

EI-223

BEATRICE VELLA AGRO

BIRTH DATE: OCTOBER 29, 1907

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 3/1994

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SICILY, 1923

AGE 15

RESIDENCE: CANICATTI, AGRIGENTO

US RESIDENCE: NYC

PORT OF EMBARKATION: NAPLES

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm here today, it's October 14, 1992. I'm in Deer Park, Long Island, New York with Beatrice Vella Agro, who came from Sicily in 1923 when she was fifteen. I'm very happy to be here.

AGRO: Thank you. (she laughs)

LEVINE: And we'll start with your birth date, please.

AGRO: I was born October 29, 1907.

LEVINE: And where were you born?

AGRO: Sicilia. Oh, well, it was a little town, yes, Canicatti, Provincia Agrigento.

LEVINE: Now, can you spell the name of the town?

AGRO: Yeah, Canicatti. Let me write.

LEVINE: I'll tell you what. We'll keep a running written here about these names that I'll find difficult to spell.

AGRO: Yeah. It's very hard.

LEVINE: Okay. I'm not going to try to pronounce it. Can you tell me about the little town where you grew up?

AGRO: Canicatti.

LEVINE: What was it like there?

AGRO: Beautiful village, beautiful. (voices off mike)

LEVINE: What did it look like?

AGRO: Just like Pennsylvania, you know. Small town, everybody know. And nothing wrong. We could sleep with the door open, no trouble, no.

LEVINE: Was it a farming town?

AGRO: No, no, no, no. No, no.

LEVINE: What did people do there for work?

AGRO: Well, the women don't work.

LEVINE: The women don't work.

AGRO: Don't work. Just the men work in the office. There's a lot of offices. Everybody know people they work on the farm, but they go in the morning and they come in the night. Well, that's the very, farm, you know, just like my father, you know, was a farmer. He was, how you call it, a white collar engineer.

LEVINE: He was an engineer.

AGRO: Yes.

LEVINE: And what did he, what company, or what kind of work did he do?

AGRO: In the sulphur mine.

LEVINE: Sulphur mines.

AGRO: Sulphur mine, that's right. That's the reason we came here, because then they closed.

LEVINE: Oh, they closed the sulphur mines.

AGRO: And my family, you know, it was twelve children.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Oaky, what was your father's name?

AGRO: Peter.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

AGRO: Josephine.

LEVINE: And do you remember your mother's maiden name?

AGRO: Yes, Bonsagne.

LEVINE: And did you have grandparents living in your town?

AGRO: They lived in the town, I don't even know the town.

LEVINE: You didn't know them. Uh-huh.

AGRO: My sister, you know, very old, and they know. But me, no, not even once.

LEVINE: How about aunts and uncles, did they . . .

AGRO: Oh, yes. I got one aunt, my mother's sister. One, and five brothers, my mother's sister, my mother's brothers.

LEVINE: And they were all around the town where you . . .

AGRO: Oh, yes, sure, yes.

LEVINE: So did you have big family gatherings? Would you all get together on different occasions?

AGRO: Those days, no. They used to stay, we was twelve children. We didn't need . . . (they laugh)

LEVINE: You didn't need any more.

AGRO: In those days, you know, just like now we go on a picnic with the family, we do a lot of things.

LEVINE: Were you a religious family?

AGRO: Catholic. I mean, we believe in God, you know, we go to church.

LEVINE: Was there, what did you do for entertainment? What did you do for fun?

AGRO: No, no entertainment.

LEVINE: No?

AGRO: Those days, no. They no easy. I don't think not because I don't remember, I don't think we celebrated birthdays. I don't know.

LEVINE: You don't remember having birthday parties?

AGRO: No. We know, you know, my brother, but we don't make no cake. We don't make no cake, we don't put no candles, no. Not just like here. I've been living

here seventy years ago, was the same thing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you celebrate anything?

AGRO: We celebrated Christmas. Not just like here, Christmas. Christmas means all family, making dinner. We make a special bread, you know, just like a cake, you know, things, but not just like here. The present we'll get over there, different, different holiday we get a present. You know, the day when people die.

MRS. AGRO'S DAUGHTER: All souls.

LEVINE: All Souls Day?

AGRO: Yeah. That's the one we'll get, my father used to, my father, now I know it was my father, he make believe the people die, they bring. But one night me and my sister make believe we're asleep and we see my father and my mother put all the dishes over there, cookies, a little money, and a sugar dollar, gorgeous. And that's it, every one.

LEVINE: And who, as a child, who were you, who were you supposed to believe did that?

AGRO: Just like my brother was dead, and God, all my

grandparents, yeah. That's . . .

LEVINE: The ones that already had died.

AGRO: That's right. That was the big holiday, better than Christmas.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What day was that? Do you remember what day?

AGRO: November 2nd.

MRS. AGRO'S DAUGHTER: All Souls Day.

LEVINE: So did you ever go to school?

AGRO: Oh, yes, oh, sure.

LEVINE: And what was the school like? Can you tell me anything about your school?

AGRO: Just like here. You know, we go to school every day, it be nice. And we have to listen to the teacher. We have recreation in lunch time, I think half hour. We go outside. And then we go home and we do homework. Oh, sure.

LEVINE: Did you have to do any chores, or did you have any work to do when you were a little girl?

AGRO: No, no. Just to be nice with the family, no. We had things in the house to do, you know. We had a big family. I used to do, you know when you read, I was a little young. But started to nine or ten years, I used to do all the bread. And for twelve people I used to make twelve, uh . . .

LEVINE: Loaves?

AGRO: Loaf, myself, you know. We used to wash clothes.

LEVINE: Where did you wash them?

AGRO: In the, oh, we have a big thing. Just like, I don't know how they call it here. Making believe it's a tub, but a big one. We used to wash two here and three of the big things. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Now, did you have running water in your house?

AGRO: We had water, but limit. We can't use and use and use. We got so much we're going to use, we have water. We have a toilet, we have two, one upstairs and one downstairs.

LEVINE: Now, did your family live in a whole house? Was the house, you had one house?

AGRO: Oh, yes. One house, but it wasn't big, you know, big house, four rooms. Those days was a big house, not just like now. You need five rooms, but there are no kids here now. And when we came from Italy we cried because in Italy we had a beautiful home. Now you, why you came here? Because my father wasn't having no job. And when we came here, my mother had two rooms. You see, my mother came first. They make a decision, my father. The best thing to do, you don't got no job. See, I have a sister here before my mother. So my mother sent me, my mother, and one son, the old one, came here, and then we'll come. And that's what we did.

LEVINE: Well, now, who came first?

AGRO: My mother. Well, first came my brother, long, long time, and he die.

LEVINE: And then did he write to you, so that he told you what it was like here?

AGRO: No, no, no, no, no, no. Then come two sisters.

LEVINE: Oh.

AGRO: Then my mother came, because my father lost the job,

and my brother. We did things, when my mother's here, then we'll come, the rest of the family. In fact, after me and my sister came. We find, we can't find my mother here and my brother. And we find my mother in two rooms.

LEVINE: Okay. Let's wait on the part about getting here. Let's talk a little bit more about Sicily before you came here.

AGRO: Okay.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember what you had heard about the United States before you ever came?

AGRO: Yes, that's a miracle, miracle, miracle, a lot of money, but it was not true, not true. Because anybody that comes, if (?), they come here and cry. (?) Number one, you can't speak English. And this is a number one, all right? Then especially if you come from my country, my town, we don't work in Italy. Now I think they work, but we don't work. And then we find my mother in two rooms. Those days they lived a dozen people in two rooms. I know. Now it's a difference. So we were, you know, we expected to find my mother, of course, I had a sister here, a married

sister with the kids, she have a nice house, yeah, my sister Mary. She had hot water. She had a tub. She had a steam. In those days, it was a beautiful rooms. We used to go over there to take a bath once a week. And then we didn't have no light. My mother's supposed to put a quarter. One night we didn't got no quarter, we didn't even have light. She was supposed to put a quarter.

LEVINE: Now, what did you have for light in Sicily?

AGRO: Well, we have a light. First, when I was young, we have a big, just like when it get dark, big things.

LEVINE: Like a kerosene lantern.

AGRO: Yes, yes. No kerosene, more beautiful, more beautiful. Just like (?). But then, before I came here, they put light. Oh, yes. A lot of people die, they put the light. So when we came here we saw a big difference. So we came, you know, my, for two weeks you see dancing in the house, you know. All the people they know from the time they came, they played the things, the old-fashioned things.

LEVINE: The music?

AGRO: Sure. My mother got some, my aunt, then she, yeah. And every night it was beautiful. Dancing, singing, people coming, calling for my mother, cooking, this and that. And then we ask to my brother, "When we got to go to work?" My brother said, "Don't worry about it. You go to work. Stay another week home." So finally we went to work. It was terrible. Always cry.

LEVINE: Where did you go?

AGRO: We went, it was embroidered things, you know, little towel, pillow. And I remember 14th, 14th Street. But we was crying because we can't talk. We can't say anything. The people was very nice. You know, me and my sister. We was crying. So my brother says, "See? You want to go to work? Now look!" You know. And then there was, we don't work any more over there. I worked to finish dress, different trade, you know. It was so bad. You know, it takes time, you know, not so easy, not so easy. Maybe now, all right, the people that are coming from other countries, they feel better. But those days it was more, very bad. My mother no have hot water, my mother no have a tub. We have a toilet in the yard. 14th Street, we live. A

lot of people, they have the toilet in the yard.

LEVINE: Was your mother sorry she had come at first?

AGRO: Yes, oh, sure. Then my brother came, then my father came, and then all family's here, yeah. And then things, you know, better. But you're in a different country. We no have a thing, just like now. Oh, no, no, no, no.

LEVINE: Well, when you decided, when you came over here, do you remember leaving the village?

AGRO: Oh, sure.

LEVINE: What was that like, leaving the village, knowing that you probably wouldn't come back?

AGRO: Well, don't forget, I was getting to see my mother. No better thing than to go see the mother.

LEVINE: Yeah. So you wanted to see your mother. And then did, and then, what, what did, how did you leave the town? What transportation?

AGRO: When we went to the . . .

LEVINE: To the ship.

AGRO: Oh. We were very, just like here. Wait a minute.
When you go Pennsylvania Station.

LEVINE: The train?

AGRO: Oh, sure.

LEVINE: You took a train to the ship?

AGRO: From the house we went with a carriage, with a carriage, the house to the station. And then we went by train from my own town to Palermo. And then we, to Palermo we went Naples with the boat, name of Guglielmo Pirici.

LEVINE: Was, did anything happen on that trip? Do you remember that trip at all? What was that like?

AGRO: Very bad, very bad. Still very long. I don't remember, I think it was there, twenty-five days. And a few days was away, the people, they screamed, and then they cry. They call all the saints, God. But I was young, I didn't even go these things. I was walking around, walking around. My sister, no. My sister, she was sick. She was sick in a chair. I used to say to people, "Look at my sister, look at my sister, look at my sister." Yes. I was just like a

tomboy, really, really.

LEVINE: Was there anything enjoyable in the ship for you?

AGRO: Nah, fell in love with this fellow, you know. (they laugh) Walking around. And then this fellow, do you believe, they lived where I did, across 14th Street.

LEVINE: He went to 14th Street, too?

AGRO: Yeah, yes. (?) wanted me to ask to go out. Yeah. I didn't go out. Yes.

LEVINE: Now, did you know a lot of people then around 14th Street that had come from your town?

AGRO: No.

LEVINE: No.

AGRO: No.

LEVINE: But were there a lot of people from Sicily, people that you could talk with and everything around you where you were on 14th Street?

AGRO: Just like, we call paisani, yes, oh, yes. Yes, yes. That's why they used to come when we came. Every night, every night. By day they disappear, for two

weeks they came, and then everybody went to work and went here and there, and would cry and cry and cry. This is America? (laughter is heard off mike) No hot water? No tub? My mother no able to suffer like this. Not just my mother, don't forget, a lot of people those days. Because, you know, we used to, Sunday, my mother, my brother, they used to take it to visit sick people, because they came, and then they got to go back to, you know, to appreciate they came. They now have a nice house. They no have, you know. It's a difference. Now, boy!

LEVINE: What was it like learning English? How did you learn English?

AGRO: Very hard, very hard. Very special, well, I learn English with my children. Because every time I used to speak in Italian they repeat, "What? What? What?" So then I started. And people, you know, people at work, you have to. You know, little by little, little by little, that's it. I used to work mostly with Jewish people, so you have to, you know.

LEVINE: Did you become a citizen at some point?

AGRO: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Did you have to go to classes?

AGRO: No, they gave me a book. I remember this. I don't know how I did, but I enjoyed the class. Now if I got to be, I don't think I remember, honestly. Me and my sister, my sister, too. They give a book.

LEVINE: And so, let's see. So you never really went to school here.

AGRO: No.

LEVINE: You were fifteen, so you . . .

AGRO: Because, because I got to go to work. But the truant officer came. How do you say, truant officer?

MRS. AGRO'S DAUGHTER: Truant officer.

LEVINE: Oh, truant.

AGRO: He came. I don't know. So that's here, I didn't go to school. Because we wanted to go, even in the night. But then we were afraid to go out, you know.

LEVINE: So what happened with your father? Was he able to find work here?

AGRO: No, then he, no. Where? My father office man.
That's, he was old when he came. All the people they know from the home town, they respected my father. He belonged to the club, you know. Every time they let him do speech, because all these people, they used to work my father. People that came . . . (voice off mike) They have a lot of respect for my father.

LEVINE: So your father was a big person.

AGRO: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Well, now, what was your father like? Can you remember any experience?

AGRO: Here?

LEVINE: Well, first in Sicily when you were a little girl. Do you remember?

AGRO: Oh, yeah. I remember. Well, he have a good job. He get up late in the morning. (laughter is heard off mike) In the afternoon he take a nap. I mean he, once a week, two days, he disappear to go, you know, in a place, in the mine, you know, to conduct. And then he worked in the house with a big book, like this, honest to God, I'm not exaggerating. I

remember.

LEVINE: And what was in the book?

AGRO: Well, the people got to pay.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

AGRO: All the, you know, all the instructions, everything.

LEVINE: And what was your mother like, when you were a little girl? How do you, do you remember that?

AGRO: Oh, sure I remember. My mother, she worked very hard, so many children. You know, take care all of the children. So we play, iron, we don't have no electric, we didn't have no electric iron.

LEVINE: What was the iron like?

AGRO: With coal in, and then after they do like this. (she demonstrates) And then in those days all the, my mother have a, my brother Peter and my father. My brother, he was young. Everything starch, you know. So it's a lot of work for my mother, washing. You wash your clothes. But my mother, I, a lot of things.

LEVINE: Do you remember any dishes that your mother cooked

when you were little?

AGRO: Yes. Minestrone soup, vegetable soup, chicken soup. And Sunday, you know, macaroni with spaghetti. In the morning, everybody have a bread, bread with milk and coffee. No juice, no juice. Just the coffee and bread, everybody. That's lunch time we ate sandwiches. Already, no, we never eat in the night, because the low people they eat in the night, just the farmer people, they eat in the night. But we used to eat two o'clock, two-thirty. That's the time we eat.

LEVINE: That's the big meal.

AGRO: That's the big meal, big meal. (?) And my father went to, the butcher over there, don't go every day. They got a day, Wednesday, Friday, you go to the butcher, buy so much meat. Everyone have a little bit, it was enough. It was enough. Better than here, you eat a lot of meat. No, no milk all day long, no juice all day long, no sweet. How did my mother bake this, that's it.

LEVINE: So name the children in your family.

AGRO: Oh, sure. Mary, Josephine, Rose, Beatrice, Nancy,

Jean, Agatha.

MRS. AGRO'S DAUGHTER: Agatha.

AGRO: Agatha. Now, this is seven sisters. Then Eugene, Anthony, Peter, Norge, John. That is seven, twelve. That's right.

MRS. AGRO'S DAUGHTER: That's fourteen.

AGRO: Fourteen. Seven and seven, fourteen.

MRS. AGRO'S DAUGHTER: Not twelve.

AGRO: And the size, I know you'll think I'm wrong, my mother says she lost, they were born, these little kids, they died, maybe three or four. You know, over there they got nothing to do. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Was there a doctor in the town?

AGRO: A woman.

LEVINE: A woman.

AGRO: I remember. We called her Dona Victoria. She was an old lady with a bag all tied, just one woman.

LEVINE: And did she, was she a certified doctor, or she knew

about, like, home remedies?

AGRO: What do you mean?

LEVINE: I mean did she, did she, like study medicine, or did she . . .

AGRO: Who, the lady? Oh, yes. She was a woman doctor. Yes, yes. But whole town we know do with her, taking babies, no doctor.

LEVINE: And when you got to this country, did your mother keep up the same kinds of ways about doing things, or did she want to become Americanized?

AGRO: No, no. My mother, she was poor lady, she went to work in at this age. But when we came, they wouldn't let her stay home. Me and my sister said, "Stay home." She used to work on the pocketbook. You know the end of it? She used to polish the end of the pocketbook. And the she stayed home, you know, she take care of three kids at home. And then she was, well, she used to cry day and night. She had the rest of the family in Italy. Then it was a big thing to leave the kids, it's what you got to do. See, when my father came, he don't like it here, he want to go

home. He wanted to go back. He wanted to go back,
but then it turned into a mistake.

LEVINE: So did they, they both stayed.

AGRO: Oh, yes. All my family is here. Just the one brother
in Italy died.

LEVINE: So how long did the family live on 14th Street?

AGRO: Oh, yeah, sure. I marry 14th Street. So I marry I
think eighteen. I was eighteen. (a telephone
rings) (break in tape)

LEVINE: Okay. We're resuming now after a phone call.

AGRO: When I was in Italy I was, I think, twelve years old.
And then maybe I was sick, chicken pox, chicken pox.

LEVINE: Chicken pox or smallpox?

AGRO: Maybe smallpox. Very bad, very bad. So my father,
every year we used to go to the country to stay in the
country where we had a beautiful home. They own (?).
Every, you know, my father own. My father boss, all
right?

LEVINE: Your father was the boss, uh-huh.

AGRO: He sent to the country every year, beautiful home. So we went, everybody, whole family, nice every. Then my, then my little sister, she have the disease, smallpox. She was four years old. So my mother went to the town, the little girl and my mother. Then my mother catch it, too. This is, you know, catch. So they let him know, to my father, they needed somebody in the house to take care of my mother and my sister. So I had my sister a little older than me, now the sister a little older than me, but was very delicate, my two sister. Very delicate. They got red hair and beauty, you know. So who are they going to send? They sent me. So I went over there. My brother took me with a horse, I remember. So I found my mother laid down, my sister with a veil, all covered up. So I tried my best. And nobody could come in the house. They put a sign. All my aunts, they used to come and cry, "I can't give you clothes to wash, nobody take the wash." I used to wash those sheets, so heavy. I used to wash.

LEVINE: How old were you now at that time?

AGRO: No more than twelve. So finally another sister catch, my sister Jeanie. She got it very bad on her face.

So the little one, she died. And nobody could come in in the house. All my relatives outside, they cry. They take this to my sister, they put something. I remember white things, disinfect. Wrap her in the sheets, and then they go. So then my mother was better, we lost one sister, another sister all damaged in the face. They send me because they think I was strong. I didn't catch nothing. And I'll tell you the truth, I don't want to say, I could see all this skin when I wash the clothes in the tub. I didn't catch anything. Every time there was any sickness in the house, call Bea, call Beatrice. We want clean hands. I used to go. (referring to washing her hands) I use this. All right, you get it. So.

LEVINE: So you were the strong one.

AGRO: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Let's see.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Do you remember coming into the New York Harbor on the ship? Do you remember when the ship came into New

York?

AGRO: Yeah, sure. Oh, sure.

LEVINE: What did it look like to you when you were that age?

AGRO: We see the Statue of Liberty there, everybody was happy. It was so cold. I'll never forget. My lips in the morning, we landed at the end of September. Everybody was happy, and then I see my brother with my sister-in-law. He was even married. He came over there, gondola, gondola. "All right, all right. They put it so you people get off, so you people get off." So, thank God, we get off, we get out. And my sister-in-law, she take us to the store, 14th Street, Klein's.

LEVINE: Klein's.

AGRO: She dressed us from head to foot. I remember a blue dress, silk. I got a picture. Hair, sportcoat, shoes, everything. Everybody used to say, "Oh, my, my God, look, American girls." (she laughs)

LEVINE: Do you remember what you wore when you traveled to America? What did you have on when you left Italy to come?

AGRO: We came here with a very light dress. It was warm over there. Very light, light.

LEVINE: So the clothes that your sister-in-law . . .

AGRO: Yes.

LEVINE: They were like American clothes. They were different.

AGRO: Oh, yeah. It was beautiful, it was beautiful. I remember it was a blue dress, all pleats. Beautiful. I forget, I should have first taken the picture from the album. Beautiful, beautiful. And she was married, you know. And she dressed everything, me and my sister. My sister, because of the red hair, she have a brown dress. For me, blue. Beautiful, beautiful.

LEVINE: Now, what was your sister's name, the one you came with.

AGRO: Angie.

LEVINE: Angie.

AGRO: Oh, Rosie, Rosie.

LEVINE: Rosie. Tell me about Rosie. What was she like?

AGRO: Rosie was beautiful, beautiful sister, a lovely girl, good look girl, red hair, gorgeous. Every time that we walk, you know, those days, you know, just like now, you've got to buy a bottle of milk you take a car. We used to walk. And, you see, those days we don't know, you say, "Hello, Red. Hello, Red." Not here. "Hello, Red." Every step, "Hello, Red." To people in the truck, people in the car, yeah. She married, she passed away five years ago. A beautiful sister.

LEVINE: Who, was she the one you were closest to of your family?

AGRO: Yes. You know, in the family you got somebody close, you know. I mean, we were like all sisters, every one, but you're closer to one sister, you know. Or maybe she grow up with me, I don't know. She's a lovely sister, beautiful.

LEVINE: Okay. So how did you meet your husband?

AGRO: Oh. You know, it was the theater in the 14th Street, Olympia Theater. And they used to do . . .

LEVINE: Olympia Theater?

AGRO: Yeah. And they used to do Italian theater every week. Saturday night, I think, or Sunday. So me and my mother, because my sister was married, me and my mother, I used to work. So every night, not every night, every Saturday me and my mother go to the theater. So he see me, and fall in love. Now, then when we get off of the theater, because he live in the same block, two blocks. So, he was so smart, he said, "Now I got to see in the building which window is the light." So they must have lived over there. So that's what he did. And then he came, and that's it. We married, we had three children, nice.

LEVINE: And what did your husband do?

AGRO: Book binding.

LEVINE: Book binding.

AGRO: That's a trade from Italy, all his family.

LEVINE: Now, did he come from Sicily as well?

AGRO: A different town of Sicily, Naro.

LEVINE: But you never knew him there.

AGRO: No, no.

LEVINE: And did your mother approve of him?

AGRO: (she sighs) My brother no approve. My mother, not so bad, because I was young, you know. But then calm done everything.

LEVINE: Was your father a traditionally strict Italian father?

AGRO: Oh, sure, sure. Those days everybody's strict, sure. But he no was here. He no was here when I met my husband, no. One night my mother had a couch, I told, every couch, open and close, was sleeping, me and my sister. And then, I don't know, I make a mistake. My husband was here, I see the (?). And my brother came, my brother Peter came, boom! (they laugh) Just to sit down. So, my husband don't get insulted, because he know we was like this, that's it. I can't help myself. (they laugh) Oh, then my husband used to bring a serenade. You know, somebody else singing, somebody else play. So you was supposed to open the door, you know, when they bring this, you're supposed to. How we're going to open the door when we, I sleep with the couch, you know? He opened the door, I was over there on the couch, you know. So my brother

don't open the door. They play, they sing, they sing, they sing. My husband was outside. He was upset because it was embarrassing for the people. All the building they know, everybody say, "Oh, my God, what a beautiful serenade." This and that, but we didn't open the door. And I can't say nothing. I have another one. (they laugh)

LEVINE: So then did you move from 14th Street when you got married?

AGRO: Yes, yes. I moved 16th Street. (they laugh) It was a nice house, four rooms. My husband buy all the furniture, everything, a dining room, bedroom, white kitchen, everything. No refrigerator. In those days it was not a refrigerator, it was an ice box. Yes, yes, everything. Nice wedding, everything, my husband did. Because my mother said, "That's how, I don't got nothing to give to my daughter. That's it. A nice guy, you take." And my husband did everything. Engage, everything. I'm having a home. Those days, it's not so easy. After I'm going to show you my wedding picture when we finish. Oh, yes, everything nice.

LEVINE: And then what are the names of your children?

AGRO: My children?

LEVINE: Their names.

AGRO: Oh, oh. After who?

LEVINE: No. You have three children?

AGRO: Yeah. Mary, Joe and Salvatore.

LEVINE: And Salvatore. Uh-huh. And then did you stay on 16th Street?

AGRO: Yes.

LEVINE: Did you raise your children there?

AGRO: No, no, no, no. After one year, she was one year, I moved to Brooklyn, Bay Parkway, Brooklyn, I moved. I was alone. My family was in New York. Then we moved, after a year, we moved to 10th Street, 10th Street.

LEVINE: Manhattan.

AGRO: Yes. 10th Street, First Avenue.

LEVINE: And then you were happy there?

AGRO: Oh, sure, my family. Even his family was over there.
I don't know why he went over there, because he had the cousin, and they convinced, "Come here, come here, come here." But, no. It was not right. And then on 10th Street, on 10th Street I have a girl. She was four years, five years ago, five years. She went to school 10th Street. Then I moved. My sister Mary told me they got a nice apartment, 14th Street. I moved 14th Street. They have steam, they have hot water, beautiful home, everything. But with the difference in the price, I used to pay fourteen dollars, 10th Street, four beautiful rooms, but no steam. And Second Avenue I used to pay thirty-two dollars. That was nice. But the thing is, they robbed me three times.

LEVINE: Say that again.

AGRO: Break, break in the house three times.

MRS. AGRO'S DAUGHTER: Burglarize.

AGRO: Three times.

LEVINE: On 14th or 10th?

AGRO: 14th, 14th. So my husband was so disgusted with the

two little girls, they never go downstairs, you know, 14th Street. We moved, we bought a house, Williston Park. Beautiful home. I live over there I think forty years. I raise over there, I have my son here, Williston Park.

LEVINE: When you think back over your life, what are you proudest of that you've done? What makes you feel proud that you did?

AGRO: He did, my husband?

LEVINE: That you did.

AGRO: Well, I came to this country, I married. My family all here. I got three children, very nice. I got grandchildren, yes. Once in a while I think, I think of my home town once in a while in the night. I remember all my friends when I used to play. My mother, when she was in the night, with a long, we have no electrical. My mother used to do all the stocking, repair. But then we have the lady with the machine, I do the stocking. And then, and my father told stories, you know, a lot of stories.

LEVINE: Your father told stories?

AGRO: Oh, sure.

LEVINE: Do you remember any stories? Do you remember the gist of any of them?

AGRO: Continuous. My father, anything we talk, he gave a story.

LEVINE: Oh.

AGRO: All the time, all the time. I mean, it's nice. I remember all, I remember the whole town. Most every night I think all these things, all my friends, yes, yes.

LEVINE: Did you keep contact with any of your friends?

AGRO: No, no.

LEVINE: Have you gone back to your town at all?

AGRO: No. We went in Italy, but then when we reached Palermo, they said it was very bad to go to women. I went with my daughter. I tell you the truth, I was disappointed, because I liked to go to my home town. But if I go now, they're all dead. That's me.
(she laughs) They're old.

LEVINE: Can you imagine how different your life would have been if you'd stayed there?

AGRO: Oh, it would have been nice.

LEVINE: It would have been nice.

AGRO: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Because now, see, even here was very tough. It was very tough. This is not easy. People, they can't, they have three or four people, they have a board, because they can't pay the little rent.

MRS. AGRO'S DAUGHTER: Boarders.

AGRO: No. I mean, we have no way to go in hot water. I mean, the same thing. Now you go in Italy they got everything. I went to my nephew, he's got a condominium. He's got a piano, he's got a refrigerator, everything. This is just like now. All over. People, they think it was like easy. No, no, no. Nobody have a car those days. Once in a while they use a car. I remember in Italy if you wanted a car, when it was supposed to come, everybody said, "Come on, check it out! The car is going to pass, the car is going to pass!" (she laughs)

LEVINE: Do you remember Ellis Island in particular when you first came here?

AGRO: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: What do you remember about it?

AGRO: Well, I see we start the Statue of Liberty, Liberta.

LEVINE: Do you remember the big building where you went in?

AGRO: I went, I went in, the Statue, yeah, my husband took me . . .

LEVINE: I mean when you first came, when you were fifteen years old and you came off the ship and you went to the Ellis Island, big building.

AGRO: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember the doctors examining you?

AGRO: Yeah, sure, yes, yes. These doctors, they examined your hair. Oh, boy. They examined your eyes, and your hair, and they passed. Some they got something, but we passed, thank God. Oh, sure Some they just like in a gate. You know? I was no trouble at all.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, can you think of anything else that you

might want to mention about life in Italy or in Sicily or coming here? Or what it's like now in your life?

AGRO: I think this country's nice, but when the people don't speak very good, it's not so easy. See, if I was in Italy I'd belong to the club, I'd do a lot of, you know, a lot of things. Even if I could go, but you don't feel correct to speak nice. Especially if you go now, it's better than America over there. Now the women are working over there. They got offices, they got everything. I'm glad I'm here, because my family was born here, I'm here, everything nice, thank God. We can't complain. But maybe now if I got to leave New York for Italy, I don't think I could go leave. Because I'm here all my life here. Because I went in Italy, I thought, my God, even the food is a difference, because when we cook we put, you know, a lot of things rich, nice. I don't think now they do this over there. I think it is still the best country, it is the best country. Oh, yes, oh, yes. It is the best country.

LEVINE: Okay. That sounds like a good place to end.

AGRO: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: And I'd like to thank you very much.

AGRO: Oh, it was pleasant.

LEVINE: Good, good. And I'm, this is Janet Levine signing off for the National Park Service, and I've been speaking with Beatrice Agro.