

EI-217  
JOSEPH (JOSE) FRESTA  
BIRTH DATE: MAY 13, 1912  
INTERVIEW DATE: 9/20/1992  
RUNNING TIME: 1:13:41  
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.  
RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME  
INTERVIEW LOCATION: TAUNTON, MASSACHUSETTS  
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 7/1994  
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED: IRV SILBERG

PORTUGAL, 1925  
AGE 12

SHIP: "LA BOURDONNAIS"  
PORT:VIGO  
RESIDENCES  
? PORTUGAL: VILA FRANCA de XIRA  
? US: TAUNTON, MASS

Historian's note: Hilda Fresta, Mrs. Fresta, is also present.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I'm here today in Taunton, Massachusetts at the home of Joseph Fresta. It is September 20, 1992. Mr. Fresta came from Portugal in 1924. He left in December and arrived January 1st. So he left in '24 and arrived in '25.

FRESTA: Right.

LEVINE: And he came from Portugal at the age of twelve.

FRESTA: Right.

LEVINE: Well, I'm very happy to be here.

FRESTA: It's certain nice to have you.

LEVINE: And I want to start by you telling me where in Portugal you were born.

FRESTA: I was born in a small town called Vila Franca de Xira.

LEVINE: Okay. And if you'd spell these words that might be difficult.

FRESTA: It's V-I-L-A-F-R-A-C-K -- C-A de Xira, D-A and that's XIra.

LEVINE: Okay. And . . .

FRESTA: It's about in the center of Portugal, and it's close to the biggest mountain that Portugal has.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What mountain is that?

FRESTA: Called Serra da Estrela. S-E-R-R-A - D -E- ES-T- E-- T-R-E-L-A.

LEVINE: Now, what is your birth date?

FRESTA: My birthday is May the 12th, May the 13th, rather. And I was born in 1912.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, did you live in the same village for the whole twelve years before you came here?

FRESTA: Yes, I did.

LEVINE: You did.

FRESTA: My father was in this country, and . . .

LEVINE: When did he come to this country?

FRESTA: He came, the first time, in 1903.

LEVINE: Oh. So he came before you were born.

FRESTA: Right. And what happened was seven years later when he went back then I was born nine months after. Then things didn't go so well, so he told my mother that he'd come back again, and he did for the third time.

LEVINE: When he came back, how old were you?

FRESTA: When he came back, I wasn't even born. Or if I was, I was a small child. I didn't know. I didn't know my father until I was seven or eight years old, when he went for a third time. And when he went the third time, then nine months after my sister was born. So therefore there were three of us, and we each were eight years apart, the reason being that he came to this country, and he said to my mother that he'd come for about four years and he'd go back seven years later because things didn't work out as good as we always think they're going to work out. So therefore, that's why three of us, I already said that, we were eight years apart.

LEVINE: Okay. What was your father's name?

FRESTA: Antonio Fresta.

LEVINE: And did your grandmother or grandfather, your mother, your father's mother and father, were they, did you know them as a child?

FRESTA: I only knew my father's mother. The others, my mother told me that her mother died, I was a little baby, and she was in bed. She was pretty sick. And she laid me there with my mo-- grandmother, and when she done some chores around the house she went and checked on us, my mo-- grandmother was dead. So I was a little baby. I didn't know. The only one that I knew was my father's mother. She died at ninety-five years of age.

LEVINE: What do you remember about your father's mother?

FRESTA: She was, she was a very kind woman, very nice. But she was in a little, another little village about, oh, I'd say ten miles away. That's where my father was born. And I didn't go there that often because, well, I was small, and my mother wouldn't let me go too far without my father being there. Had my father been there, I probably would have get around a little more with him.

LEVINE: Do you remember any experiences with your grandmother?

FRESTA: Well, all I know is that whenever I'd go there she'd treat me very well. She didn't know, she gave me everything that I wanted.

LEVINE: Like what? What would you want?

FRESTA: Well, in those days you would be contented with mostly anything because we didn't have much. Like, for instance, we didn't have any toys. We didn't have, we did have plenty to eat, and that's all that counted then. But as far as toys were concerned, well, that was out of the question. Not only to me, but to anyone else. And I had a little sickness when I was a child. And therefore my mother wouldn't let me go without any shoes. And I'd see some of the children without shoes. And I'd see some of the children without shoes and, oh, I'd be so horrified because I'd like to be with him, but I couldn't. I had to have either a sandal or something, something on my feet, because they didn't want me to get any worse. And I remember when my father went, he brought me a pair of shoes, high cut, with a little jackknife on the side and oh, my, I thought I was a king ( he laughs ) amongst those kids.

LEVINE: He brought them from America?

FRESTA: He brought them from America, because they didn't have such a thing up there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What did you have wrong with you?

FRESTA: Uh, it was uh . . .

LEVINE: Bronchitis?

FRESTA: Uh, what?

LEVINE: Bronchitis?

FRESTA: Bronchitis.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And were there doctors in your village?

FRESTA: Uh, at the time no, but a few years later, a few years later they were. But at the time no. We had to send for a doctor from a bigger village about ten to twelve miles away.

LEVINE: I see. Was there such a thing as sort of folk medicine? I mean, were there people in the village that had sort of home remedies that you used?

FRESTA: Well, not so much in my time. There were some, but before that they used to be barbers that would have some kind of medicine. Because when my sister, younger sister, she was about a year-and-a-half old, and she was playing around the kitchen. We had a kitchen with tripods, with triple legs. And my mother was cutting vegetables, and she had a little pot boiling, and as a kid, she was about a year-and-a-half, she was playing, and the water fell all over her. We didn't think she was going to come through. But they, my mother or somebody took her to another little town where there was a -- some barber, and he got her full of some ointment. I still don't know what it is, and she came through. She had scars all over her. Being a baby, when she became a woman, it didn't show any scars.

LEVINE: I see. Well, now, what was your mother's name and her maiden name?

FRESTA: Her maiden name was Maria, uh, everybody knows how to spell Maria. But it's anyway, it's Maria Zucelle[ph] Cristobal, which is Christopher.

LEVINE: And your sister's, your sister and, did you say you had two sisters?

FRESTA: I had two sisters.

LEVINE: What were their names?

FRESTA: One of them is Consisel, which is Chrissie. And the other one was Leopoldina.

LEVINE: Were you closest to some particular family member, would you say?

FRESTA: Well, I was close to about anybody, being a kid, and I knew everybody, and the town didn't have that many people.

LEVINE: How many people, about?

FRESTA: Oh, I'd say we'd have about two hundred homes. So some people would have bigger families than others, you know. That I couldn't say.

LEVINE: Well, what was the town like? How would you describe it?

FRESTA: Well, it was a beautiful town. Of course, everybody loves their town, let's face it. It was a beautiful town, and we had a church. We had two schools, and what happened was the -- the professor, the teacher of the main school, was married, and he lost his wife, leaving two boys. Well, he was still young enough, and later on, he went and married another teacher out of town, in another town. Well, she was also a teacher, and she taught on the -- in the first level of her house where they were living. Well, the school of her husband's was full, so some of us, including me, went to the wife's. Well, being the young wife, she had five children, one after another. And, of course, not having the medical facilities like they do today, she maybe wouldn't have any school for a month before she had it, and then there would be another month after she had it. So when you come right down to it, I'm lucky if I have three years schooling. From that, plus my being sick that once in a while I'd stay out of school. So I have about three years of schooling there, and about two - two years of schooling here. So that's my education, about five years' school altogether.

LEVINE: And how about religion? Were you a religious family?

FRESTA: Uh, over there practically everybody, especially in those towns, are all Catholics. When you go to a bigger city like Lisbon or Oporto, they do have other religions. But through those little towns all you find is practically Catholics.

LEVINE: Did you observe, I mean, were you very religious?

FRESTA: Very. I used to go to church, because my father ( he laughs ) was very religious. So I used to go to church every week because there was a time there we had a priest there, but then they died, and not having enough priests to cover every place, they would have a priest sometimes say mass in three different little towns. So maybe one week we'd have it at eight o' -- eight o'clock in the morning. Maybe another week it would be at seven. And maybe another week nine or ten, because the guy, the priest have to go from one village to another. But I used to, as a matter of fact I was learning to be an altar boy.

But because of the fact that the priest would only come once a week, you didn't get much of a chance to learn. I never got really to be a full altar boy. I would have if the priest was there steady. But I helped out with a man half telling me what to do and so forth a couple of times. We had a bishop come down there once, I remember. And I was one of the altar boys to serve. And, but things were a little different than they are today. There wasn't so many of - of anything. Let's face it. So therefore you done the best you could with what you had. And me being such a small kid I didn't particularly pay attention to most of the things. I do now. I think of what was going on then, and now I say, "Oh, my God," the way it was, you know.

LEVINE: What do you think of, when you think of the town now? What are the things that come to mind?

FRESTA: I still love my town. I think anybody loves the place where they're born, regardless. You might be poor or you might be rich, but you like it anyway because you were born there. And my wife and I, we've been there four times. It took me forty years to go there the first time. And my wife is born in this country, the daughter of people like me in a little village, maybe an hour or so or two away from where I was born.

LEVINE: That's where your wife's mother and father . . .

FRESTA: Right. And she loves it, she loves to go there. Every time we went there, she loved it. The reason probably we won't go there any longer is because she's had a couple of knee operations, and I've had one, and over there in order to see anything you have to do quite a bit of walking, and we can't do it. So therefore I figure our visits there are over.

LEVINE: Well, tell me, what did your mother do when your father was here in America for such a long time?

FRESTA: Well, in those little towns all you do is live off the land. So we had three pieces of property, and over there they eat a lot of kale soup and potatoes and beans, and they used wheat at the time, now they don't, to bake bread, to make bread and bake it. And there was an oven, I would say as big as this room, for the town. And there was a family that had three boys, and they used to take care of that oven, and say, "You bake bread today, I'll probably bake it to - to-- tonight or tomorrow." And then out of the bread we'd -- that they would make for us, we'd give them according to the amount that you'd bake, you either gave them a whole bread or a half a bread or two breads, whatever. And they used to use that mostly. But today, since we've been there, they don't want wheat any more. What they eat is white bread. They like it better. Which I don't blame them, but at the time that's what we had.

LEVINE: Do you remember any dishes that your mother cooked that you particularly liked as a small boy?

FRESTA: Well, there's one particular thing that I didn't like. I still don't, and that's onion. I love the flavor. My wife can make some steak with onions. I'll just get the onions away, and I'll eat the steak. But the minute the onion touches my teeth, every hair in my body gets up like that, and I shiver. So therefore even today, if I go to somebody's house, people that I know, of course, I'll tell them, "Don't give me any onion." But other than that I eat everything. And but what I used to like, and I take advantage of it because I was a little sick, would be linguica. I don't know that you know what it is. It's a sausage made out of pork. And that and fried potatoes. I still love them. My wife makes them for me once in a while, and I still love them.

And sometimes my mother would go to a, well, it's not a fair, it's like a flea market, like, to buy things like oranges or goods for the house. And that would be on a Monday, in another village. They have it every Monday. My wife and I stopped there to see it. And I'd stay with my older sister. And she'd probably tell them, "Look, I got

some soup. That's what you people - " Oh I'd blow my stack. Because I was sick, I could get away with it. And I'd a get sausage and French fries. ( he laughs ) In other words, I was a bit spoiled.

LEVINE: Well, were you kind of the little man of the house since you . . .

FRESTA: I had to be.

LEVINE: And what did that, what kind of responsibilities did you have?

FRESTA: I, well, I was the little man because I was the only man, but I didn't have any responsibilities. At that age, God no. My mother took care of all of that.

LEVINE: Well, what, in town, what kind of, was it an agricultural town? Did most people grow food?

FRESTA: Uh, well, it was agriculture to the point to where they would sell, well, there were a few that would sell goods, but most of the people have two or three little pieces of land and they would plant potatoes and beans and fa-- fava beans, and things like that, to eat.

LEVINE: But there was no industry there?

FRESTA: No, no industry whatsoever.

LEVINE: Most people simply worked their own land.

FRESTA: Right.

LEVINE: I see.

FRESTA: Of course, there were two or three that had an abundance of what they used, so therefore they would sell. Like, we have a lot of olive trees, and the -- we - they'd make a lot of olive oil. We had a place where it would have dou-- something, like the bread business. You to go over there with your olives and make olive oil, it didn't, instead of paying them money you'd have given them, say, a gallon of oil out of your own or whatever. That's -- they in turn would sell it and make a little money for them.

LEVINE: Money doesn't sound like it was used that much in the town.

FRESTA: Well, it was when you have to go to a tavern. We had about three taverns. And like a grocery store, when you'd have to buy rice or sugar or coffee, which wasn't used. Today it is, but in those days, because it was extra money, or tea or things like that that you couldn't plant. You'd have to buy -- soap.

LEVINE: Did your father send money to your mother?

FRESTA: Every month. And it's funny that at one time the mail used to come from a bigger town where doctors were, and somebody would bring it over to our village, and then there was one time there somebody wasn't too honest, and when they saw that it came from America, they'd open the bag and see if there was any money in it, and for two or three months we didn't get a thing. So my mother was worried. So after that he sent it by, uh, anyway, registered mail. So I, in turn, would have to go to that village, to the post office, and pick that up.

LEVINE: And would you walk to that village?

FRESTA: I would often go with a - with a mailman because it was different. There was -- sometimes they'd have a woman, sometimes they'd have a boy, sometimes, so I had to walk back with him, and I'd to walk back home.

LEVINE: So would, how would they go? Would they be walking, or . . .

FRESTA: They'd walk. Now they have buses that you can go mostly any place. Nobody walks up there no more. But in those days you did, unless you went to far, far away. Say, to Lisbon or Oporto or Coimbra - somethin'. Then you'd try to get some transportation. Because there's a train that goes by, goes to the - goes to Spain. It goes right through. And it's only about, oh, seven or eight miles away from the station, the train station.

LEVINE: Now, did you take that train when you went?

FRESTA: Yes, we did, we did.

LEVINE: Was that the first time you had ever taken it?

FRESTA: Uh, yes.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about the decision to leave. What were the circumstances?

FRESTA: Well, the circumstances were that my father was always up here and going back, and then my mother got to a point where she finally told him, she says, "Look, the best thing would be for you to send for us, and we'd be together, because this is no way of living." So he did. Two years later he did.

LEVINE: He sent you money for the ticket?

FRESTA: Uh, yeah. He sent us money, and we sold our house after we were here, because we had a pretty good [not understood] house.

LEVINE: Tell me about the house. What was the house like?

FRESTA: Well, I don't know what to tell you. The thing is we had a, we had a house. Over there they don't have cellars, but we did have one the way we - we were situated. And under there we had a little place where my mother would bake the bread -- bake it, rather, mix it. And

then next to it we had a bigger place where when my father went down once when I was, the only time that I can remember, I was seven, eight years old, we had a donkey, and he used to keep it there. And next to it we had another part where we used to keep the sausages that my mother would make when the - when we'd kill a pig. We'd kill a pig once a year around Christmas time. And she'd make sausages and ham, and she'd salt some - some part of the pig - some of the --. And we'd have olives that you buy in the store. Well, we'd have jars - big--.

LEVINE: Barrels.

FRESTA: Barrels. And we'd keep the wine, that pork, and the - and the olives. Things like that.

LEVINE: Well, now, so your father sent money, and you . . .

FRESTA: Upstairs . . .

LEVINE: Oh, sorry, go ahead.

FRESTA: Upstairs we had two bedrooms, another room which could - could be used as a bedroom but we didn't use it, and then we had a bigger room which would probably be like these two rooms together in the front. And then on the side we had a kitchen, and on the entrance we had a place when, because we had to get our own water out of a fountain. The houses there didn't have any water in the house. Now I understand there's a few that have by a motor or something, but in those days you didn't. Everybody went to, we had a couple of fountains. One you put your thing in that and you'd fill it up, but the other one you'd have to wait on the fountain to fill it up.

LEVINE: I'm sorry, you'd have to wait on the fountain? You'd have to, what?

FRESTA: No, no. There would be a - a spigot, and then you'd put the container there and fill it up. But the other one on the - across the - the -- there's a little river, a little bit of a, it's not exactly a river, like a little brook that runs through the town, and on the other side there's plen-- plenty of water, nice water. But there you'd go, you'd get your container, you'd fill it right up, and you'd go home with it. That was my older sister's chores.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

FRESTA: She was seventeen, eighteen. She came up here, she was nineteen.

END TAPE A SIDE ONE

BEGIN TAPE A

SIDE B

LEVINE: Did you have any chores?

FRESTA: No. No, I was, I was babied. I was really babied. I didn't do hardly anything. And we had a water hole, and I used to see the kids

go over there and swim, and I couldn't because if my mother would hear about it I'd get a licking. And oh, I'd be so envious of the kids going, and I couldn't g-- make it, you know.

LEVINE: Because of your condition.

FRESTA: Because I was sick. And my mother didn't want anything to happen to me, especially with my father away. So, in other words, I was a spoiled brat. But one day the kids, they teased me so much, they said, "Look, she ain't going to see us, so why don't you go?" So I says, "I don't know, I don't know." But, anyway, I did, once. And somebody went and tell her, and I, we were naked, and we were only kids. And when I looked up and I saw her way up there, I got out, grabbed my clothes, and I went through the vi-- vineyards, places, so I couldn't get back of the house. And I knew I was going to get it, but what saved me was a man that was around, going, fixing umbrellas and dishes. You don't know how poor those places were at the time. Not today. They used to break dishes, and the guy would put a couple of things there to fix them and glue them, like, so you could use them over again. Things were ro--

FRESTA: So the -- this man was sitting at the foot of my steps, and there were three other women there having umbrellas fixed or whatever. And she felt sort of ashamed to hit me in front of them, so she didn't, so I got away with it.

LEVINE: Were the boys treated differently than the girls in your village?

FRESTA: No, no, no. They were equal, I'd say. But the reason why I was treated a little different, well, one was because my father was here, and every once in a while he'd send us a little money, so we lived a little, a little different. And then because I was sick, but the boys, they weren't [not understood] . When they were kids, twelve, fourteen years old, they're out with their, if they have sheep, as a shepherd. It's hard, it's hard work. It was. We got a neighbor here that came back about four days ago. He was there three months. And, oh, my God, he says they lived better over there than we do here, because up to about twelve or fourteen years ago the government didn't give them any pensions, but now they do, so everybody's getting money. In those days they didn't have it. Today you go over there and you ask him to go in the tavern, and you buy him a drink. They want to buy it themselves because they got all kinds of money. So they live better, even he said, they live better than we do here.

LEVINE: Well, now, tell me about, did you, do you remember leaving your town when you left to come here?

FRESTA: Oh, yes, I remember that very well.

LEVINE: Was there a sendoff of any kind for you and your brother and sisters and your mother?

FRESTA: Well, yes. Our neighbors and people that knew us which we, in the small town you know everybody. They wished us good luck and all that. Oh, yeah. We, and then we went from there . . .

LEVINE: Well, how did you get to the train? Did you walk?

FRESTA: I think we were taken by a horse and wagon because we had a little luggage.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything that you packed or your mother packed or bought?

FRESTA: No, I don't.

LEVINE: So you, okay. So you went to the train.

FRESTA: We were all excited to come here. I didn't even give it a thought.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you thought about America before you ever came here?

FRESTA: Oh, well, you know, as bad as it is now with the recession, I think that if they'd open the doors the town would be deserted. They would all leave. Because even today, and I think any part of Europe, because I was in the Second World War, and I went in five countries. And when you mention the word "America," it's a dream come -- if it ever comes through. So therefore in Portugal it was all different. And when I was, when my mother told me that we were coming to America, oh, I couldn't get over it. And I think everyone -- everyone in my family thought the same.

LEVINE: Okay. So when you got, you took the train, and then what . . .

FRESTA: We took the train straight to Lisbon, the capital. Well, in those days boats were rare. In other words, you couldn't get a boat every day. You'd probably get it a week, or sometimes every other week, or whatever. So we were supposed to take a boat out of the harbor of Lisbon. But it so happens that four-five days after we were there my youngest sister got an attack of appendix. And today you go to a hospital up here for appendix, three or four days later they send you home. But in those days, even here, you'd have to stay a week or two. Well, my sister, I don't know whether it burst on her or not. All I know is that she, we, she stayed in the hospital seven weeks. So we couldn't make it.

LEVINE: What did you do?

FRESTA: We stay-- there was a cousin of mine, that they was, her and her husband, her husband, mostly, were selling cheese, Portuguese cheese, that are made in my region where I was born. It's in the best-known Portuguese cheeses in the -- in the -- typical of the country, even here, called after this Serra da Estrela. So therefore, they, we were supposed

to go to a hotel, but my cousin says, "Oh, no, you stay here." So we put mattresses all over the floor. We were, because it was only two little rooms. And we stayed there while my sister was in the hospital. So . . .

LEVINE: Was your mother worried about that?

FRESTA: Well, she was, but what could be, what could we do? I mean, my sister was sick. She had to be in the hospital. And we wrote to my father to tell him why we hadn't come. And after seven weeks, then there was no boats for us to come. So the agent knew of a boat that was going to leave out of Vigo, Spain. So I remember so well we went by train all part of the day and part of the night. We get to Vigo, Spain, which is, I'd say about fifteen miles outside of the Portuguese border up north. And there we stayed about four or five days in a hotel, and then this French boat called La Bourdonnais, we went in that boat and we came to this country. And the first couple of days I was a little sick. I get seasick quite a bit. But after that, being a kid, I was going around the boat. And my mother and my older sister, they never left the bed. They were so sick, so sick, so sick. Well, it was all new to them. They never had been on water. And I remember it was Christmas, and my mother says for me to see if they have any boiled potatoes, that she'd like one or two. She didn't eat a thing, neither my sister, all the way through. And as it happened they did have them, and I brought her a potato, and I think that was the only thing that she ate in about eleven days.

LEVINE: Were you in steerage? Were you down in the hold of the ship or were you on top?

FRESTA: Uh, we had a cabin, we had a cabin.

LEVINE: Just your family?

FRESTA: Just my family, yeah.

LEVINE: And then you went to the dining room if you weren't sick.

FRESTA: Right, right. And I don't remember much about my younger sister, but I think she was all right, because her and I, we used to go around the boat and see different things. But it was my older sister and my mother. They never got out of bed. I think they lost ten or twelve pounds during the voyage.

LEVINE: Do you, you spent Christmas on the boat.

FRESTA: Yes, we did.

LEVINE: And what was that like?

FRESTA: It didn't, it didn't, felt like Christmas.

LEVINE: Were you used to celebrating Christmas?

FRESTA: Well, if you'd call it celebrating. I mean, we didn't have much to celebrate outside of probably different food and going to church a little dressed up and so forth. There wasn't much change really. But knowing that it was Christmas, things were a little different, but not out of this world.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else about the voyage, anything that struck you as different and new and exciting, or . . .

FRESTA: Well, that excitement was on my mind because of the fact that I was coming to America. But about the voyage outside of my goin' around the boat, I was kind of inquisitive. I still am today a little curious, and going here and there. That's about it.

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

FRESTA: Yes, very much so. And I was (coughs) excuse me. I wasn't used to that kind of cold weather. And it got so cold, and then we went to Ellis Island. And, oh, my God, the building looked so spacious to me, so - so big. I hadn't seen anything like that before. And all kinds of people, different nationalities, going in through those corridors between, tables and corridors in between and declaring what you had, and so forth and so on. I remember that very vividly. And that's one of the reasons why I wanted to see it again. I really wanted to see it. And then going through. And my father with a friend, because my mother -- my father couldn't speak that good of English. He spoke a little bit, but never that much. You know, when you're, when you come into a country, either here or anywhere else, and you're over thirty or whatever, you never get it right. Because I came, I was twelve years old, and I'm still a little out of the ways at times.

But, anyway, I remember going in through there, and then my father and this friend of his was waiting for us. And then we got out of there. I don't know if it was the following day or whatever. It might have - might have been the same day. We got out of there and we went on this, they used to call it steamer. A boat outs-- that used to go to Providence, Rhode Island. And my feet were, I have, my family must have been the same way. They were so cold, so cold, so cold. When we get out, when we get on that steamer, it was coal-burning fire, and it was so hot. And they started to come to. Oh, being a kid, I cried, it was so, because they were thawing out. And so we travel all night, or part of the day. But, anyway, all night, and we got up to Providence, Rhode Island, early in the morning. Then we came on the train. We had a station here then. Now we don't have it any more. We came in the train to town, and then my father got one of those yellow cabs - big thing -- with no - no doors on the front of the driver, and they brought us up here. He had it bought this place, and I've been here ever since. I bought the place off of my mother after she passed away. And that tree that you see over there was about my height when I got here, so I'm as old as that tree. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: Wow. Well, do you remember your first few days in America? Were there things that struck you . . .

FRESTA: Oh, there were. Of course, there was a lot of people around here that, some people anyway, that had come from my village. They came four years ago. As a matter of fact, it was the father and mother and sisters of the girl that she just call for you to see. And of course they came to see us, we went to see them. And knowing that they were, we knew them, it made it a little easier. And things like that, and then, of course, there was other people across there, a little further up, at the corner, that they came from another little village a little further away. Then we got to be very friendly up here.

LEVINE: What did your father do for work here?

FRESTA: Uh, well, he done all kinds of things. Before we came over I understood that he was a baker. On a horse and wagon he was delivering bread through different routes. But this last time he worked in a paper mill for about twenty-seven years. It doesn't exist no more. They knocked it down. But it used to be down the road about a mile. And the poor guy, you know, in those days you didn't make much. And then he bought this house. He bought, it was only a little bit of a room. And what they did, he bought this with another man because it's a sort of a double.

LEVINE: Two-family.

FRESTA: A two-family, up and down. So the other man was there with his wife and three or four children, and we were here. But then after a couple of years, oh. The other fellow was a carpenter. Not that good of a carpenter, but he was a carpenter, and my father helped him. And instead of knocking that building -- that little room out, they added onto it. And what they did, because money wasn't that much money, they bought a couple of condemned houses up city. They knocked them down, and they used every bit of it in this - this house in order to build. And since we came from Portugal we have to finish upstairs, because all they had was the two by fours. Like I said, there wasn't money. Because, for one, he sent for us. For another, he had just bought this place on the me--they didn't have any money. And things were rough then.

Today you go out of work, you get social security for a while. That kind of helps you. But in those days there was no social security. He was out of work for about six-- six months. The place closed down. And he was kind of handy. In those days they didn't have cement blocks to build houses, the cellars. So there were two or three houses that were built up a little ways, and he was kind of handy as a stone mason. So he built the stone walls for the homes. And he made a little money. It wasn't enough to support us, but then we have a farm here. We never went hungry. Though we didn't have the things that we probably would have if we had the money. But as far as whatever he planted, potatoes, beans, peppers, anything, we had it, we had it. We never went hungry.

LEVINE: So a lot of the things that you grew in Portugal you also grew here.

FRESTA: Right.

LEVINE: The grapes.

FRESTA: Right, right. Everything. He planted that grapevine.

LEVINE: It's beautiful.

FRESTA: It's getting old, but now I got three new shoots coming up.

LEVINE: What was it like going to school for you?

FRESTA: Oh, that was rough. Now, imagine that you went to Portugal and you get there and you didn't know a word, which I didn't. So you came here, and people would be talking, you didn't know. They could be calling you names and you didn't know what was going on. So it was really rough. And I depended on two or three fellows that were from Portuguese pe-- people. But some of them had been already born here. Their folks were from Portugal or from the Azores. We have more, a lot of people from the Azores, but I'm from the mainland. And, therefore, I'd ask them, "What's she sayin'?" or "What's this sayin'?" You know. And the -- the -- sometimes they would tell me the wrong things, and I didn't know whether they -- I'd have to believe them. So it was really rough, very rough.

And since I had gone to school for three years in Portugal, I figure about three years. Maybe it wasn't even that. But anyway, the arithmetic such as adding and even subtraction, it was nothing to me. I already knew that very well. So this -- this girl that you're supposed to see, did she call? She told the teacher that I had been in school three years and so forth, because the teacher, so they started me in the third grade. I think it was in April. I'm not sure, right. February. They started me in the third grade. And the teacher would write the small additions on a board, and we'd be at our desks copying them. She would just shake the eraser off, cleaned her hands, she was just ready to sit down, and I'd have my paper right there, I'd take it up to her. She couldn't understand it why, you know.

Well, to me, I am that. Numbers, arithmetic is the same way all over the country, all over the world. So therefore she couldn't get over it. So I was there from February to June and I got promoted to the fourth. In the fourth grade I was there a whole year. Oh, I'm a little ahead of myself. While I was in the third grade I couldn't read. So they would sit me into the next room, which was the first and second grade, and there was a teacher there, and she'd teach me how to stay the words. Well, it took a little while, of course. But then there were, after about three or four weeks or a month, I don't know. They would have the word, and they would have some kind of a subject which the word would describe it. And I was getting a little too smart for my britches. And if I didn't know what that was, I'd kind of look at the word. So she get to a point that she'd cover that so I would learn.

LEVINE: She covered the picture.

FRESTA: Yeah.

LEVINE: So you would see the written out.

FRESTA: Right. So there was a girl in my class in the third grade, she was so dumb. She didn't know nothing. And she kept her eyes on the clock, and she said, "Miss Reed." The teacher's name was Reed. "It's time for Joe Fresta go in the other room." And, ooh, I hated her for that, because I thought I wanted to be with the rest of the class, you know. So after five or six weeks, when they were reading in my class, we each had a book, and the teacher would call on somebody to read at different times. And, of course, I followed. But my, I couldn't . . .

LEVINE: The vocabulary.

FRESTA: Yeah, I couldn't. So one time I was so sick of going into there, because to me it looked as if I was being a little kid being kind of punished, you know. So one time I saw the book. There was about a full line-and-a-half with a period. And I studied them, and I says to myself, "Jesus, I'm going to try it." And I did. I raised my hand. And, of course, the whole class could raise their hand. But when the teacher saw mine she was going to give me the chance. Don't ask me how I did it. All I know is that I, I did it, and from then on I didn't have to go into the other room no more. So, anyway, I was there from February to June, and I got promoted to the fourth grade. I was there a whole year. And then I got promoted to the fifth. Now, it was a small school divided into four, but up here was the entrance to go to the basement. This was one and two, this was three and four, and this was five and six, this was seven and eight. Well, because of the entrance, or, rather, this is not the one that I'm thinking about. But anyway, because of the entrance, it made this room a little smaller than these others.

LEVINE: Just for the tape, so for the first and second, the entrance to the basement was in there, so that room was smaller.

FRESTA: The fifth and sixth. The entrance was here to the basement, so therefore made the fifth and sixth grade rooms smaller. Well, when I got promoted from the fourth grade to the fifth, our class was bigger than this room could take. There was five extras. So they had to pick five people to go into the seventh grade because they couldn't fit there, and I was one amongst them. So I got another promotion.

END SIDE B TAPE ONE BEGIN SIDE A TAPE

TWO

LEVINE: So that must, how did you feel?

FRESTA: Oh, I felt great. And the - and the teacher said, "Imagine, he's only been here a short while, and you - you people can't get it to go there, the double promotion, and he can." So while I was here on the seventh and eighth grade, I was there about - well, my - my birthday's in May. And by this time I was, what, I was fourteen? And if I'd finish this year, I would be fifteen. So I wasn't even thinking of high school, even though I'd love to go. But you see, I start thinking, I'm fifteen years old. By the time I go to high school four more years. I'll be

nineteen, almost twenty. Then if I should want to go to some college or something, oh, my God, I'd be an old man. So I decided to get out. I - I was a - a - a fool in a way because I should have finish. Well, I was in the seventh, I'd still have to go to the eighth. And the - the teacher there told the class one time to some of the people, "You're not getting promoted, but this fellow that came from the old country not too long ago is." I always liked the figures and writing and everything. I always, uh . . .

LEVINE: So what did you do when you stopped school?

FRESTA: There were no jobs. Very -- things were very bad. So somebody got me to go, friends of mine, to work on construction, road building. But I was so small, I'd never worked that much. They - they gave me a pail, and I was a water boy. I'd have to go different places and get water, go to those people. I did some work, yes, but mostly I was a water boy. And I worked there for about two or three years.

LEVINE: You mean bringing drinking water?

FRESTA: Yes, yes. You know, because you build a road through the woods, there's no water. So you have to go to a house and have them give you water, and you have a bucket with a dipper. Then you go around and, so, that's what I did for, I went down the Cape one - one year. I was in Portland, Maine. I was in New Hampshire.

LEVINE: This was being a water boy at these different places.

FRESTA: Yeah, yeah. There was a, it was a company that they used to have about five jobs going all over New England states, so I'd go wherever they, I could go.

LEVINE: And when did you meet your wife?

FRESTA: Well, ( he laughs ) I knew my wife when she was six years old, but never realizing that we were going to end up together. So because, like I said, the -- her folks were born there, oh, I'd say maybe about fifty miles away. As a matter of fact, when we went there the first time, we went to the village where her father and mother were born. Then, of course, a fellow, like -- and a girl, too, they have different ideas, they have different girls. They - they talk to one another, and so forth and so on. But then one time I was hospitalized in the hospital, and she came down with her - with her mother to see me. And right there and then, I fell in, I fell for her. So, after that . . .  
( he laughs )

HILDA: That was years before we got married.

LEVINE: Do you know what it was you liked about her?

FRESTA: What's that?

LEVINE: What did you like about her?

FRESTA: Oh, I liked everything about her. The way, her structure, her face. I liked everything about her. So then we, we went around, we went around. I used to go and see her. We couldn't get around for about a year-and-a-half, I guess. And we finally decided on, well, I did. She - she didn't speak much. She - she does now (laughs), but at that time she didn't.

FRESTA: So I, we made a date and we got married. Then we've been married fifty, almost fifty-two years. Fifty-three!

LEVINE: And were your mother and father and your wife's mother and father pleased with the match? Did they have anything to say about it?

FRESTA: Well, I don't know that you know or not, you must know. Uh, the parents of a boy, they never get the best girl. Very, very seldom they get a girl that the parents will say, "Well, she got - he got the right girl." Because they always figure that there's no girl good enough for their son. However, my father didn't care too much. My mother had her doubts, but after she was satisfied. It was the girl that I chose, and she was satisfied.

LEVINE: But there was no idea that they would choose the person.

FRESTA: Oh, no, no, no, no, no. Not in -- it never happened with my father or mother, and it never happened with us, with our son and daughter.

LEVINE: Well, now, what is your wife's name and maiden name?

FRESTA: Her - her name is Hilda -- Cortinu. Well, she has a middle name, Da Jesus, Hilda Da Jesus (writing and paper rustling) Hilda De Jesus Cortinu.

LEVINE: And then did you have, you had children? What are your children's names?

FRESTA: We have a boy and a girl, Diane and Ernest.

LEVINE: And do you have grandchildren?

FRESTA: We have four granddaughters, Christina, Kimberly, Lindsay and Meaghan.

LEVINE: And your daughter's married name?

FRESTA: My daughter's married name is Costa.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, let's see. We're getting close to the end now, but I wanted to ask you, you know, this tape is going to be in the library at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, and people will be able to listen to it for all time. Is there anything you feel you would like to pass along, you know, based on your life, based upon starting out in Portugal and coming to America and living out most of your life here.

FRESTA: Right.

LEVINE: Is there anything that you'd like to, say, pass along to your children, grandchildren, or anybody else that you feel you've learned about life, that you feel is important?

FRESTA: Well, to me, there's no country like this country anywheres in the world. And I've been in a few countries, like when I was in the Second World War. I was in England, France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, and I've been in Spain. And, of course, in this country I've been in Hawaii, Florida, California. Bermuda. I've traveled a little bit. Canada several times. And, to me, I love to go to my country, to Portugal, where I was born. I always said, of course, there's not that many crazy people like me. I always said that if I was healthy and wealthy I'd like to travel the world over. I'm that type of a guy. I like to know languages. I like to know how other people live and everything else. But, of course, at my age I can't, and I was never wealthy. ( he laughs ) But I really don't know what to say. All I can say is that this country's got everything to see, more to see than any other place.

LEVINE: Well, tell me this. What is it that you're proudest of, that you've done in your lifetime?

FRESTA: Well, I think I've done as well as I could have done, seeing that I came from the old country, and in order to get places you have to have education and, as I told you, I haven't got much of an education. But I don't think I've done as badly with the bit of education that I do have. In those, in the first days of my life, rather, after I became an adult, you couldn't get jobs, so I tried a little of everything. But towards the end I ended up taking an examination to be a switchboard operator for the sewer department of the city of Taunton. And I worked there for twenty-six years. I was the only one there without a high school education. But I done as well as they did, as I liked to print. And, as a matter of fact, the boss in charge said one time that I printed better than anyone in there.

Uh, the only thing that I had against that job was that I had to change every week, so therefore if it came on a holiday, I couldn't say I'll be home with the family. There were many times that my wife and the children, I was working on a Sunday, and they would go over there and have dinner with me so we could all be together. Other than that it was a steady income, I'm glad that I did it because I didn't make that much money, but I knew that it was there steady to support my family. And, of course, my wife, after my daughter was a year-and-a-half old, she went to work. And then later on she was lucky enough to get a job in an institution of retarded people, and she worked there for twenty-four peo- twenty four years. And we're not rich, but we manage. We have to watch, have a budget, but we do - we do very well.

LEVINE: Well, you certainly have a nice home.

FRESTA: Thanks.

HILDA: It's old.

LEVINE: It's very nice.

HILDA: I hang on to all my furniture that I've had for years.

FRESTA: So I don't know what else I really . . .

LEVINE: Well, let me ask you this. Were you or your parents disappointed in anything after you came to America?

FRESTA: Well, I don't think so. The only thing that it might be if you want to call it in this appointment is, you see, in any country out there, especially I'm -- let's speak about mine, where I was born. You th-- when you talk about America, you think that you come here and you shake a tree and you fill up baskets full of dollars, which it isn't so. In that respect she might have been a little disappointed. Of course, my father wasn't, because he was here. And me and my kid sister, we were too young to care.

LEVINE: Did your mother and father become citizens?

FRESTA: No.

HILDA: Yes, your father did. Your father did.

FRESTA: (softly) Probably not. My father might have, but my mother never did. And my mother couldn't say a word in English, and when my kid sister started going to school, she'd come home, and her and I would be speaking a little English, and my mother wouldn't hear of it. Not because she didn't care one way or another. It's because she didn't understand what we were talking about, and she felt kind of . . .

LEVINE: Do you think she was pleased that she had come here, or do you think . . .

FRESTA: Oh, very much so, oh.

HILDA: Yes.

FRESTA: We all were, we all were.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I think we can close here, unless there's anything you'd like to add before we finish.

FRESTA: Well, I really don't know. All I know is that I'm eighty years old. I'm retired. And I've been here, it's going to be sixty-seven years, and I feel that I belong here. Well, let's face it. I only had twelve years there, so therefore I remember -- I like it, I like to go there as often as I can. I won't any more, naturally. But, and I'll never say that I'm not Portuguese, because I am. But I adore both here and there, but more here because I live here. This is my, the rest of my days, I hope.

LEVINE: Well, thank you very much. It's been a pleasure talking with you.

FRESTA: You're welcome. And that's the best I could do.

LEVINE: Well, very good. Thank you. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I've been talking to Joseph Fresta, who is in his home in Taunton, Massachusetts. And it's September 20th, 1992, and I'm signing off.

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