

**EI-022**

**LUCY SANGIACOMO NIGRO**

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**INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 8/1993**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 11/1993**

**ITALY, 1909**

**AGE 15**

**SHIP: THE "AUGUST"**

**PORT: NAPLES**

**RESIDENCES:**

- **ITALY: BELLA**
- **THE US: BROOKLYN, NY; East 97<sup>th</sup> St, NYC**

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. We're here with Lucy Nigro, who came from Italy in 1909 when she was fifteen. Today is Thursday, February 7th, 1991. Well, Mrs. Nigro, could you please give your full name, and this includes your maiden name, for us, please.

NIGRO: My full name is Lucia, and Sangiacomo. S, that's a maiden name. S-A-N-G-I-A-C-O-M-O.

SIGRIST: Okay. And last name is Nigro.

NIGRO: And my maiden, my married name is Nigro.

SIGRIST: Right. And, uh, what is the date of your birthday?

NIGRO: Uh, 1894, the month five, the day six.

SIGRIST: I see. And where were you born in Italy?

NIGRO: In Italy, Bella. B-E-L-L-A.

SIGRIST: That's the name of the town.

NIGRO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And what part of Italy is that in?

NIGRO: Close to Naples.

SIGRIST: Near Naples?

NIGRO: Close.

SIGRIST: Let me talk a little bit about when you were a girl in Italy. And let's start by talking about your mother and father. What was your father's name?

NIGRO: Mateo, Matthew Sangiacomo.

SIGRIST: Yes. Is that M-A-T-T-E-O? ( her daughter enters the room )

NIGRO: Catherine, this is the man from Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: That's right, come on in. ( break in tape ) All right. This is Paul Sigrist. We are continuing our interview with Lucy Nigro. We are at her home, 221 Avenue U in Brooklyn. Mrs. Nigro, you were just beginning to talk about your father. His first name was Mateo, you said.

NIGRO: Yes. My father was a very tall man, handsome. And he was, his trade, watching the sheep.

SIGRIST: He was a shepherd.

NIGRO: A shepherd. My mother name Angela, and she was a weaver.

SIGRIST: A weaver.

NIGRO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What was her maiden name?

NIGRO: Caldano, C-A-L-D-A-N-O.

SIGRIST: I see. And did you have any brothers and sisters?

NIGRO: Uh, I had three sisters, which they came here before me, too. I came later.

SIGRIST: I see.

NIGRO: And they all, they two die.

SIGRIST: When they were here?

NIGRO: They die here.

SIGRIST: I see.

NIGRO: They married here, they have family here, and they die here.

SIGRIST: I see. Were they much older than you?

NIGRO: Young. I'm the oldest one.

SIGRIST: You're the oldest. I see. Well, let's talk a little bit about where you lived. What kind of a house did you live in in Italy?

NIGRO: Well, I lived in a small house. No bathroom, no water. No gas, no electric. Very poor, very poor.

SIGRIST: And you said that this was in this town of Bella.

NIGRO: The town of Bella, yeah.

SIGRIST: But was Bella really a very rural area?

NIGRO: No.

SIGRIST: It wasn't very big.

NIGRO: It was a town of about seven, eight thousand inhabitants.

SIGRIST: I see. And the sheep that your father tended, were they his?

NIGRO: No. He was working.

SIGRIST: I see. For whom? Just, different people?

NIGRO: Well, somebody that owned, they had money and they hire a man. But they didn't make no money, and we hadn't too much to live on. My mother was a weaver. She used to weave some clothes for the people and make a coat or a bedspread or whatever they could make, and that's how we made a living.

SIGRIST: Did she have a loom in the house? Did she have a loom to do her weaving in the house?

NIGRO: Yeah, sure.

SIGRIST: Was it a big one?

NIGRO: Yeah. The loom was big, square, about three or four feet. That's how she worked. In that one room we had to sleep and we ate. Everything in that one room.

SIGRIST: Did your father or your mother keep a garden or anything?

NIGRO: In Europe, no.

SIGRIST: No.

NIGRO: No. We had none. Because we didn't have our own garden, our own property, so we had none.

SIGRIST: I see. So your father then left the house every day.

NIGRO: Yeah. Sometime he's, no. Sometimes he stay away for a week or two.

SIGRIST: A long time.

NIGRO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: So it was just, then, you and your mother.

NIGRO: Yeah. With my sister.

SIGRIST: And how much younger are your sisters?

NIGRO: Three years apart.

SIGRIST: I see. And three years between you and your, the next sister. What were their names?

NIGRO: My oldest sister was Catherine, and my other sister was Donato, Donato.

SIGRIST: D . . .

NIGRO: D-A, D-O-N-A-T-O.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you ever help your mother weave?

NIGRO: Yeah. I used to put up the spool. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: I see. And your sisters, too? Did they help?

NIGRO: Well, no, sometimes.

SIGRIST: They were younger?

NIGRO: They would play. They were young. They play with, uh, sticks, stones. We had no marbles, so we used the stones for play.

SIGRIST: I see. No toys, then, you just used what you had.

NIGRO: No, no.

SIGRIST: You said it was a one-room house.

NIGRO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: But, was it stone? Was it wood?

NIGRO: No, stone.

SIGRIST: There were made stone there.

NIGRO: It was all made out of stone. No wood.

SIGRIST: Did it have a fireplace or a large stove or something?

NIGRO: Yeah. It had a fireplace, you make the fire on the floor, and the chimney takes the smoke out.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you all have your own beds, or did you have to sleep . . .

NIGRO: No, forget it. ( she laughs ) No, no, no, no. We all slept in one bed.

SIGRIST: You all slept in one bed. Did you go to church?

NIGRO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Was that an important part of your life?

NIGRO: Oh, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: You were Catholic?

NIGRO: Sure. Born Catholic, I'll die Catholic.

SIGRIST: And was there a large church in this small town?

NIGRO: Pretty good, pretty good.

SIGRIST: And were your parents, did they go every Sunday, or . . .

NIGRO: Yeah, my mother. My father couldn't go because he was away.

SIGRIST: Out tending.

NIGRO: Yeah. My mother.

SIGRIST: Who did the cooking?

NIGRO: My mother.

SIGRIST: She was very busy.

NIGRO: Well, but see, we had to eat.

SIGRIST: Yes. What sorts of things did you eat?

NIGRO: The most, my mother found it very easy and very economical. Pasta, pasta and beans.

SIGRIST: Did you make your own pasta?

NIGRO: Sometimes you make, sometimes you buy.

SIGRIST: Was there a store or . . .

NIGRO: Oh, yes. They sell. They have a store. Not like they have today. Today they have like America, but years back was one store, two, was enough.

SIGRIST: Was it a big event for you to all go shopping? I mean, did you do this very seldomly, or . . .

NIGRO: No. Every day when you want, you go, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you guys bake your own bread?

NIGRO: Yes. My mother used to make bread that would last us for a week.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Was it just a white bread, or was it a . . .

NIGRO: Only white bread we had because we hadn't our own wheat. We had to buy the flour. So my mother used to save to buy the wheat, bring to the mill to have flour, and to take back. I take nothing back. I buy flour, it's all there, what I pay.

SIGRIST: I see.

NIGRO: So that was economical. You don't tell the girls today to be economical like that. They'll spit in your face!

SIGRIST: Yes, indeed. Did, uh, let's talk about holidays. Let's talk about Christmas.

NIGRO: Oh, we had Christmas, a nice Christmas Eve, like here. We go to church on Christmas Eve. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: And then what would happen after church?

NIGRO: Well, we go home and we have the goodies. Then we know that it's a holiday. Over here we know it's Christmas only to give gifts. You don't care for the food because you have every day the food that you want. We appreciate, we didn't have what we want, and that one day, a holiday, we have to enjoy.

SIGRIST: And you had special foods, then.

NIGRO: Yeah. Everything special on a holiday.

SIGRIST: Did, were there other family members in this town, like your mother's family or your father's family?

NIGRO: Well, they were, but they had their own family and they stayed in their own house.

SIGRIST: So at the holidays, Christmas, for instance, you all didn't get together then?

NIGRO: No. Not necessarily.

SIGRIST: Did you exchange presents?

NIGRO: We had nothing to give.

SIGRIST: You talked about there being special foods at Christmas. What sorts of special foods?

NIGRO: Well, like you have ravioli, you have lasagna. You know, different meat, which we don't have every day.

SIGRIST: Was your father always around at Christmas, or sometimes not?

NIGRO: No, not always. Not always.

SIGRIST: I see. I see a piano over here. Were any of your, were your parents musical at all, or were you?

NIGRO: None at all. My daughter took lessons.

SIGRIST: I see. I see. Who decided to come to America?

NIGRO: Uh, my grandmother, she was here twice with her son.

SIGRIST: This is your father's . . .

NIGRO: My grandma. My mother's mother.

SIGRIST: Your mother's mother.

NIGRO: She was here twice and she come back.

SIGRIST: Why was she here twice? Why . . .

NIGRO: Her son was here. He used to come home. My mother was in Europe, and she come back.

SIGRIST: So she was just visiting.

NIGRO: She'd come and go. She tried to get my mother here. So she tried, my father came first. And when he was here, he sent for me. Because I was the older girl, maybe I could do a little work. On luck, I was rejected for my eye.

SIGRIST: When your father first came, what job did he get here?

NIGRO: Unload the coal.

SIGRIST: Working with coal?

NIGRO: Unload the coal.

SIGRIST: Unloading coal.

NIGRO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How much sooner did he come before you came?

NIGRO: Before I came, my mother came because I couldn't come. I was rejected, so I didn't even try again. So my grandmother says to my mother, she says, "Look, you go with your two girls. When you're there, she's got to come."

SIGRIST: When, I have a question. When you say you were rejected, does that mean you were rejected in Italy?

NIGRO: In Italy, for my eye.

SIGRIST: For your eye.

NIGRO: Yeah. That's what I'm telling you. But now they let come anybody here.

SIGRIST: But then they screened you very carefully.

NIGRO: Very good.

SIGRIST: Well, did you have to go to a doctor? How did you find out that there was something wrong with your eye?

NIGRO: No. In Naples there's a doctor that looks your hair, looks your eye, make sure that you're perfect to go to another country. That's how we know. Well, then my mother and my sister, they came here with my father, and

my grandmother says, "You have to go there to your mother." My aunt, where I was staying, says, "No, you stay with me." Grandmother says, "No, no. She's got to go to her mother."

SIGRIST: Um, why, why did you stay with your aunt after? Because you were certainly old enough to take care of yourself.

NIGRO: But I had no place to stay. I had to stay with somebody.

SIGRIST: Did they sell the house?

NIGRO: We had no house. We used to pay rent.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see. You rented that house.

NIGRO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: So when your father and, by the time your mother got here they had given up the house.

NIGRO: Sure. So I stayed with my aunt. That was my mother's brother.

SIGRIST: And that was in the same town?

NIGRO: Yeah. Same town.

SIGRIST: So how long were you alone over in Italy, then?

NIGRO: Maybe a year. I don't even think so. So then my grandmother go to the agency. She says, "I want to make a trip to go to America, and I'm taking my niece." So she made a passport for her and for me. I couldn't have my own passport. I was a minor. And we came.

SIGRIST: So did you have to go through all those examinations again?

NIGRO: In Naples, yeah.

SIGRIST: And that time you passed?

NIGRO: Oh, sure.

SIGRIST: What was wrong with your eye the first time?

NIGRO: I don't know what was wrong, but I used to have something, when I was young, that the doctor used to put drops in my eye.

SIGRIST: I see.

NIGRO: But then, again, combined. So when I came the second time, they checked me again. They don't know that you had gone already once.

SIGRIST: That's right.

NIGRO: So they checked me again, and I was all right. I came through. Now, when we came, we don't go to the airport like today. You get off the boat, and they take you with the little rowboat to Ellis Island. Everybody went

there.

SIGRIST: Okay. Before we get to Ellis Island, let's talk about the boat ride over. Do you remember . . .

NIGRO: No. I mean to say that's where they take you.

SIGRIST: Oh, in Naples, you mean, they rowed you . . .

NIGRO: No, America. From the big ship in the little rowboat they take us to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Okay.

NIGRO: We didn't go like you come here, you get off and you go home. No, no.

SIGRIST: It wasn't like that.

NIGRO: I think it was better.

SIGRIST: Let's go back to Naples for a minute. Do you remember the name of the boat that you came over on?

NIGRO: I think it was August.

SIGRIST: August?

NIGRO: August.

SIGRIST: August. Do you remember anything about the boat ride over?

NIGRO: Oh. ( she laughs ) It was crucial for me, crucial. You're asleep, one over the other, no beds, no bed, nothing. You eat your dinner on the floor of the boat. They go with the pail full of food, and they get so many people to have from that food, and we ate on the boat. I couldn't eat a thing.

SIGRIST: Were you sick on the boat?

NIGRO: Seasick. Eleven days seasick, eleven days.

SIGRIST: So you were pretty much confined to being down.

NIGRO: Yeah. So when I went to Ellis Island everything was so different and so beautiful, really.

SIGRIST: Now, so it was your grandmother who was with you?

NIGRO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Your grandmother. So you stayed together when you were on the boat with her?

NIGRO: Oh, yeah. Sure. She was in my care.

SIGRIST: And was she sick also? Did she get sick? No, she was all right.

NIGRO: Great, great.

SIGRIST: Do you, were there lots of Italians on the boat?

NIGRO: All Italians.

SIGRIST: They were all Italians.

NIGRO: The ship leaves in Naples, and they're all Italians.

SIGRIST: Yes. Did you make any friends on the boat? Did you meet anybody?

NIGRO: No. Not really.

SIGRIST: Did anyone from your town go?

NIGRO: No, not that time. Sometimes they went, but that time we were alone, my grandmother and I.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did you take with you? Do you remember what kind of . . .

NIGRO: What could I take? Only the clothes that I wear.

SIGRIST: Well, do you remember, you said that the ship took eleven days, right?

NIGRO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And you were sick for most of that.

NIGRO: Mostly every day.

SIGRIST: Yeah. And was, where you stayed, was it well-lit, or was it very dark?

NIGRO: Where?

SIGRIST: Down in the bottom of the boat.

NIGRO: Oh, it's like all the boat. You had no room.

SIGRIST: You said that there were stacks . . .

NIGRO: Yeah. Somebody could spit on you. Somebody could wet on you. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Yeah. Were there portholes? Could you see out at all?

NIGRO: No. But where we were in the middle of the boat you couldn't see nothing.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go up on deck?

NIGRO: On the deck we sat all day.

SIGRIST: You did. You went up during the day on deck.

NIGRO: That's where I sit all day.

SIGRIST: Well that must have been . . .

NIGRO: Everybody. When they couldn't sit in the inside, they had to go on the deck. But people, they were well, they used to walk around, they used to enjoy. I couldn't do that.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Because you weren't feeling well.

NIGRO: No, I was sick.

SIGRIST: When everyone was up on deck, did the crew of the boat clean out the area?

NIGRO: Oh, they come and clean. Before we get on they clean. Disinfectant smell. Hmm.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what they fed you on the boat?

NIGRO: No. I don't really remember. It was like soup, but I couldn't know.

SIGRIST: You probably didn't eat very much.

NIGRO: No, I couldn't eat. I couldn't eat.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

NIGRO: When we come on the big boat, passed now the big boat, my

grandmother says, "You see how nice it is over here? It's beautiful." Oh, it was gorgeous, really, in the daytime. But then when she showed me at nighttime, which I now, even now I enjoy the nighttime light.

SIGRIST: You mean the city all lit up?

NIGRO: Yeah. All lit up. It's beautiful.

SIGRIST: You'd probably never really seen anything like that before.

NIGRO: No. What could you see in that little town?

SIGRIST: Right, right.

NIGRO: You can't see nothing.

SIGRIST: Now, you said that you went over by a rowboat to Ellis Island. Then what happened?

NIGRO: Then when I went there they gave us a place where to sleep.

SIGRIST: Why did you have to stay overnight?

NIGRO: Well, one reason, I suppose, was for my eye. I don't know. Then for my father. They wanted to see maybe I was the wrong party, I don't recognize my father. And they had the case, I'm crying. So the judge in Italian says, "Don't cry. No pianga, no pianga." When the judge asked me, "Is this your father?" I says, "Yeah." Okay. So it was all right. But

we had a, the first time I enjoy eating. A cup of coffee in the morning with a nice piece of bread in the coffee. That was delicious for me because I never had that.

SIGRIST: Where did they feed you?

NIGRO: They had a dining room. Everybody was . . .

SIGRIST: What did it look like? Do you remember?

NIGRO: They had tables. They had tables, yeah. They had tables.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of people at Ellis Island?

NIGRO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Very crowded.

NIGRO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did your grandmother stay with you?

NIGRO: Sure. She couldn't go without.

SIGRIST: Now, so your father came to meet you?

NIGRO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was your mother with him?

NIGRO: No. My mother stayed home with the other girl.

SIGRIST: Was he living in New York City at that time?

NIGRO: New York. 97th Street. 225 East 97th.

SIGRIST: I see. So when you, you said you didn't recognize your father at first, because . . .

NIGRO: No. The judges think that I won't know him. That was the case. So he says to me, "Is this your father?" I says, "Yes." See? ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: You said he was a very tall man?

NIGRO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, you must have been very happy to see him.

NIGRO: Oh, imagine. I was happy to see my mother and my sisters. Yeah. And I lived on 97th one year.

SIGRIST: So he, that's where he took you. He took you right to 97th Street.

NIGRO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What kind of an apartment did he have?

NIGRO: On 97th Street also we didn't have too good. Three rooms, toilet in the hall, cold water, coal stove. Three rooms we had to stay my mother and father, me and my sisters, and my grandmother, all in the three rooms.

SIGRIST: Wow. That's pretty crowded.

NIGRO: Well, we managed.

SIGRIST: Was it, were you on the first floor? Were you on a higher floor?

NIGRO: Third floor.

SIGRIST: Third floor. Had your father, how long had he lived there before you got there?

NIGRO: Oh, before I live at 97th? I only lived there one year.

SIGRIST: You only lived there one year.

NIGRO: They got me married ( she laughs ) at sixteen years old.

SIGRIST: That was fast. Well, let's talk a little bit about that. How did you meet your husband-to-be?

NIGRO: I didn't meet. They introduced. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: They had already planned this. What did he do?

NIGRO: Head clean. He was here a short time, too. He was only here two years.

SIGRIST: But I'm sorry, what did he do?

NIGRO: Head clean.

SIGRIST: Hat?

NIGRO: Head clean.

SIGRIST: Oh, head clean. And he had only been here, he had come from Italy.

NIGRO: Yeah. He came from the same town, that's why. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: But you didn't know him when you lived in that town?

NIGRO: No.

SIGRIST: No. How did your parents meet him?

NIGRO: There were some people that they lived in the same neighborhood with my grandmother. "So this is a nice man. Could your daughter marry?" And that time the old people, they think girls get married quick as they can, because when they get old they get too smart and they wait till the moon comes down. The moon never comes down when you get old. You go to the moon, but the moon don't come to you.

SIGRIST: I see. What was his name, his first name?

NIGRO: Vincenzo.

SIGRIST: Vincenzo. And did you like him when you met him?

NIGRO: I was so young, I don't know. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: How did your parents introduce you two? Did they have him over for dinner?

NIGRO: No, he was older. The house he used to come. He was kind of, a kind man, a very kind man. He was older than me, but he was very kind. And we got married.

SIGRIST: So you married a year after you got here.

NIGRO: Yes.

SIGRIST: What about your sisters? Were they married?

NIGRO: No, they were younger than I.

SIGRIST: They were younger. That's right. So did you, when you first got here, did you get a job, too?

NIGRO: I got a job in a factory with about three hundred people.

SIGRIST: Where, what were you doing? What kind of a factory was it?

NIGRO: Uh, a negligee factory, underwear. They used to work maybe three hundred people. It was terrible.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did you have to do?

NIGRO: Uh, clean. Clean the underwear.

SIGRIST: Did you work a long day?

NIGRO: Not really. Long hours?

SIGRIST: Yeah, long hours. How long? From when to when?

NIGRO: Sixty hours a week.

SIGRIST: Wow. What kind of a, do you remember how much you made doing that sort of thing?

NIGRO: I make maybe three dollars a week, sixty hours.

SIGRIST: That's hard work.

NIGRO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And what was your, was your mother working?

NIGRO: Yeah. She started to work a little when my sister got a little bit older than I was, you know.

SIGRIST: And your father, you said . . .

NIGRO: Coal. Unload the coal.

SIGRIST: That's right. He was unloading coal. And he continued to do that.

NIGRO: Yes. But he wasn't paid much.

SIGRIST: No. Well, those were different times, too. You have to unload a ton of coal for twenty-five cents.

SIGRIST: Wow. And of course everybody used coal at that time.

NIGRO: Well, so, and you had to live on that little money.

SIGRIST: So did you take the money that you made, did this all get thrown into . . .

NIGRO: All in the house. I give it to my mother.

SIGRIST: Did you continue working after you were married?

NIGRO: No. I didn't have to work. He didn't want me to work. But then a neighbor, I move into two rooms, my marriage. No luxury like today. Two rooms. Cold rooms. No stove, just water.

SIGRIST: Same neighborhood?

NIGRO: Downtown. Bathroom in the yard. This was on the West Side, 26th Street. Two rooms, paid ten dollars a month. I had to buy my own stove, and the gas you have. So we managed. We got here, and I'm still here today, with all the sacrifice.

SIGRIST: And did you, how did you learn English?

NIGRO: I was aimed to learn from the minute that I stepped here and I went to work, I see that they were rough on the newcomers. Got to learn. And I even tell today to the girl, "Learn the language, because it's very important." So . . .

SIGRIST: Did you take classes, or did you just learn from . . .

NIGRO: No, no, no. We had, I went to First Elementary, I graduated elementary school. Then I couldn't go to high school because I had a family, I had to come home. But I really had wealth to come home from work and go to school, keep house. And I had parents that lived in Astoria, I lived here, so it was rough. But I learned.

SIGRIST: How did your parents learn English? Or did they ever learn English?

NIGRO: No. My mother didn't talk, no. My father neither. Because nobody would talk English there.

SIGRIST: Was this sort of an Italian neighborhood where they lived?

NIGRO: 97th. They were all, yes.

SIGRIST: So they didn't really have to learn English, because everybody spoke Italian.

NIGRO: Everybody, in the store too, they were the same language so they didn't learn it. But I'm very happy that I learned. I had an education that I didn't have in my young age.

SIGRIST: Did your husband speak English?

NIGRO: A little, a little.

SIGRIST: He probably needed to speak some, right, for his business?

NIGRO: You see, when I was young in Europe I couldn't even continue my education. We had no money. In those foreign country if you have no money you can't go far. You reach the third grade and you stop there. If you have money you go ahead. If not, it's hard luck.

SIGRIST: That's right. And so many people are very poor, were very poor.

NIGRO: Yeah, see? So I went out, and I was eager to learn, and I enjoy what I did, and what I'm doing even today, I enjoy very much. I help the Senior Citizens a lot. I went to meetings. Every meeting I went. I was in Smithsonian one week with the Ellis Island. I talk for one week in the Smithsonian, for which they paid me. They gave me a hundred dollars.

The transportation from here to Pennsylvania Station. From Pennsylvania Station to Washington. Washington they wait with a car by the station. We take two cars.

SIGRIST: So coming to America really did offer you . . .

NIGRO: Plenty.

SIGRIST: A lot of opportunities.

NIGRO: I'm very grateful and I'm thankful that I did all what I did, and it helped me a lot, and I enjoy talking to people.

SIGRIST: Did, were your parents glad that they came to America?

NIGRO: Yes. Well, sure, because why not. They had better than they had home.

SIGRIST: Your father would not be doing what he was doing other than tend sheep.

NIGRO: Oh, sure. They were happy. Yes, they were happy.

SIGRIST: What happened to them in later years?

NIGRO: Who?

SIGRIST: Your parents? When did your father retire, what?

NIGRO: My father, he died when he was eighty-three.

SIGRIST: I see.

NIGRO: Poor man. He was one week without speaking and he died. My mother died at sixty-two with a heart condition and asthma. That was then end of my parents.

SIGRIST: Did they ever live with you later on?

NIGRO: No. They lived alone.

SIGRIST: They always lived by themselves.

NIGRO: They lived in Astoria and I lived here.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what happened to your sisters.

NIGRO: Well, one of my sisters died when influenza epidemic, she died. '22.

SIGRIST: The influenza epidemic. So that would have been, what, just after World War I, right?

NIGRO: Yes. Twenty-two, she was. My other sister, she died about eight, ten years ago. She was married. She had one son which he lives, this is the only one I have in my family. My other sister, she died, she left five children. ( break in tape )

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: I want to talk to you just a little bit about, because you'd been in this area for so long. Let's talk a little bit about the changes you've seen.

NIGRO: Well, when I came here, as I say, it was all farmland.

SIGRIST: And how long ago was that?

NIGRO: Seventy years.

SIGRIST: Seventy years.

NIGRO: All farmland.

SIGRIST: Roughly 1920.

NIGRO: There was only this row house, and one row house on Seventh Street. And they built up, because it was all farmland, across the street, it was all farm. The next block they built the house and it was like a swimming pool. I don't know how they built the house, so much water they had to make a foundation, but they did, and people lived there. The Marlboros project, Marlboro house, that was really a river.

SIGRIST: That they just filled in.

NIGRO: They filled. They worked about two years before they could get the

foundation. And look, I think they said they made twenty-four buildings.

SIGRIST: And we're very close to Coney Island, aren't we?

NIGRO: Two stations. Coney Island was beautiful.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go and visit?

NIGRO: Ah, I used to. Not now.

SIGRIST: But I mean, years ago did you ever go to Coney Island?

NIGRO: I went to school there, Coney Island. The first was 19th Street. Then we moved where Luna Park was. It was beautiful before. Steeplechase and Luna Park. It was beautiful amusement. Whatever happened.

SIGRIST: Did you ever in, say, Steeplechase's heyday, did you ever go and visit? Did you ever go over to the amusement park?

NIGRO: Oh, sure. When I was young, yeah.

SIGRIST: What was that like?

NIGRO: Oh, nice. You could go on all those rides. You could go any place you want.

SIGRIST: Was it always crowded there?

NIGRO: Oh, yes. Very crowded. But nice people. We didn't have the problem we have today at all. I don't know why we've got to have so much problems.

SIGRIST: Things have changed.

NIGRO: No, changed. But let me tell you. Now some of the big boys, let's say, you. ( gesturing to Sigrist ) You're a nice boy. You deal with him. ( gesturing to Peter Hom, who is also present ) He's rotten. And by dealing with him you take a little bit today, a little bit tomorrow. You become rotten like he is. Now, you should have your own brains, because you're a good boy. Why should you tempt yourself to become a bad boy?

SIGRIST: Well, unfortunately a lot of people are influenced.

NIGRO: Well, no. They don't influence. They only want to be show-off. Some of the boys, they want to show their authority. And the mentality that they show off, they could do it. See? But it's wrong.

SIGRIST: And you don't think that those people existed seventy years ago?

NIGRO: Maybe there was, but we didn't see that many, because we didn't have all this taken. Maybe there was. I don't know. But we didn't, we used to sleep here with the door open. Now I'm afraid to open the door.

SIGRIST: Well, I don't blame you.

NIGRO: See?

SIGRIST: ( to Peter Hom ) You behave yourself, Peter. ( they laugh )

NIGRO: ( to Peter Hom ) I didn't mean to say, just to make an example, no.

HOM: No, I understand.

NIGRO: Don't get me wrong now. You're just as good as he is.

SIGRIST: Well, I think that sort of brings us up to nowadays. And I just wanted to ask you if you just had anything that you wanted to say. You said you were very happy that you came to this country.

NIGRO: Well, I tell you. I enjoy being an American, becoming a citizen.

SIGRIST: What year did you become a citizen?

NIGRO: '32.

SIGRIST: 1932.

NIGRO: I rejected my country. But I reject, and I don't care what's going on. They want you to talk about it. Talk is nothing. It's only what you do to the country. But if you say your country is (?), well you say, I don't say. And I find that whatever I have I owe to America. I enjoy myself every minute of the day, even to today the way I am. I can't see, I can't walk, but I enjoy. Now I have a Express Car Service. They take me here by the door. They take me where I want to go. It's only fifty-five cents, like you pay the bus. I can't go on the bus. So that's a good thing. And I've been fighting for a

while for the senior citizens. I went to Washington (?).

SIGRIST: Well, so you've had a good life.

NIGRO: Yes.

SIGRIST: You've made a lot of sacrifices along the way.

NIGRO: We went for the President. For whatever we have, we fought for the carfare transportation. And when we signed the transportation, it's half price. No matter what it goes, it's got to be a half price. We don't want change. See, the subway, it's a dollar, what? A dollar ten? I don't know. I don't go now. But we pay fifty-five cents. So I pay fifty-five cents for this access car. It takes me by the door, and takes me where I want to go, which is beautiful. I didn't have this. And then I went to the state, Albany, to Albany. And we had a talk with the state representative.

SIGRIST: When did you do this?

NIGRO: When did I do this?

SIGRIST: Yes, when?

NIGRO: Oh, not long. About eight years ago.

SIGRIST: Eight years ago.

NIGRO: Because up to ninety years old I was still active. I'm still doing.

SIGRIST: You're still pretty active. ( he laughs )

NIGRO: I still do now. If I could have the chance, I'll call. The congressman sends me the brochure and I can't answer these questions because I can't see. I can't read. So you go to the desk. The girl says, "What do you want?" I say I had a letter, pick up the letter. And I say this, "Well, he's not here." You know. I said, "Look, I'm going to sit down here until he comes." He was inside, in another room. Then he came out. He says, "What's here?" I showed the letter to him. "Oh," he said, "I have no time. I'm going." There was no answer. I come out, one of the report was outside. He says, "What's going on?" I said, "Look, he didn't want to talk to me, and now he's talking to the men on the other side." And he write it down. That was in Albany. In Washington also, the state senator. Over there was beautiful. I visited all of that. Monihan, all the one that we know. So I come to one. He was a black man, a wonderful person. The girl says, "Sit down, take a seat. What do you want? Coffee or, coffee or soda?" They all said, "Coffee." I say, "I don't want no coffee or nothing. I only want the cup that is on the table." She says, "I can't give you the cup." ( she laughs ) But she gave it to me anyhow. She gave it to me. So, you see, I enjoy every minute.

SIGRIST: Well, that's, you know, it's really nice to see.

NIGRO: And being with the night school, I went all over, I went all over. One time I lost a man. ( she laughs ) We was in Ford Museum. We all went to see the museum. We got off the bus, the train. And I got on my bus, I don't see this man. What am I going to do now? I go to the director. I says, "I

can't find one man." "Oh," he says, "we got to go. We've got to go." We left the man there.

SIGRIST: Oh, dear.

NIGRO: Good thing that he had all the, he had all the papers that he needed, because then we went. We went on a boat. The boat was a hotel for us. We stayed all night on the boat. The next morning a cop brought this man to the boat. And it cost the organization more to pay for where he stayed there than what he paid for the trip. I really had a very good time, and I enjoy. I still enjoy.

SIGRIST: Well, Mrs. Nigro, I want to thank you for hosting us here at your house, and I just wanted to thank you for giving us your time and for telling us your life.

NIGRO: I hope that you could do something for me to help me go there, because I want to go, even if they take me. But I don't want to go in the crowd. I like to go special, like, not special. It's special. They have more people there, and they have like I am.

SIGRIST: Well, if your daughter would be willing to drive you, we could make arrangements, certainly.

NIGRO: Yes. My son-in-law would drive me with the dock, South Ferry.

SIGRIST: Sure. We can talk about that afterwards, but I think we can make some arrangements.

NIGRO: You let me know, please.

SIGRIST: I will. So let me just sign off. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service signing off with Lucy Nigro here in Brooklyn.

END OF INTERVIEW