

EI-272

ANNA LaROCCO NEGRI

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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ITALY, 1913

AGE 4

PASSAGE ON "THE KAISER FRANZ JOSEF"

PORT OF EMBARKATION: NAPLES

RESIDENCES: ITALY: NASCHITO

US: SCHENECTADY, NY

SIGRIST: Good evening. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Monday, March 29, 1993, approximately five o'clock in the evening. I'm in Torrington, Connecticut with Anna Negri, who came from Italy in 1913 when she was four years old. Hi. It's nice to meet you.

NEGRI: Hi. Nice to meet you.

SIGRIST: Let's begin, I do want to also say, for the sake of the tape, that we are in a room that echoes a bit, so you may hear this on the tape. Let's begin,

Mrs. Negri, with you giving me your birth date.

NEGRI: February 28, 1909.

SIGRIST: And what is your maiden name?

NEGRI: LaRocco.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

NEGRI: L-A, capital L-A, capital R-O-C-C-O. And this is the name that was given to us when we landed at Ellis Island, because the real name is Guira LaRocco. Guira means to swear by the rock. And they were called that, there was a Saint Simon that perched on a rock for penance. We stayed on that rock a long, long time. This was about the year 400 or something like that. And so whether it was, we were called that just as a joke, or whether we really believed in things like that, I don't know. But that's the name, the real name is Guira LaRocco.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Guira, please?

NEGRI: G-U-I-R-A, L-A-R-O-C-C-O. Guira.

SIGRIST: And at Ellis Island, you said they lopped off the Guira?

NEGRI: Well, you know, they had people working at Ellis Island that didn't know how to spell any better than I do. (she laughs) So that it was easy to just say "LaRocco." And it wasn't only our name that was cut short. My father had two brothers that had come here before us, and they did the same thing to them. So I guess it's just something that they did at the time. Like you take a lot of the Jewish people and the Polish people. These attendants didn't know how to spell that. So, whatever, they spelled it, phonetically, and that was it.

SIGRIST: What town were you born in in Italy?

NEGRI: Maschito.

SIGRIST: Can you spell it?

NEGRI: That's capital M-A-S-C-H-I-T-O. Mashca is male, and a lot of these people came over from Albania when the Turks overran the Albanian country, and they were killing all the Christians. So, in 1476 those in Albania, in Albania, they left that country, crossed the Adriatic, and landed on that side of Italy at the Port of Bari. Like two, three years ago the same

thing happened when the Albanians, it was the same thing. And they landed at that port. And that's where we stayed. So most of them were the male, so they called it the village of males, Maschita.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that town in words for me, please?

NEGRI: It was a, at the time that I was there, I would say it was a village of about fifteen hundred people. And I have a picture of it that I drew in class, in art class. I'm not a good artist, but we had to do something, so I did a picture of it, and I'll show it to you afterwards. It was mostly in one town. And my mother's people, her name is Diasa, D-I-A-S-A, Diasa. And they were in the commerce. They were what we call brokers, Miliatore. They've been in business for a couple of hundred years. And what they did was buy and sell. They didn't handle any of it themselves. They bought and sold for the people. They found markets for the goods that were growing in this village. And the village is, I would say, about thirty, forty miles south of Pompeii, and we were maybe about seventy miles south of Naples. But it was a very small village. My mother, my father's people were farmers, and they had chestnuts and olives, wine,

oil, olive oil. But my mother's people were always in commerce. In fact, you see pictures of the Wild West where they have this waystation? That's what they had. Because they had, they took care of the post, they took care of the mail. And they took care of the shepherders. They would come through the village to go to another place for the sheep to graze. And so they had a corral for the animals, and they had one or two rooms for the shepherders, and they had food for them. So they were always, they were always busy, my mother's people. But my mother didn't go to school, you see? Girls didn't go to school then. She had a brother, the oldest brother, who was the boss. And they called, this is what they called primagenitura, the eldest boy. The eldest boy is the head of the family, and what he says goes, you know. So they did send my mother, so it was just two girls in her family. They did send her to, like, a home economics class where she had to learn how to take care of children and sew and cook and things like that.

SIGRIST: What was your mom's name?

NEGRI: Rose, Rosa.

SIGRIST: Can you describe her in words, what she looked like when you were a child?

NEGRI: She was a beautiful woman. She was a beautiful woman, well-liked. She lived to be ninety-two years old. After my father died, she had no skill. With her, she had twelve children. All she thought about was her babies, that's all. She didn't care about anything else. And she was a wonderful mother. I used to get mad at her, but she was a wonderful mother.

SIGRIST: I find this whole business about the waystation very interesting. Do you have any personal recollections of that waystation?

NEGRI: Oh, yes, I do. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Can you tell us a little bit, please?

NEGRI: I was the second child. My older sister Rose, she was frail, and she was a beautiful girl, she, my grandmother was blonde, blue eyes, so we had in our family half blonde, blue eyes and half chestnut-colored hair and hazel eyes. And I was seventeen months younger than my sister. Then I had a cousin, her name was Rose, too. And they were the same age.

And, consequently, they would always be together. They didn't want me. They didn't want me there. So they were always pushing me aside. And I'd get so angry. You know, I wanted to go there, too. I recollect one thing especially. We had the coach and horses, you know, to deliver the mail, or to go from one village to another. And my uncle got on the seat. He was ready to go off. And he asked my sister and my cousin if they wanted to go with them, because they weren't going very far. Well, I wanted to go, too. So I start climbing up, and it was kind of high. And my cousin kept doing this, you know, kicking me, kicking me down, see. So I grabbed her ankle and I bit it, you know. So she howled, you know, and everybody come running outside to see what was wrong. And so, of course, I was put on bread and water, and the house, I could remember like it was today. The house had a big extension in the back, like the old farmhouses right here, you know. That's where they kept their wood, their grain, their feed for the animals and all that. So they tied me to a post, one of the long columns, and they brought me some water and a piece of bread, see. Well, I wasn't going to stay there very long, you know. My uncle, who's deaf,

he had typhoid fever when he was about six, seven years old, so he was deaf. And he was very fond of me, because of all the brothers, they all had, the first children were all girls, and I was the only, I was a girl, but I was the only one that was a tomboy. And so he liked that. So he came out, and he waited till my mother and my aunt were away. My aunt was very indignant to think that I bit her daughter. And she was kicking me. So, anyway, he, when the women were gone, he untied me, and he took me up to the store and he bought me some candy. And I can still see, coming down, our house was like over here, and coming down it was just this little incline. And I was on his shoulders, you know. He was walking down the street with me, you know, me eating candy. Well, that just infuriated the whole family. "You can't do that." "We're disciplining her." And another thing that I remember at that house . . .

SIGRIST: The waystation that you're talking about.

NEGRI: This is that waystation, was the house. Of course, they lived there, too. They lived in the other parts of it, you know, just the way it was done here. It was the same thing. And I must have been about two

years old. This was after that. I must have been about two years old. And I had an abscess on my neck.

I still have this scar here. And, of course, they had to do something about it. I can remember my four uncles, they had me on the kitchen table. They were holding me down, my legs and my arms, and I was screaming to high heaven, and they lanced it. I can remember like it was today. It was something, you know, to think, you know, they may have had something to anesthetize it, I don't know, but they didn't do it. And another thing that I remember about that place, see, in Italy everybody has a job to do. The minute you learn to walk, the minute you start walking, you know, you have to do things if you can. And I must have been about two or three years old, I don't know, so I had my little job to do. And my job was to feed the little chickens and the little ducks and things like that. Everybody had something that they had to do. A wonderful thing, today we wait until they're twenty years old before we say, "You've got a job to do." You know. So anyway, one of the ducks, we had a big pan, it must have been about, oh, I would say a couple of feet in diameter. And it was shallow, it wasn't too deep, with water. And that's

where we had to feed, we take some water, or the ducks would get in there. And so the ducks were in there, and we're walking around like that, and I thought, "Gee, isn't that nice, they're walking around." So I do this (she gestures) you know, to see if they'd go down, but they didn't go down. (she laughs) They kept coming up. And, of course, one of the family saw me, and I got a reprimand again, you know. "You can't do that! Ducks have to do this, you know, they have to walk around like that." You know, I wanted to walk in the water, but they're not going to walk in the water, you know. (laughter is heard off mike) Those are the, about, well, most. And, of course, I remember when we left to come to . . .

SIGRIST: Wait, we haven't gotten that far yet.

NEGRI: Oh, okay.

SIGRIST: What was your dad's name?

NEGRI: My . . .

SIGRIST: Father's name?

NEGRI: Angelo, Angel. Angelo.

SIGRIST: And what did he do for a living?

NEGRI: Well, I said they had a farm. It's still there, and the cousins have it. And he's the second boy. He was the second son. So that everything went to the first, the first son. So his brother, his oldest brother was John, and then Angelo, my father. The next one was Joe. So John, so the three of them came to this country. You figured there was, John didn't want to stay there, because he was kind of, not lazy, but he didn't want to work on the farm, so he thought he'd come over here. So he came here. My father-in-law's two brothers in the First World War. And so consequently, you see, everybody had to serve in the army. But because there was two, and then they lost those two, these three didn't have to go in the army at all. They had the, they came over, the two boys that were killed. One died as a prisoner of the Germans, and one was killed in action. And . . .

SIGRIST: Did your father come over before you did?

NEGRI: He came over two or three times.

SIGRIST: Oh, tell me a little bit about that, what he did when he was here.

NEGRI: Well, he came over. He must have been about seventeen, eighteen years old the first time he came over. And because he had his own working papers, they didn't mark down WOP on his entry. You know what that mean? You're called WOP, that's WOP. If you didn't have your working papers, you were called a WOP. And, just to digress a little bit, most Italians didn't know the language, so when somebody said, "Hey, WOP," they thought that must be an English word. But when they said that to the Irish, the Irish knew the language and bang, you know, they would hit them. So we didn't pay too much attention to it till later on when we realized what it was. He had his working papers, you see. But he didn't, you know, it didn't bother him that much. He wasn't aggressive like me. I don't know where I got that aggressiveness from, but anyway.

SIGRIST: What kinds of jobs did he get in America when he was coming over here?

NEGRI: Well, the first ones, he worked in a factory in Jersey where they made pots and pans an enamel, you know. And so later on in life, when he started getting bald,

he said it was because they used to carry these trays of hot pans on top of their head, you know, that's why he got bald. And then he didn't like that, so he worked in Pennsylvania for the street, the highway department. They cut down, they were building roads, and they cut down the trees and whatever. He did, yeah, the cement work. And he didn't like that.

SIGRIST: Was he sending money to your mom?

NEGRI: Oh, yes. Yeah, he sent.

SIGRIST: When you were a little girl, because you were only in Italy four years, was your father there, or was he over here?

NEGRI: He was here.

SIGRIST: He was here.

NEGRI: He was here. Oh, sure. That's why my mother, my mother didn't want to come here, you know.

SIGRIST: Well, what, how did your mother support herself while your father was here?

NEGRI: Well, they were wealthy. They were wealthy according to that town, see, and whatever money, because they

grew everything they needed. They had the flour mill there, and the people raised their wheat. And then they would bring it, there as a central place where they had the, where they ground the wheat, you know.

SIGRIST: The mill, or something.

NEGRI: The mill. And I don't know how they paid for it, whether the miller would take some of the flour as payment, or whatever it was. But, you see, they raised everything. They didn't have to buy anything. And even the clothes, they found ways of making it. They had, in fact, I have a scarf, you know, a table scarf that's handwoven cotton. It's just cotton woven. (a telephone rings) But, so, but he would send money anyway. So that, but she didn't want to come. She didn't want to come here. And how . . .

SIGRIST: Did she live with her family, or did she have her own house?

NEGRI: She had her own house.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that house for me?

NEGRI: Well, afterwards, you look out in the backyard here. I've got a stone house, a small stone house. Of

course, hers was larger.

SIGRIST: In words, can you describe what you remember?

NEGRI: Well, it was stone. It was hand, you see, there's a lot of stone building in Italy, because Italy is seventy percent mountains and stone, and only thirty percent tillable land to raise anything. So they use, they make use of the stone. It was a big, what was it, it was a one-family stone house. I would say there was about three rooms, and they have the kitchen. They had, over here we have the grill, the outside grill. Well, they had that, that's where they did a lot of their cooking. And they had a fireplace with a section there where they bake their bread. I could, I remember that part. I remember the brazier, they called it. You know, where the, when it was cold it would heat the rooms. They didn't cook on it, but they would heat the room with it. And, of course, we had to stay away from it, you know. That's how I remember that. Otherwise I wouldn't remember it. I was probably trying to sneak there and see, grab a pole or something. I must have been awful.

SIGRIST: Everything, trying to drown the ducks. Can you tell

me a little bit about what foods you ate in Italy?
What kinds of foods did your mother prepare?

NEGRI: Oh, boy. We had everything there. We had chestnuts.
We had, oh, of course we had olive oil. We had,
there wasn't, we didn't have any butter, because we
had the oil, we didn't bother with the butter. We had
the, well, what foods? The pasta, of course, the
pasta. We'd make our own bread. And we ate veal, we
ate ham and fowl, one of the fowl. And, of course, we
had, we would make cheese.

SIGRIST: How would you make cheese?

NEGRI: Well, they would make it with the, usually with the
goat milk. That's where you get your provolone, and
things like that. I don't know. They, I don't
remember how that was done, but they did use a lot of
cheese. We had a lot of cheese, and we would have,
some that we would dry the, it would be very hard,
that would be for the grating. And fruits of all
kinds. We had a lot of fruits, yeah. In fact, and
vegetables.

SIGRIST: Did you have a little garden plot that was yours?

NEGRI: Oh, yes, yes. You see, her dowry was the house, and my father's dowry was some land. Now, when I say they had a farm, it's not a farm as you see here where you have extensive acreage to the house. They may have an acre across town, an acre over there. You see, it was divided. And that's another thing. They had like a little shed to keep their tools there. This acreage, wherever they farmed or whatever they farmed. They didn't eat a lot of potatoes, but they did have beans of all kinds. They had a lot of legumes, all kinds of legumes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your mother baking bread?

NEGRI: No, I can't say I remember her doing that, but I know that sometimes, I guess that's what it was, you know, you walk in there and you can smell everything. No, I remember her doing that. But it, I don't know. The, we ate simply, you know, very simple. They didn't have cows, because they didn't have the land for the cows. Now, maybe a little distance further north they would have them, like in the northern section in the Po Valley they'd have cows, and they use a lot of butter there. Where we were it was mountainous. In fact, the whole Adriatic side of Italy, you have

Venice as the port, and then you have Bari, and that's about all. The rest, you know, it's mountainous. And I was going to tell you something about, oh, going out, whenever they had to go and work on this land, they would bring their lunch, and they'd stay there. Sometimes they stayed there all day long, it depended.

And the little babies, they'd carry their babies with, they would wrap them up just like the Indians did. They'd wrap them up and carry them on their shoulders. You know, how they called, a fascia [ph], they called it, a fascia. They wrapped, it was a piece of material about that wide (she gestures) and it would be, I don't know, a couple of yards long, enough to wrap the baby. That was so that it would be easier. When we got to whatever they were going to farm, they would hang the baby on a shrub or a branch or a tree or something and watch it that way, you know, while they were working they'd watch it that way. Today you think of it as being cruel, but it was a good way to take care of them.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections at all of being in the fields with your mother?

NEGRI: Oh, yes, I have. (she laughs) This may sound very

far-fetched to you, but this has all happened. I got kind of bored. I used to get tired of watching them.

We had help, too, you see, when you were in there. And as I said before, they didn't care how old you were, how young you were. You had chores to do, and you did them. Well, I got kind of bored, and so I took off. They looked for me all day long. They couldn't find me. They didn't know where I was. They had the whole town looking for me. Then somebody got smart, and they decided they'd better look in the cantina. There I was, sleeping. I was sleeping in the little barn, you know. I didn't care. I wasn't going to be doing any farming. I was fast asleep. I remember that, because I got a spanking. You know, things that impressed me the most were, I don't know if it was, I've been that way. I've been that way all my life, where I remember things. When we left, you know, to come to, well, my mother didn't want to come.

SIGRIST: Why didn't your mother want to come?

NEGRI: Well, she had it good over there. Why should she come up here and have to work? She . . .

SIGRIST: Did any of her relatives ever go to America?

NEGRI: Yeah. An older brother of hers, he came many years before her, but she never kept track of them. I don't know, he used to write to her older brother, the oldest in the family. And this one was the next, the second. She never paid too much attention to them. She was that way. She didn't pay much attention to anything but her own family. She loved her children. She would have one right after the other, you know, and they all turned out beautifully.

SIGRIST: Well, how many, how many children were with you before you left for Italy, I mean, for America? Just you and Rose?

NEGRI: Just my sister and I, that's all.

SIGRIST: And your sister is older, you said?

NEGRI: She is seventeen months older, and she's always, she was kind of sickly. And she, my father decided that I could take care of myself, whereas she needed care, she needed care. So he sent her to college. He sold his property in Italy. Now, in 1926, when you just about had a dollar in your pocket, and this is what he did, you know, just to give her an education, because he figured that I would always find my way, whereas

she wouldn't. And she died at thirty-nine, so he, I didn't know why. I resented it, naturally. I resented why I had to go to work at fourteen and she was in college. And he tried to explain, but he was not talking. He wasn't a very talkative man. He didn't explain things. If he only had explained it, I wouldn't have resented him as much as I did, but I did resent him a lot.

SIGRIST: Well, of course, as a young child you didn't realize (?).

NEGRI: Sure, sure. But why didn't they tell me that it was because she, I knew afterwards. I knew, even when she was in school, I thought, okay, there's something wrong here. Why don't they say something, you know? And she died of cancer. So anyway . . .

SIGRIST: So your mother resists. She doesn't want to come to this country.

NEGRI: No, she . . .

SIGRIST: How does your father finally get your mother to consent to this?

NEGRI: Because he started going with another woman.

SIGRIST: Ah-ha.

NEGRI: So his brother wrote to my mother and said, "You better come here, your husband has another woman." And she made arrangements for the next boat. So that's what it took. And I think he did it very, well, I don't blame him, he was here four years, you know, without her. So I really don't blame him.

SIGRIST: What did you know about America when you were a little girl in Italy?

NEGRI: Not too much, because he would write, and she couldn't, it was funny, she could read, but she couldn't write. And so she would explain things to us, but it was my uncle that would explain more to me, the one that took a fancy to me. He didn't want me to come here. He wanted to keep me right there, but she wouldn't let him. Sometimes, you know, when I'd get angry with her I'd say, "Why didn't you leave me there?" She says, "You'd drive everybody crazy there!" (she laughs)

SIGRIST: What kind of preparations did your mother have to make before you left?

NEGRI: Well, actually, she didn't do anything. Her brother did everything for her. And we were to leave from Naples, and when they had inspected us, oh, and they gave me a shot for typhoid, and when they took a physical, you know, I don't know, she had something wrong with her eyes. Whether it was just from crying, or they were red, or whatever it was, so they said, "No, we couldn't let you go." You know. So we had to stay in Naples for a month and wait for her to get better. And, consequently, she, not knowing how to write, her brother wrote to my husband, my father, you know, because he was waiting for her two weeks. And she didn't show up. And so we were in Naples for a month. We were at the King Emmanuel hotel. It must have been near the harbor, because she wouldn't want to be too far away from the harbor, where the boat was. It was awful. It was dirty, it was awful. That was the first time I saw a rat, I mean rats. They were in the gutter, running around in the gutter there. They were as big as a cat. I would never forget it. I could think about it now, and I could see them.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: What did you take with you when you left from the village in Italy to Naples? What were you bringing to America with you?

NEGRI: Well, we had a trunk, and I guess that was shipped, my uncle brought it over with a cart, with his wagon. And then our suitcases. And the clothes on our back. Oh, then Naples, he gave me a big doll. It was almost as tall as I was. And he gave my sister one, too. And, poor doll. On the boat, I don't know if I wanted to show the fish, you know, my doll. It fell in the water. You should have seen the fish go after it. (she laughs) You know? That's the one thing I regret, that I lost the, and that was the second, that was the first doll I ever had. And then I had another one here in this country, when some people came over. You see, we didn't know anything about Christmas, and gifts, and things like that. Because in Italy they, see, that's a German festival. All that started there. We just, Christmas was religion, you know, so you did it that way. But when we were here in this country for a couple of years, well, no, it was about 1918. Some people from our village came to visit us.

And, well, they had been living in New York for a while looking for work. So then they came up here, and they stayed with us for a while to look for work there. And it was around the holiday time, so they hung up stockings. You know, that was the only time I ever had a stocking hung up. I never had one after that. And they gave us, they gave me a doll, and they gave my sister a doll. And my father, they put a couple of oranges in his socks, and a chunk of coal, you know. And my mother, they gave her some money, you know, because they were boarding with us. Well, actually they weren't boarding, she had to stay here, so they did that just to come. That doll. And when I picked it up, you know, it made a noise. And I thought, "What happened?" So I did it again, "Maaaa." You know? Gee! So I kept looking at it and looking at it. I don't think I had that doll a week, but I didn't take it apart. I had to find out, I had to cut the back, and there's a piece of material, a gadget in there that had like a bellows, and when you put the doll forward, you know? (she gestures) It would say, "Maa!" You know. That was the second doll I ever had in my life, and then I ruined it anyway. I never had another toy given to me.

SIGRIST: So you were in Naples for a month, and your mother's eyes . . .

NEGRI: Got better, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what kind of treatment or any kind of medication or anything like that?

NEGRI: No. I don't remember that at all. Only what happens to me. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the boat for the first time?

NEGRI: Did I see the boat? I thought it was another country. I got on the boat. I didn't know what the name of the boat was. My mother didn't say anything. I didn't know. And I'd like to get way ahead for just a minute. In 19, oh, about 1930, '32, I wanted to get my citizenship paper. See, my father got his citizenship paper the year that women had to get their own. They couldn't come under their parents, and things like that. I think it was in 1920 or '21, something like that. So I went down to the register of voters, and I told where I came from and all that. He said, "What was the name of the boat?" I says, "I don't know." And I looked through all our papers. I

couldn't find the name of the boat anyplace, the name of the ship I said, "I can't understand it." Well, it took him a couple of years to write to the different ports of entry, and I kept saying, "We came in New York. We landed at Ellis Island. I remember that. I'll never forget it." He said, "Well, you're not there, you're not registered there." And he tried New Orleans, he tried Boston, he tried Baltimore. Two year. Finally one day he said, "Gosh, there must be something. Isn't there something at all that you remember?" I says, "There's nothing." The only thing I remember, there was a damn portrait. When you walked down the stairs to the salon, the dining salon. Then there was a platform, and you turn this way, right over there. The whole length of the wall, it scared the life out of me. So I run down the stairs and slide into the salon. And he said, "What did it look like?" I says, "Well, it looked down like this at me. It looked like Franz, Emperor for Franz Josef. There was a boat by that name! So I said, "That's the one, then." So he wrote, and sure enough, but even then we had trouble. They couldn't find LaRocco. They couldn't find Juirra LaRocco They couldn't find Guira LaRocca di San Simeon. Nothing. I said, "Well,

it's got to" So then I said to the registrar, "You know, in Italy a lot of the women take their maiden name and the children have their maiden name." I said, "Try Viazza." That's where it was, with my mother's, my mother's name. I didn't mean to digress from that but, uh . . .

SIGRIST: It's a good story, actually.

NEGRI: But that's how, it used to scare the life out of me on that boat. It was a beautiful boat. It was, it was a German, an Austrian-American line, and I guess it stopped running during the war or after the war. But, uh . . .

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about the boat trip? Do you remember where you slept?

NEGRI: Do I remember. It . . . (she laughs) You won't believe all of this, but it really happened. You know, I mean, nothing, nobody could be that crazy. I was lost on the boat one day. They couldn't find me. I was always running around, and pretty soon the, a couple of the attendants down in the, where all the machine is, brought me upstairs and said to my mother, "You'd better watch her. She was down there, she was

walking all around, she could have gotten hurt." I said, "I wanted to see what that noise was." There was a lot of noise, you know, the machine was going and the noise. So she say, "I don't know what I'm going to do with her. She's never in one place. She never sits still." So she had to bring my sister, I don't know, to the doctor on the boat or what she had to do, so she says, "You stay in this room now." So they locked the door. "Well, you can't lock me in, you can't lock me in." I tried to go out through the porthole. It was a good thing I couldn't open it. I would have, I wouldn't be here today. But I, when they came back, they weren't gone very long. When they came back, there I was trying to figure out how I could open up that porthole. But the ship was beautiful, and finally they got me to, my mother took a couple of her hairpins. They were usually those big metal ones. And she had some thread, and she says, "You sit there now, and you learn to knit." I had long chestnut-colored hair, and there I was trying to knit with these, and these people would stop by and say, "Are you really knitting? Hmm?" I was making a lot of knots, but, four years old, you know. But it kept me out of mischief for a while anyway.

SIGRIST: Did you get sick?

NEGRI: Not me, no. My sister did.

SIGRIST: Did your mother get sick?

NEGRI: No. My sister did, my sister. I didn't get sick. My mother would say I could eat rocks. You know.

SIGRIST: Were you all, did you sleep in one room with lots of other people?

NEGRI: No, no. We had our own stateroom. We had, it was a nice ship. We had, we ate at the salon, the dining room. And there was, we were, we came over first class, so we didn't see any of that. We didn't see any of that horror that people coming over before that. But then when we landed here, they grabbed me again. I was so mad at them. I, my mother said, "She headed down there." And I was going, "No, you know . . ." I was trying to tell them. The doctor said, "That's all right. Get the other one." You know, get the other one. But then it, but it didn't even show up. You know, I said that's why he felt that I didn't have it down.

SIGRIST: How long did the trip take?

NEGRI: About two weeks.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

NEGRI: Oh, yes. We came, I still, I thought it was floating in the water. And I still think that, that it's floating in the water. When I see pictures of it, and even when we went down there a year ago in November I think, yeah, a year ago November. You look at it, and you swear that it's floating. You just look at it long enough, you know, you see the shimmering of the water, and you think it's floating.

SIGRIST: Do you have any impressions, being a four-year-old, of seeing New York City from the boat or anything like that?

NEGRI: The only impression I had was, "My God, where is it going? It's reaching the sky." Because most of the houses where we came from, they were small. You know, they were flat. And in Naples I did see some, but we were by the harbor, so I really didn't see too many of them. But the few, the impression. I looked at it, and I see pictures of it today, and it's floating by

itself. It's just going around floating by itself.

SIGRIST: Tell me what happened after you pulled into New York Harbor. Tell me about getting to Ellis Island.

NEGRI: As I said, my mother was not a writer. So my father didn't show up when we got off the dock. And there was a fellow, I have his name here, he was from our village. And he waited with us, you know. Because I didn't know how to get a hold of my father. She didn't write, so she didn't know how to get a hold of him. So we waited and waited. And finally he said, "Well, we'll go and see, visit some other neighbors," that were living in New York. And we went there, and then they got a hold of my father. Of course, there wasn't communication. There weren't the telephones handy the way they are today. Everybody has a telephone, even a little shack will have a telephone. They didn't then. And she wouldn't know enough to call anybody, or who to call. He was supposed to be there, too, a month before, you see? And where he was working, he was working at the General Electric at that time. He was living in Schenectady, working at the General Electric.

SIGRIST: So how did you get to Ellis Island? I'm just curious, because you said you were traveling first class, so I'm just wondering why . . .

NEGRI: Well, we got on the ferry, and we landed at Ellis Island. Now, I don't know why we got there. Where would we go if it was first class?

SIGRIST: It should have been processed in your cabin, unless it's because your father didn't show up.

NEGRI: He didn't show up.

SIGRIST: Well, maybe that's why.

NEGRI: Maybe we were processed there. I don't know. But all I know . . .

SIGRIST: What do you remember of that experience?

NEGRI: Well, that, too, you know. It, I walked in and it was lunch a bunch of cattle there. You had your stanches, I guess they call it, you know, the pipes separating the people. You had the row that was going, that was already, could leave, you know, they were already processed. I guess we were already processed, then. (she sighs) Then you had the others that had to

wait there. They had to go and get a check-up. They had to go, and the doctors were there, you know, to look at them. But, you know, I was that high, all right. So everybody behind, you know, the mass of people. I don't know where they all came from. It was full. The whole place was full.

SIGRIST: So this gentleman brings you . . .

NEGRI: To a friend's house, and they were neighbors from Italy, too. And so then we stayed there and visited some other relatives that were in New York City. We stayed in New York City for two weeks.

SIGRIST: Did you ever see anything in New York that you had never seen before?

NEGRI: Just the dirt, there was just the dirt. You know, I was always looking down, looking down the road. And, in fact, I find a lot of pennies that way (she laughs) looking down. And it was just the dirt. And then, of course, we stayed, they kept us in the house more than, they didn't let us go out at all, only when we had to walk to go to the store or something. And then we went up to, we took the train to Albany, and then to Schenectady. Now, we lived

there for two years.

SIGRIST: What do you think your mother was thinking when your father didn't show up?

NEGRI: If you knew my mother, she was probably so damn mad at him that, if he came near her at that time, she probably would have hit him over the head with something. But it was her own fault. Now, she could have learned to read and write, but she took the easy way, and she did that all her life, you know. She wasn't going to be bothered, because I wanted her to learn, and she got along fine. She worked for me for twenty-five years.

SIGRIST: She could do it if she wanted to do it.

NEGRI: She wasn't going to do everything. Because she was the youngest in the family, and she was a baby. And she, her father just didn't go. She never had to work, and she didn't want to work. She didn't work. When she came, during the war here when they were, wanted everybody, the women, to come in and help. So she got a job. And she had three children, and the neighbor, well, she was the owner of the house and lived downstairs, and took care of the youngest girl.

She was about four years old. And we were seven or eight years old, nine years old, something like that.

She worked, she worked there at the (?) for about a month. She got her pay, to hell with this. She came home, she bought me a dress, she bought my sister a dress. She spent all that. (she laughs) And that's the way she was, you know. She needed it, she got it.

SIGRIST: So you took the train to Schenectady.

NEGRI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what it was like seeing your father for the first time. He's basically a man you didn't know.

NEGRI: I hated him. I hated him. It was awful. Even at that, because he was a hard worker, he was a wonderful guy, but he didn't, you see, I was spoiled. I was spoiled in Italy with my uncles, you know. And here I see this man, and he looks down at me like that, you know. And I thought, "Oh, who is that?" You know. And I never got along with him. I would always do something, you know, to aggravate him. I could never understand, he would never stop and explain, "Now,

look . . ." Like with my sister, you know, she doesn't feel good. I know they can't seem to find out what's wrong with her. She was always frail. She was a beautiful girl. In fact, she was one of the three that was chosen as Belle of the class, the high school class, you know. But he didn't. He said something, you don't question it. That's it. You don't. And that's the way he was. And I was just like him, so I couldn't take it, you know.

SIGRIST: What was your parents' relationship like? They had not seen each other for some time, and your mother assumes that he's been with another woman.

NEGRI: Oh, yeah, he was.

SIGRIST: He didn't show up at the boat. I mean, this is not a good beginning.

NEGRI: Well, she was brought up, the man is the boss. Nobody would ever take it today, but at that time, all right. So if she went home, if she went back home, her family wouldn't accept her. Do you realize that? And this is the way they were brought up. You made your bed? Lie in it. This is it. So she made the best of it. What else was she going to do. And he toed the

mark, though, he, I guess she let him know just how she felt, but, you see, she was of a better class than he was. He was a farmer, and she was in commerce. They were in business all the time. And she always had her own way. So I don't know what she could have done. She couldn't have done anything at that time. Today she wouldn't put up with it.

SIGRIST: She just accepted this as her fate.

NEGRI: Yeah, that's so true.

SIGRIST: It's (?), in a way.

NEGRI: What else. Sometimes I wish, I almost wish it was that way today, at least the family. To her, she didn't care if she had her family. She just, and the children are beautiful. She had six boys and six girls.

SIGRIST: Wow!

NEGRI: I mean, they all made, they all did very well.

SIGRIST: Tell me about, and maybe in Schenectady, if you were there for two years, where you would remember the most about that. Tell me about what it was like getting

adjusted to America.

NEGRI: Well, first of all, I didn't now how to speak English, naturally. And I tried, they put me in, we were in kindergarten, and I loved it, because we made things, you know, and I was trying to learn how to, I never forget there was something that I had to say to one of the, to the teacher about heat. And it didn't sound right. I couldn't explain myself. I didn't know what, you know, I wanted to say something, and (?), I didn't, see, I spoke, at that time I spoke Albanian and Italian, and I was trying to learn English. And I can still, that word bothers me. I don't know what I was trying to explain. To this day I don't know what it was. But I know that in kindergarten that word heat meant something. Whether I got reprimanded for it, or somebody laughed at me, because the kids would laugh at you, you know. I don't remember. But that word heat, and I kept looking at it sometimes, I say, "Well, what does it mean?" It is heat? Heat is warmth, isn't it? Isn't that what it is? Heat? Something is, the heat, the sun, the heat of the sun, something like that? Isn't that what it means, heat? I was wrong, I don't know why, I was wrong.

SIGRIST: Were there other immigrant children that you went to school with?

NEGRI: Yeah, there were. I wouldn't say a lot of them, because there were more than you see today, or more than you've seen in the last twenty years.

SIGRIST: When you moved to Schenectady, your father was working for GE, you said.

NEGRI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you move into an Italian neighborhood?

NEGRI: We lived on Strong Street. It was a nice place. There were a lot of Italians there. This was, well, I guess it was close to the center of, you know, to downtown, in other words. And the last time I went to visit my cousins it was deplorable. A lot of new people came in, and they were messy. There was a yard, an empty yard on the corner. It was right in, near the center there. There were a lot of bottles and garbage and stuff on it.

SIGRIST: But when you lived there it wasn't like that. Can you describe where you lived with your father?

NEGRI: Yes. It was a two-family house, and, well, when we got there my uncle John lived upstairs, he owned the house, he lived upstairs. And I think there was four, five rooms. Downstairs my Uncle Joe lived. He had four or five rooms. So we lived there. And my father, my mother and two kids, you know. It was horrendous. (she laughs) You know, there were too many. Every Saturday night we took a bath. We'd bring a big tub, that tin tub that they have, you know. And you'd close the doors, and you'd take, you'd get in the tub and you'd wash yourself, throw that water out. We had some heating on the stove, and you filled it up for the next person, and it was just too much. And my mother got so angry one day she said to my father, "You want to stay here with your brothers, you stay here with your brothers. I'm moving out of here." So she did. We moved out. We moved, I would say about, see Strong Street is a big street. It comes around like this. And then it gets into the center. And I would say about halfway down from where we were. Of course, it was mostly a lot of Italians there. And they all had their garden, and they all took pride in seeing who had the biggest tomato, who got the first peppers of the year. Oh,

the first peppers are huge. It's really a riot to see some of those. Hey, you should see my pepper. And my father had to have, he never had breakfast in the morning. He would have, bring a sandwich and eat it an hour or so afterwards when he was working. His first peppers. He had to have it in the morning, fried with scrambled egg. That was his, after that he didn't care. Then you take care of the garden, but the first pepper. And they were, they were kind of, well, compete with each other, see who picked the first tomato and the first pepper and things like that. Because they were always, but they always had their gardens. They loved their gardens, you know.

SIGRIST: Tell me about how your mother adjusted to America, or how she didn't adjust to America.

NEGRI: She just, she adjusted very well, but she adjusted in her own way. She wasn't going to be told what to do. This was one of the reasons why she had to get away from their house. Because John's wife, her name was Grace, and she was very bossy. John didn't care. He, he couldn't care less. She, Grace was very bossy. My mother could not go shopping, because she didn't know how to speak English. Grace had to take her. My

mother said, "I'll be damned if someone's going to take me. I'll find a way." You know. And she hated it. She hated to be treated like a baby when she always had her own way, you know, from the time she was a baby, and she wasn't going to have them tell her what to do. That was one of the reasons was she, she wanted to learn English, but she wanted to learn it her own way.

SIGRIST: How did she do that? Tell me how your mother learned English.

NEGRI: We'd come home from school and we'd sing her songs that we learned in school, and she'd sing with us, and she'd learn English. And Sunday afternoon, or Sundays we'd get the Sunday paper, and there were, oh, like The New York Times and some of these other papers, they always had a serial running in there, you know, a story. I had to read that to her every Sunday afternoon when we got through with our dinner and cleaning up, we had to read that Sunday story. And then she would try it herself, you know. She'd say, "Well, how do I write my name?" So I showed her how to write her name. I made her practice and practice

so that she could write her name. So this is how she got her citizenship paper. After I found out that we were (?) Franz Josef. See . . .

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever want to return to Italy?

NEGRI: Never. She did go in, (she sighs) I think it was in '69. I forgot. I forgot the year that she went. But anyway, I told you I had five brothers. They were all in the service. They were two in the marines, two in the army, and one in the navy. The youngest brother, he joined the navy because he wanted to see the world. And he joined, the war was over again, but he got in anyway. And he stayed in Newport, Rhode Island, the whole term of his enlistment. He didn't go out to see the world at all. He was, worked in the office there. I don't know what they'd call that. And so, that following year, he said, "Well, we'll go to, we'll travel." And my mother said, I said to my mother, "Why don't you go now? Go to Italy if you want to see it. You've got a sister there. That's all she had. And so she decided to go with my brother. Well, they went on the Andrea Dora, the last trip that she took to Italy. Because then she came back here, and when she was gone again that's when she

got into the uh. And when my mother got there, she was so disgusted, they were, first of all, she was disgusted with the town. She said, "They didn't do anything. In fact, they were worse off." Of course, she couldn't realize that they went through a war, or anything else. How could they have anything better? But just the same, because she was living here, high off the hog, you know, she thought that they should do the same thing. And anyway, the communists were having a lot of riots in Germany and in France and all that, and one of my brothers was in Ansbach, and he knew that my mother was in Italy, and he was going to come down to see her. In fact, in front of the hotel where she was in Naples, they burned the cars, and they were rioting. And, so she was so afraid that my brother would come down and get into that mess and, see, he was a lieutenant, and he had charge of one of the factories there as Ansbach, you know. He was a marine. And so she was supposed to stay there two weeks. On Sunday night the telephone rings. It was my mother. I says, "Where are you? Are you calling from Italy?" She says, "No, I'm next door." (she laughs) She, I said, "What are you doing home?" She goes, "I couldn't stand it. I couldn't

stand it any more." She says, "They haven't learned anything." I says, "Ma, they had a war. How are they going to learn anything, you know, when they have a war." And so she, my brother was telling me afterwards, she went to the, she wouldn't fly to go over there. She wouldn't.

SIGRIST: We only have two minutes left.

NEGRI: Oh, anyway. So she, she wouldn't fly. But when she wanted to come home so bad, she went to the office, and they said, "We don't have any room for you." She says, "I'm staying right here. I'm staying right here, and I'm going to go on that plane." And she got on that plane, and she came home.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Negri, in our final two minutes, let me ask you sort of an obvious question. Are you glad that your mother brought you to America?

NEGRI: Oh, definitely, yes.

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would have been different if you had stayed?

NEGRI: Well, I really don't know. Knowing my character, I would have either run away, run away from home, which

I attempted to do here when I was about six or seven years old, but I could never, I could never be tied down like that. And I haven't been. I've done what I wanted to. I've been fortunate to have a husband, and I've got two daughters. But I seem to appreciate what I've done.

SIGRIST: You've had a good life, it seems. (Mrs. Negri laughs)

NEGRI: This is, I want to thank you very much, Mrs. Negri, for having me come out here and talking to you about your immigration experience. This is Paul Sigrist signing off in Torrington, Connecticut with Anna Negri on Monday, March 29, 1993.

NEGRI: Thank you very much.