, I was twenty-seven. I had had plenty of boyfriends, but in those days they'd, the boyfriends used to send up the house. They wouldn't get to talk to you first. They would send the mother or a neighbor to your house to see, find out if he could come to your house. But before he came, he would have to take his mother. He would come with his mother, or have the mother come first or the father. They couldn't just come in and have a date with you. You couldn't. So I went through all that period. I had a boy from school, many boyfriends, because everybody, until today, when they see me, whoever's left, they see me, I was the smartest girl in the room. They remembered me, Rose, the smartest

girl in the room. But to go out, that was out of the question. I was afraid, then. My sister was having trouble with her husband. That made me feel I shouldn't go out with anybody, you know, and all that.

So that was my trouble. I had plenty of boyfriends, but not going out on dates and this and that. But when I met my husband, I was trying to fix him up with somebody else that liked, but he said he liked me instead. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: Did his mother come?

MATASSO: Oh, yeah. Well, first, well, we went out, not alone, we never went out alone. His brother had a girlfriend, and the two couples went to the show on Common Street. Hardly anybody had cars those days, too, you know. But he had a car. And we went to the show Saturday night. Then after I saw him a couple of times, this is at a wedding or, not alone. And he said, "Well, I want to come up your house. I'm serious." So then I told him, "Well, then your mother, your father has to come up." So he sent his mother and father up, then he came up. And we've been married, it's going to be fifty-two years next week, September the 8th.

LEVINE: Well, wonderful. Now, did you, you must have been working then, between the time you got married and the time you left school? Were you working?

MATASSO: Oh, I went to work at fifteen years old.

LEVINE: What did you do?

MATASSO: After I left I went to high school, as I said, until December. The sewing factory that had been in New York moved to Lawrence, and I went to work there. I was fifteen at that time.

LEVINE: What did you do then?

MATASSO: Sewing, sewing factory. I worked there three years. We were making boys' suits. And after three years they moved, they moved back to New York or something. But anyway, another shop came from New York, Ricco Brothers. They're still here. And I went to work for them, right. I went to work for Ricco Brothers making men's suits. That's in Lawrence, and I was living in Lawrence at the time. So I worked there until the war started in 19, I got married in 1940. I was working there. And then the war, there was the Second World War. We made men's, we made the men's coats, the army

coats, I remember. Ricco had two plants. And I worked there until my daughter was born. She was born in 1942, and I left, I stayed home three years. I raised her three years. And then I went back to work, Chandler Street. That's where I worked the first three years. Another company came in, and where I was home was three years. And then, after a while, I was collecting unemployment checks, I think, at the time, for a while. Because my shop had shut down, and the other shop shut down. Ricco shut down after my daughter was three years old. That shut down. We made the coats. and then that shut down. And then I got called back on the other factory, because I was experienced in sewing. They called me there, and I was there five years. Then they shut down, moved to New York. The first time the shop shut down they moved to Boston. I went to work in Boston for three years. Then the other one went to New York, so they've been moving around, but I didn't go to New York. I moved, I went to work in Boston, and I worked there for three years. Then this Ricco's was here, and they wanted me because I was experienced, and I came to work in Ricco's. And I was, my last twenty-five years I was in Ricco's. I retired from there

twelve years ago, and I worked fifty years sewing, sewing factories. Boston, Lawrence, Ricco Brothers, Chandler Street, and Pepperella's.

LEVINE: Now, did you enjoy your work?

MATASSO: I loved it. I still do. I love to sew.

LEVINE: What did you like about it?

MATASSO: Well, I liked sewing. And this was men's, but we didn't do a complete suit. You know, we just had a certain part of the sewing to do. My job was to baste the lining. You know the lining in the back, the yoke.

LEVINE: The collar?

MATASSO: Inside there's a lining. That's what I used to baste on a jump-basting machine, not a sewing machine. But I could do many jobs, because I had worked at different places many years. I had experience in all, a lot of jobs. So whenever I was out, they'd call me right away. They wanted me here, you know. And there wasn't much work. Then the other shop would want me to go out there. Somebody was out sick, go over there.

LEVINE: So you had a . . .

MATASSO: And I enjoyed the girls I worked with. I mean, I really enjoyed the girls. We're still good friends with a lot of them. We keep in touch. And . . .

LEVINE: Now, what is your husband's name?

MATASSO: Matthew.

LEVINE: Matthew Matasso.

MATASSO: Matasso.

LEVINE: And your children's names?

MATASSO: I only have one daughter, Mildred Matasso. She's single.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MATASSO: My husband, excuse me. My husband was a welder, and he went to work at Portsmouth Navy Yard during the war. He was a welder, machinist. He went to an industrial school too, and he learned more about machines, being a machinist, that he always wanted to do. But a welder, he built submarines at Portsmouth, New Hampshire. So we've been working and doing very

well. When I started to work I got five dollars a week. And I had to walk. Today everything is you ride here, drive here. I worked, I lived on Middle Street, and I had to walk from there to Chandler Street, which is across the city of Lawrence. I was only fifteen. Go through the Common. Today I'm afraid to walk through the Common, the way things have changed.

LEVINE: What are you proudest of that you've done?

MATASSO: The what?

LEVINE: What are you most proud of that you accomplished in your life?

MATASSO: Well, I haven't accomplished much, I'd say. But I enjoy sewing. I've made all my drapes, and a lot of clothes. I always sewed my clothes, from when I was a little girl. And I still do. I sewed my daughter's clothes. I feel I've accomplished. I love to cook, bake. I love to do all that. A lot of people can't do that, and they say, "How can you do it?" I wanted to be a teacher, but I couldn't go to school. And I ended up being a nurse. My mother, I took care of my mother five years because she got a stroke, I took

care of her. Her house, my house, I'm going back and forth and working in between. Took care of my father, he came to live with me. He was eighty years old, till he was eighty-six. I took care of him. My husband has been sick, all these operations. Instead of putting him in the nursing home . . .

LEVINE: You're going to take care of him.

MATASSO: So I turned out to be a nurse. I thank God. God has been watching over us, you know, I'm not complaining. I'm glad I was able to do all of this, and my friends know. They said that we couldn't do it, but I can do it.

LEVINE: Now, you are one of the few people who know what it might have been like had you stayed in Italy in your little town instead of coming here. Can you imagine what, how your life would be, or comment on what the difference might be?

MATASSO: I went back, as I said, twelve years ago. And things were pretty much the same, like when I left, you know, the street. This woman came out, she says that she remembered me from when I was there then. I didn't remember her. She says, "But I remember you. I used

to play with you." My sister used to play with her older sister, and all that. And my cousin said, "Why don't you come back here? The house is here." I wouldn't want to live there for any money in the world.

LEVINE: What would you miss about, if you were there, what would you miss?

MATASSO: Our way of living here is so different. It's so different. I mean, really. You can just go out, and we have, especially the place. I said, "Where I live, I have trees." We had two big trees cut down a couple of years ago. I have big trees here. My squirrels, I have my squirrel pets. There's so much. Over there you, I don't know, the houses are different. Even though some have beautiful homes, some have, because I had this girl that worked with me that married and went to, back over there. Her house was just beautiful. But I wouldn't want it. I'd rather be here. I mean, I like here. I love it here.  
( she laughs ) I mean, everything. You know, we can go to the store, buy what you want, any time you want. You'll always have enough money, you know. You know how to manage things. We went through a depression

here. We were here during the Depression, and we didn't starve. We made do. You know what I mean? We always had enough for what we needed. And we never lived beyond our, we always saved first and didn't buy, so we don't owe anybody. And we had a good life.

I mean, fifty-two years. I'm thankful for my daughter.

LEVINE: Is there anything else that you would like to say? The tape's just about over. Is there anything else that you can think of that you would mention?

MATASSO: Well, I'm glad, I'm the only one born in America, and I'm very happy about that. I've always been proud of that, that I'm the only one. And I think we had a good living in America. God has been wonderful to us. The country's been wonderful to us. The people have been wonderful. I can't complain about anybody. I have a lot of friends from way back, from now, and new friends, new neighbors. I love everybody. And we've had a good life. I mean, God has been good. We started out with hardly anything, and today we own our own home, and I traveled to Italy, I've gone to California, I visit my sister. I have a brother in Portland, Oregon. Here and there, I'm the only one

here. So, my folks have passed away. My relatives have passed away. There's very few cousins left of the original, you know. But I'm thankful. I thank God every day that I'm living in America. And when I went to Italy, as I said, twelve years ago, when I came back I wrote down everything that happened every day, you know. Now I have a little book, but I want to make a bigger write-up about it. When I came back, I went to the library here, and I asked them if they would dig out a poem that I had in school, America For Me. I got the words, "You can travel all over the world," which we did. When I went now, I went to Belgium, Austria, well, Italy, all of Italy, and Sicily, and the poem said, "No matter where you go, all over the world, America for me it's home again, and home again, America for me. That's me."

LEVINE: That's sounds like a . . .

MATASSO: I'm proud to be an American. I'm happy that I was born here, although my family. I'm very happy about that. So, America.

LEVINE: Well, I'm very happy to have been able to talk with you. It's a wonderful story that you have to tell,

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and I'm very happy to have been here. And I'm talking with Rose Matasso, and this is Janet Levine on September 2, 1992. I'm here in North Andover, Massachusetts, and I'm signing off.