

EI-211

THOMAS IACI

BIRTH DATE: AUGUST 1, 1918

RUNNING TIME: 35:52

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: JANET LEVINE AND PAUL E. SIGRIST,
JR. 2/1995**

SICILY, 1931

AGE 13

PORT: PALERMO

RESIDENCES:

- **ITALY: VILLAROSA**
- **THE US: NY, NY**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm here with Thomas Iaci and it's September 2nd, 1992 and I'm in his home in Methuen, Massachusetts and Mrs. Iaci, his wife is here with us. Mr. Iaci came from Italy in 1931 when he was thirteen years of age. So, I'm happy that I'm able to talk with you today and I will be as brief as possible. Tell me where you were born.

IACI: I was born in Villarosa, Sicily.

LEVINE: And what year? What's your birth date?

IACI: 1918. August, the first.

LEVINE: Okay. Do you remember the village where you were born?

IACI: Oh, very well.

LEVINE: Could you tell me what you remember about it? What was it like?

IACI: Well, I remember everything --

LEVINE: What did people do there?

IACI: They used to work in the sulfur mine in the olden days, but now they don't get away with it.

LEVINE: I see, so most of the men worked in the sulfur mine?

IACI: Most of them, a lot of foolishly got killed there too.

LEVINE: What was it? Why was it so dangerous?

IACI: Work under mine for about two, three weeks, three hundred feet or whatever. 'Course I was small, even though I recall. And something, the thing would cave in and they get trapped in, in the mine.

LEVINE: I see. Then, did people farm there? Did people have farms?

IACI: Forms, what's that?

LEVINE: Farms? Did they ---

IACI: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, sure. A lot of people had the little farms, you know. For them, they were like a million dollars, having a farm right there.

LEVINE: What did you do for enjoyment when you were living in there?

IACI: I used to play, what do you call it? Cops. I used to bicycle riding. Kids stuff, you know?

LEVINE: Do you remember the house you lived in?

IACI: Oh yeah, when I was there 1970, I looked at it and it reminded me of the olden days. But then by the 1990s, things changed altogether.

LEVINE: What do you remember about it? What was so old fashioned about it?

IACI: Well, to me it, when I was a kid, it was not old fashioned. Anybody had a home there, was something good. But, of course, when I came from America, back when I was, things had changed, different.

LEVINE: What did your father do in Sicily?

IACI: I don't remember what he did because I was a kid he was in America.

LEVINE: Oh, you never knew him in Italy?

IACI: No.

LEVINE: And what was your father's name?

IACI: Joseph Iaci.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

IACI: Cicondria Shondra; her maiden name, Shondra.

LEVINE: And your full name is what?

IACI: My full name is Cicondro Iaci.

LEVINE: And did you have grandparents in Sicily that you knew?

IACI: No.

LEVINE: No, and did you have aunts and uncles and cousins?

IACI: Yeah, sure, a lot of them.

LEVINE: Were you a religious family?

IACI: Yes, used to go to church on a Sunday; every Sunday, most of the time.

LEVINE: What did the men in town do for entertainment?

IACI: Well, when they out of work, they go to the piazza and they meet their friends. You talk to me; I talk to you. You buy me a glass of beer, stuff like that. 'Course there was no beer then; there was wine. (He laughs.)

LEVINE: And how about your mother? What, did she work at all?

IACI: No, she never worked.

LEVINE: Did you have brothers and sisters?

IACI: Yep.

LEVINE: What were their names?

IACI: Lucy Iaci, Paul Iaci and James Iaci.

LEVINE: And did you go to school in Sicily?

IACI: Second grade.

LEVINE: And then what did you do?

IACI: Come to America.

LEVINE: Oh, okay, now how was it decided that you and your mother and your brothers and sisters? would come here?

IACI: My father sent for us.

LEVINE: He sent money and a ticket or --?

IACI: Uh huh. But what happened, we went for a visa and my mother passed the visa. So my brother decided to come here, although he was younger, my brother, James. And he's, see he came 1930 to America and they left

me behind with my mother, to take care of my mother 'cause my two sisters had died. So I stayed with my mother. Nineteen thirty-one my father came to Italy to pick us, the two of us. My mother had passed and I passed so we waited two more months for the next visa. So she didn't pass. So I came over with my father in 1931 to America.

LEVINE: Why didn't (sound of airplane) your mother pass?

IACI: On account of she was too weak.

LEVINE: What was it like to see your father, because you really hadn't known your father? (Airplane noise persists.)

IACI: Yeah, I know, well, we made friends (he laughs).

LEVINE: Yeah? What kind of a man was he? How would you talk about him?

IACI: Well, pretty good.

LEVINE: How did he treat you?

IACI: Well, he wasn't the best father.

LEVINE: He wasn't.

IACI: No.

LEVINE: No. was he strict?

IACI: Very.

LEVINE: So, you and your father came together to the United States. And what was that trip like? Do you remember leaving the village? Oh yeah, we left from Polermo.

LEVINE: Were you happy to be coming to America or were you sad to leave?

IACI: (pause) I was happy and I wasn't happy.

LEVINE: (pause) Yeah, okay, well, was the trip difficult, the voyage?

IACI: I was unhappy to leave my mother behind (he starts to cry).

LEVINE: Yeah, I bet. But you were excited about coming to America because it was an adventure I guess. (pause) Well then, how did you get to the boat?

IACI: From Palermo, we picked up the boat, the name of the boat was the Providence. I still remember.

LEVINE: Yeah, good. And so what was the voyage like on the Providence?

IACI: Oh we stopped all kinds, we stopped about fifteen stops; Algeria, oh, Providence, all those states.

LEVINE: You mean once you got to the United States?

IACI: Took us fourteen days to get here.

LEVINE: Do you remember coming, were you down in the bottom of the ship? Were you with what they call "steerage"?

IACI: No.

LEVINE: No, did you have a cabin?

IACI: Sure.

LEVINE: Oh, so, did you have a comfortable voyage?

IACI: Yeah, we had like bunk beds.

LEVINE: Were there other people in your cabin besides you and your father?

IACI: Was just me and my father.

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

IACI: Very well.

LEVINE: What do you remember?

IACI: I remember Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Do you remember the Statue of Liberty?

IACI: Uh huh. (Pause.) We must have come in about five or six o'clock in the morning. There stands Statue of Liberty. My father, "Go look, go look, go look!" (He laughs.)

LEVINE: Did it mean anything to you at that age?

IACI: It was something beautiful. (He cries.)

LEVINE: Then you got to Ellis Island and what do you remember? What did it strike you as?

IACI: We didn't want to go through a visa. They made us strip. Of course my father says, separated from me, and, (pause) Ellis Island wasn't the way it is now. It was like a barn. (He laughs.)

LEVINE: That was what it was like for you?

IACI: So after we went through the visa and so on, we got on the boat again. We went, I think it was, I don't know what street it was, I don't even know now, but it was like 34th Street or 42nd Street, you know, all the places in New York?

LEVINE: Yes.

IACI: One of those places. We got out from there and then my father's friends come up to pick us up. We had a little chug chug, a 1931 Ford. To me it was something new.

LEVINE: You never saw a car before?

IACI: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: You had seen cars?

IACI: Yeah. Then we went over a bridge. I don't know if it was Brooklyn Bridge or

what bridge it was. "Look, look, look, look down," I'm looking down in the river. (He laughs.) I remember that.

LEVINE: And then, where did you go?

IACI: My father's house.

LEVINE: Where?

IACI: New York.

LEVINE: Oh, where was it in New York? Do you remember?

IACI: Market Street.

LEVINE: Market Street?

IACI: xxxxxxx.

LEVINE: Was it like a tenement apartment?

IACI: It was a tenement, yeah. Was a tenement.

LEVINE: Was it in Brooklyn or was it in --

IACI: No, no, in New York City.

LEVINE: In New York City. And what do you remember about that place?

IACI: Oh, I remember that we had lights that got pulled by a, with a chain.

Bathroom, same thing (he laughs).

LEVINE: And what was your father doing for work when he was in New York?

IACI: He had a candy store before he came to Italy. Then he sold it to his brother-in-law. But xxxxxxxx was too much.

LEVINE: When he got back, you mean?

IACI: When he got back, by the Depression; nobody was working then. Nobody was working.

LEVINE: So what did you do once you got to New York?

IACI: I was shining shoes. My father, he wanted to go shining shoes, but I wanted to go shining shoes. xxxxxx So I made my own little box and I went shining shoes. xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

LEVINE: So then, did you stay shining shoes for a long time or what happened after that?

IACI: Couple of years, couple of years. With that money I used to make, like a buck and a half, two dollars, we used to eat. The Depression, everything was cheap. Loaf of bread, five cents. And (pause) then I wanted to stop shining shoes, my father wouldn't let me. I said, "Pa, let me keep the shining shoe box, when you need a shine, I'll shine yours. I won't shine no more." Because I was fifteen, sixteen, starting to go out. Liked looking at the girls, you know? (He laughs.) Oww. I said, "Pa, either that or I'm going to break the box!" (Imitating father's voice) "You're not going to break no box, I'll break your back. You're dead." I broke the box. He broke my back. And I

took off.

LEVINE: On the truck? Did you go to work on the truck?

IACI: I went to see my brother. He give me a, he give me a, he used to work for Daniels and Kennedy, a trucking company. I got a job over there. xxxxxxI was fifteen, sixteen years old, truck drivers helper. Worked in night time, from six until three in the morning. Wherever they wanted the stuff, we'd do it. And I'd be sleeping on top of the truck.

LEVINE: So, then did you live with your brother?

IACI: With my brother, no.

LEVINE: No, you stayed living with your father?

IACI: No, my brother and me came over here, Massachusetts. xxxxx to come over here.

LEVINE: And were you still working with your brother?

IACI: No.

LEVINE: Did your father come up here to Massachusetts too?

IACI: Yeah, after awhile, I went to service, I become a citizen, and this and that. The first cent I made, I sent for my mother, I got married, I sent for my mother and she came over here to me.

LEVINE: That must have been nice.

IACI: And that's the best money (he cries)

LEVINE: . . . you ever spent

IACI: in my life.

LEVINE: So it was really nice to see your mother again. Yeah. Well, how did you meet your wife?

IACI: I was with my brother over here. And the bus stopped along side, so she was coming out, you know, with other people. So my brother knew her through his wife. We started talking, before we got xxxxxxxxxx, we got together.

LEVINE: (Laughing) So did you court your wife for a long time or you got married right away (Mr. Iaci coughs.) or what?

MRS IACI: "a few years."

LEVINE: A few years.

IACI: (He is still coughing.) The best woman I ever married.

LEVINE: The best woman you ever married, huh. (She laughs.) Good. Good. Do you have children?

IACI: Three.

LEVINE: Well, first tell me your wife's name.

IACI: Constance Iaci.

LEVINE: And the maiden name?

IACI: Grasso.

LEVINE: Grasso. And your childrens' names?

IACI: Joseph Iaci, Lorraine Iaci and Dennis Iaci.

LEVINE: And do you have grandchildren?

IACI: Seven.

LEVINE: Oh, boy, good. Any great?

IACI: Not yet.

LEVINE: Seven grandchildren.

IACI: My oldest grandchild started yesterday, going through college.

LEVINE: Oh, wow. What are you most proud of that you've done in your life?
What makes you proud?

IACI: Well, what I am and what I achieved.

LEVINE: (Pause) What did you do for work after you came here?

IACI: I worked everywhere. (Pause.) Carpentry. Nursery. xxxxxxxx. I built this here. See this here? I built it. And, barber.

LEVINE: And, barber. Shoes? What about shoes, did you --

IACI: I'm not a shoemaker.

LEVINE: (Mrs. Iaci is speaking in background to Levine.) Shoe shop?

IACI: Oh, shoe shop, yeah, not that much. (Pause, Mrs. Iaci whispering) Oh, General Tire; I worked for General Tire.

LEVINE: Uh huh, uh huh, you've done lots of different things.

IACI: That's where I caught the cancer. (Dog barks.)

LEVINE: Really.

IACI: Of course, you could have catch anywhere really.

LEVINE: Did you or your brother or your father, were there certain things that you kept up that were ways that people had in Italy, after you came to the United States? Were there any ways that you just kept that were Italian ways of doing things?

IACI: Oh, I don't know, I don't know. We ate the same spaghetti as the old country (he laughs). Always eat the kind of food, you know, stuff like that. Ice cream was new to us. I worked a lot of things. I'm just saying the top part.

LEVINE: Are you glad you came to this country?

IACI: Very, very glad.

LEVINE: Why are you glad?

IACI: Because, Land of Opportunity.

LEVINE: Do you think you had more opportunity here than if you had stayed?

IACI: Oh, sure. (Pause) Actually, actually I got to say, but I don't know if I should.

LEVINE: Well, if you want to and then, if you hear the tape, you could take it out if you want to.

IACI: My voice is not the same, another. So -- (pause)

LEVINE: Would you want, do you want to think about whether you want to say some other things?

IACI: Something about my father. Bad. Want me to tell you? (He laughs.)

LEVINE: If you want to.

IACI: Well, I'll tell you.

LEVINE: It's up to you.

IACI: When I was about seventeen or so, sixteen, I was in a theater, me and a few kids, my friends. We were watching, you know how kids have friends. So

what happened. All of a sudden a detective comes up, and he grabbed me. "What did I do?" "Come on." I mean I'm a scared, kid, you know what I mean. He took me to a police station, we're going to go. My father didn't come over. So, after take me a different place, finally, my father comes. "What's the matter? What's the matter?" I say "I didn't do nothing; I got arrested." I didn't do nothing. Because he had a sweetheart. My father had a sweetheart so my mother So, finally, I says to my father, "Pa, go see Alfredo (pause), two other kids, and come for be a witness. We didn't do nothing" He didn't do that! He had me put away. So, I got put away, Knapanap? , New York Institute. Three years I did. He didn't write me a letter --nothing. So there was a friend of mine, used to work for Marienets, good people, nice people. They were looking for me, all over. My father didn't even tell them that I was in prison. So, finally, my friends found out. And I used to chum around with the son. The kid died 193_ --I got papers -- 1938. But Chickie? was looking for me. (He is crying.) (Long pause.) I'm very emotional.

LEVINE: (pause). Were you ever found to be innocent?

IACI: How can I? So then my brother found out. I put in papers to get me out. I sent him my bag home? and he took over. So, this guy, the old man Montero, says to me, "Tommy, there's Johnny's bed there. Want to stay here like a son. You want to go with your brother, go with your brother. So I said, "Mr. Montero, I appreciate very much. I go with my brother. So I went with my brother and that's why I'm over here.

LEVINE: Did you ever regret that decision? Are you sorry you made that decision?

IACI: No.

LEVINE: No.

IACI: I met my wife.

LEVINE: Do you know why you chose the way you did? Why did you choose to go with your brother?

IACI: My family.

LEVINE: Your family, uh huh.

IACI: I got along with my brother beautiful, never argued, never --

LEVINE: how did you know this man, Mr. Montero?

IACI: Oh, we came from Italy, I told you, he and his four sons. One son was a little younger than me, maybe a year. And this guy got to liking to me. He showed me how to roller skate. We used to go. We were always together, like two peas in a pod. We used to do a lot of things together.

LEVINE: Well it sounds like you always had a lot of good friends.

IACI: Oh yeah.

LEVINE: Did you ever make your peace with your father?

IACI: Oh, yeah, when I got married

LEVINE: I'm sorry, say it again.

IACI: When I got married, I went for my honeymoon, which I didn't have, I went in New York and the first thing we went down to see my father. He wasn't home. So, we were so tired, so I says to my wife, 'cause we going to visit to my aunt, one of my aunts. I say, "Auntie," I say, "Could my wife stay over here?" I say, "I'm going to look for my father." "Yeah, yeah, yeah," she was off; she was tired. So finally, after awhile I got hold of my father and like nothing happened. I still treat him as a father.

LEVINE: You must have a big heart.

IACI: Yeah, only once I gave my father hell, once.

LEVINE: What did you give him hell about?

IACI: Well, me and my brother went to New York for, to visit my mother and father, you know, so, what happens, he was invited to one of his friends for dinner, Sunday dinner. So I went down, I was introduced .Now we're grown Up, you know, we're not no more kids. So twelve o'clock we were going to eat, you know, my father, "Don't worry about it." Maybe you're going to play at Salvina, that's the way, he was in house? with a niece. So, "No, you don't go there. Don't worry about it." So, I says to my brother, "Let's go to Salviva (he laughs)." We went to Salvina. So she's making coffee and we're sitting down. We're almost about to have the coffee. The phone rang, bgggg,I says to Salvina, "Salvina, salvina, if it's my father tell him we're not here." "Salvina, my sons there?" "No, they're here. We're over here having coffee (he laughs)." So, "they should come at twelve o'clock." "Okay, okay, bye." I knew that at twelve o'clock we'd be there, because when I give the word to say, "I'll do that." I do that. So, I go back to where my father, where he was invited, and he say, "Where'd yous go? Did you go to Salvina?" "And if I went there, what about it!" "For Christ sake, you never change," you

know. " You've been a crook and you're crook." You know, in Italian. So, my mother says, "Tell him, tell him," in Italian. My mother talks in Italian. "Tell him." "Ah, shut up, you too," to my mother. So, everybody kept quiet from then on. That's the only time I gave a little blast. But if I was another son, I'd said, "You go to hell. You're not my father."

Tape is turned off.

LEVINE: Okay. We're resuming now. I want to ask you, "How were you as a father with your sons?" You have one son?

IACI: I have two sons.

LEVINE: Two sons. Okay, do you think, how were you like your father or different from your father with your own sons?

IACI: There's no comparison.

LEVINE: How are you different?

IACI: Well, I'm an easy going. If I think there is bad stress, if I think something is wrong, I want to know about it. I want to know. I cut things right in the middle. If you're right, you're right. If you're wrong, you're wrong.

LEVINE: And how was your father? With you?

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IACI: (He gives a laugh.) Right or wrong is right.

LEVINE: I see, so you were fair minded with your (sons).

IACI: All the time.

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

IACI: . . . Everyone of my kids had a car from me. I gave them a car, when they first started. My daughter, thank God, now they are doing all right.

LEVINE: Good. So that's another thing to be proud of.

IACI: Umm.

LEVINE: You were a good father to your children.

IACI: I told them, my sons, they say, they brag about me so much.

LEVINE: That's wonderful.

IACI: Says, "I got the best father in the world."

LEVINE: Great.

IACI: I says, "That's your say-so." (They laugh.)

LEVINE: Well, now is there anything before we close, anything else you'd like to say about being born in Italy, coming to this country, life here and anything else you'd like to mention?

IACI: Life here, you can't beat it. The best country in the world. I don't care who knows it. That's my expression. (pause) I love this country.

LEVINE: You've gone back to Italy a couple of times.

IACI: Yeah, in 1990 and 1970. The first time I went with my wife and she doesn't like; I don't know why. If I was feeling good, I would have went again. My cousin just come back.

LEVINE: So you still love Italy, as much as much as you love America.

IACI: Yeah, I like, I like for a pastime like, you know, vacation. 'Cause if I hadn't her with me, I would have spent six months. I would have went over there and six months, the summer here. So, it would only involve a couple hundred dollars for, you know, the trip. But over there's got beautiful beautiful (places).; I got a beautiful place over here too. But it's cheaper.

LEVINE: Okay, well I think maybe this is a good place to stop. I want to thank you very much for talking with me. This is Janet Levine. I've been talking with Tom Iaci and I'm here in Methuen, Massachusetts on September 2nd, 1992. And I'm signing off.

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END OF INTERVIEW

Mr. Iaci died later in 1992.