

EI-334

DOLORES MARIA VASSALLO CASCIO, JOSEPH VASSALLO AND
MARY CARMELLA VASSALLO MOLLO
BIRTH DATES: MARCH 23, 1921, AUGUST 16, 1924 AND
SEPTEMBER 21, 1926
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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
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MALTA, 1929
AGES 8, 6 AND 2

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the
National Park Service. Today is Thursday, June 17,
1993. I'm at Ellis Island in the Recording Studio
with Dolores Cascio, Joseph Vassallo and Mary Mollo.
And it's my pleasure. They all came from Malta in
1929, and this is a real treat for us. When they
came, Dolores was eight, Joe was six, Mary was two,
and they all ended up detained here for some time,
which we'll talk about later. Anyway, I want to
welcome you all to Ellis Island. It's great to have
you here.

ALL: Thank you very much.

SIGRIST: Why don't we begin, we'll go oldest to youngest, and give me your full name, with your maiden name, and your date of birth, please. Dolores, we'll start with you.

CASCIO: My name is Dolores Maria Cascio, nee Vassallo. And what was it?

SIGRIST: Birth date.

CASCIO: My birthday is March 23, 1921.

SIGRIST: Joseph?

VASSALLO: Yes. Joseph Vassallo, and I was born in August 16th of 1924.

SIGRIST: Mary?

MOLLO: My name is Mary Carmella Mollo Vassallo, and I was born in September 21, 1926.

SIGRIST: My first question for you, we know you all came from Malta, Joe or Dolores, do you remember when Mary was born?

CASCIO: Yes!

SIGRIST: And what do you remember about that.

CASCIO: Oh, yes, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me what your remember, Dolores.

CASCIO: My oldest brother and I, and he wasn't in on, this one wasn't in on it. We had been saving money for her. Mom used to make us put all our money that we made on holidays or anything in a little box on the ceiling, and she used to tell us, "That's for your little baby sister that's coming." She always said "sister." (she laughs) That was before her birth. She was born at home, and right after that we had an earthquake, right after she was born. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: And you felt responsible for this.

MOLLO: Right. I caused it.

VASSALLO: She came in with a bang.

CASCIO: Yeah, yeah. It was just a few days after that we had the earthquake and every, all the furniture was moving from one side of the room to the other, and we all had to go to the cemetery because it was the only open space where there weren't any homes. So we went

to the cemetery, and I remember the earth opening up.

And, I tell you, I was scared. But that's what I remember about her birth.

VASSALLO: She really made an impression.

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories of it, Joseph?

VASSALLO: No, I don't remember that very well.

CASCIO: He was too young, yeah.

VASSALLO: I was only three years old, uh, three years older than her.

CASCIO: Two years, two years older.

SIGRIST: Mary, did your mother ever tell you anything about maybe when she carried you or the birth itself?

MOLLO: No.

SIGRIST: Women were more reticent about talking about it.

VASSALLO: In those days, yes.

CASCIO: Oh, yes. She didn't, we didn't talk about that, no.

MOLLO: We didn't usually talk about that too much. You know, she just told me about how beautiful Malta was

with all the lovely flowers all over, you know.

SIGRIST: Was that important to your mother, flowers?

MOLLO: Yes. She was a maker of flowers. She made artificial flowers. My mother and father both made artificial flowers in Malta.

SIGRIST: For hat trimming, or . . .

CASCIO: For bouquets. They made beaded, beaded flowers. In fact, she was the first one to introduce beaded flowers. And she just made great, big bouquets, centerpieces and anything that they ask her to make she made.

VASSALLO: From scratch.

CASCIO: Yes.

VASSALLO: She used to make her own petals, color everything the colors that were required. And she used to get like linen and cut the leaves and shape everything, just from scratch.

SIGRIST: Were you children ever required to help out? This is a cottage industry, I assume. You're doing this at home?

CASCIO: Yes. We did it at home.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the process, maybe, a little bit, that you might all remember?

MOLLO: I remember making our own Christmas trees. My mother used to, my mother and father used to get the branches from the other side, you know, from Europe, and we used to put little berries at the end of each one, and we used to assemble the artificial Christmas tree that they sell today. We actually started it in those days. We made our own little Christmas tree, and then we decorated it, you know.

SIGRIST: So when they came to this country they carried this talent with them.

MOLLO: The tradition with them, right.

VASSALLO: In fact, my older brother used to go sell the bouquets and single flowers. Everything used to be made just like nature would make it.

CASCIO: Including the perfume.

SIGRIST: So you would say that your parents were artistic people. They had talent.

CASCIO: Yes.

VASSALLO: They were, very.

CASCIO: Our father was a musician also.

SIGRIST: What was your dad's name?

CASCIO: Ralph.

SIGRIST: And tell me a little bit, and I'll go right across the room. I'll start with Dolores, what his personality was like, what sticks out in your mind, especially thinking back in Malta, in your case.

CASCIO: You're really asking the wrong person because he was very stern (she laughs), very, very stern with me especially. As the children came along he got less and less and less. But he was very stern. But in those days all fathers were stern, really. They were the head of the household. You know, and the mother did what the father told her to, so it was all.

SIGRIST: Is there a story that you remember when you were in Malta of doing something bad and being punished for it by your dad?

CASCIO: Oh, yes. It's going to be personal, though. (they laugh) Yes, and my mother had gone to mass, and she left my father to look after me. It was very rare we saw our father, like every three years. And I had wet the bed, and my father wasn't used to that. So I came out and told my father, you know, "I'm wet, I wet the bed." He was so mad at me he went to hit me and my mother put her hand in front of him and he broke her fingers. That's how hard he was going to hit me.

SIGRIST: Wow.

CASCIO: But that's the worst thing I could really remember.

SIGRIST: He was going back and forth from this country.

CASCIO: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

VASSALLO: And he loved you the most, so just imagine.

SIGRIST: Joseph, what do you remember about your dad in Malta?
What sticks out in your mind about him?

VASSALLO: My memory isn't that vivid, but I did think that he was everything to me.

SIGRIST: What did he look like? Can you describe what he

looked like, Joseph?

VASSALLO: Well, I used to see him in uniform a lot, because he didn't, you know, he used to come back to Malta like every three years. He used to migrate back and forth to the United States and Canada. And when we did see him it was like seeing God all over again, you know.

And he, like my sister said, he was a musician, and whenever he was in Malta he used to play with the band. He used to play many instruments. A very talented man. And it seemed that whenever I could remember him he was in uniform.

SIGRIST: And, Mary, as a small girl in this country, what sticks out about your father once you guys had come and settled in this country when you were growing up?

MOLLO: Well, religious things. He used to make the presepio, the crib.

SIGRIST: At Christmas time.

VASSALLO: Yeah, the Nativity scene.

MOLLO: The Nativity. And he used to make it out of papier mache. He used to, he used to get all the brown paper bags like months ahead of time and soak them in

glue sizing, and then he used to form the mountains and the sky, and he used to cut out the little stars, and he'd have the light behind it, and then he'd put the little houses on the mountains. And there was one time where he had the water running over the windmill, and the water would circulate and go down underneath the table into a bucket, and recycle itself. It was so beautiful.

SIGRIST: So he really was a man who was so talented with his hands.

MOLLO: And for the Immaculate Conception he always had the statue of the Blessed Mother, and he'd have the skirt around it on top of the china closet, and he'd have stars and flowers coming down, beautiful. I remember that.

CASCIO: Yes, yes. I still have that statue.

MOLLO: Yes.

SIGRIST: You said your father was in this country. Why did he come to this country initially?

CASCIO: To work, I think.

MOLLO: To work, yes.

VASSALLO: To find work, mainly.

SIGRIST: Was Malta not a place for work?

CASCIO: It was only, he was a steamfitter in Malta. He worked on ships, English ships that would come into port, and he was a diver. They'd fix the ships there when they came into port. And, but there wasn't any other work. There were no factories, no nothing in Malta. So they had to either go to Australia, England or America, and he chose America. That's why he came.

MOLLO: Pop also told me that he helped lay down tracks from Canada across the country.

VASSALLO: Oh, yeah. They worked the railroad, that's right.

CASCIO: I never heard that.

MOLLO: You know, the first railroads.

VASSALLO: And that's the time they got lost in the North Woods.

CASCIO: I know they got lost, but I didn't know that he . . .

SIGRIST: Can you tell the story, Joe, about them being lost in

the North Woods?

VASSALLO: Well, what I remember was they were coming in from Canada and they were lost in the . . .

CASCIO: Laurentian Mountains.

VASSALLO: In the mountains. And they were lost for like several weeks. And somehow somebody led them back to civilization, but they were, they were at the edge of starvation, and they were just about had it. And a vision of some kind brought them back out of the North Woods.

CASCIO: An old man. They said an old man took them back to his, he had a little hut. Took them back and fed them, and then led them out of the woods, this whole group of people. And they wanted to go back to thank this man, and they could never find him.

VASSALLO: They never found him. It's, you know . . .

CASCIO: Being religious, this is how, we believe it was a miracle. He believed it, the whole group did.

VASSALLO: Well, they survived.

CASCIO: Yes, they survived.

SIGRIST: What a story that is. How old was your father when he first came to America? Does anyone know exactly, or . . .

CASCIO: I don't remember.

VASSALLO: No.

SIGRIST: A young man, before he was married, or . . .

CASCIO: No, after he was married.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met, any of you?

CASCIO: No. They never told us, they never told us. We don't even . . .

SIGRIST: Go ahead.

CASCIO: We don't even have a wedding picture of them, you know.

SIGRIST: I see. And they never talked about that sort of thing.

CASCIO: No. I have their marriage certificate.

SIGRIST: Mary, what was your mom's name?

MOLLO: Mary Concetta.

SIGRIST: Can you spell her maiden name for me, please?

MOLLO: Uh, Zammit, right?

CASCIO: Yes.

VASSALLO: Yes.

MOLLO: Z-A-M-M-I-T.

SIGRIST: And let me also put to you the same sort of question I had about your dad. Describe what your mother's personality was like.

MOLLO: Oh, she was sweet, loving. She was a peacemaker.

SIGRIST: That story proves it, Dolores' story about her getting in the middle.

MOLLO: Yes, she was a wonderful person.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what she looked like, in your eyes, when you were growing up as a little girl, what she looked like?

MOLLO: Well, she was on the heavy side. She had a beautiful face. What more can I say? And she looked . . .

VASSALLO: Ever since she came to the United States though, her health failed her, and she gradually became worse and worse until finally after we moved to Brooklyn, to Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn, she passed away there.

SIGRIST: Did she want to come to America? I'm kind of jumping the gun, I realize, but I mean did she want . . .

VASSALLO: No. I don't believe she wanted to, but she wanted what's best for us, and she wanted to be with her husband, because he used to be in this country very often, and I think there was a little bit of suspicion going on that maybe a little hanky panky, you know?

CASCIO: That's not what I was told. (they laugh)

VASSALLO: So I think that had a lot to do with it, but she really didn't want to leave her homeland.

SIGRIST: When you think back, and again we'll try to keep this on Malta for you, is there a story that you remember about your mom when you were a kid that, or something she did that really sticks out in your mind before you got here?

VASSALLO: No. All I remember is how she used to feed us. We

had, we used to grow most of our own food, and before we'd go out to play she'd give us like half a loaf of Italian bread, you know, the round loaf, and cut it in half, make a dugout out of it and put oil in there and send us out to pick the rest of the food, tomatoes and all that.

CASCIO: Tomatoes, yeah. You got them with you.

VASSALLO: And that's how she used to feed us. She just used to let us go.

SIGRIST: Was she from the same town that you came from? Had she grown up in that town?

VASSALLO: Yes. In Kalcara, yes.

CASCIO: Yes. She was born in the house, yes.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the town?

CASCIO: Kalcara.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

CASCIO: K-A-L-C-A-R-A.

SIGRIST: I see. And, Dolores, let me also ask you, too, when you think back to your childhood, what sticks out in

your mind about your mother? Is there an instance or a story that really comes to mind when you think about her?

CASCIO: It was just a happy environment. We lived in the same house as Grandma and Grandpa did. They lived in one part of the house, and we lived in the other part of the house.

SIGRIST: This is your mother's parents.

CASCIO: My mother's parents. And there was always happiness. Always cousins with us, always good food. Just a state of happiness that never left me, really. It was always there, always there. It was put into us. A love of flowers, and it was all this beauty. There was always beauty around my mother, always.

SIGRIST: Is there a present that you remember your mother giving to you as a child in Malta?

CASCIO: Not in Malta. We really didn't give presents in Malta. In the United States I do.

SIGRIST: Later on?

CASCIO: She gave me a little pendant with a little red stone

from the five and ten, and that was it, I still have it, yeah.

SIGRIST: Let me, before we get too involved with the family stuff, and let me ask Joseph. For those of us who don't know, can you kind of just describe Malta? I mean, it's a small island, but can you . . .

VASSALLO: Malta is a very small island. In fact, it's a little smaller than Staten Island. And actually it's like the vacation land of Europe, very much like Puerto Rico is to the United States. It's a tropical island. And just a beautiful place to be.

SIGRIST: And it's south of Sicily.

VASSALLO: It's sixty-eight miles south of Sicily.

SIGRIST: And can you describe the town a little bit that you lived in? I assume it was quite small.

CASCIO: Very small.

VASSALLO: The town, we lived, we lived near the Grand Harbor, at the end of the Grand Harbor. And there they used to bring these colorful boats up at the end of what was like a creek, and there they paint the boats, and

I remember that very vividly. I could still smell the paint they used to use.

SIGRIST: Were these boats being painted for a festive occasion, or just . . .

VASSALLO: They were always colorful.

CASCIO: They were always colorful. Oh, yeah.

VASSALLO: Very colorful boats. They resembled the gondolas. They had the large, the large, uh, mast in the front and in the back, uh, bow. And they were, they were always decorative colors, bright colors.

SIGRIST: Is the sea very important to people who live in Malta?

CASCIO: Yes.

VASSALLO: Everything.

MOLLO: Their main staple was fish.

VASSALLO: It's fishing villages and seaport, the main seaport and the repair yards.

SIGRIST: I see.

MOLLO: During World War Two it was one of Britain's largest navy ports.

VASSALLO: And it was bombed, the boats were.

MOLLO: But it has underground catacombs which helped the people, you know. A lot of them were saved because of the underground catacombs.

SIGRIST: Dolores, can you describe the house that you lived in for me in Malta?

CASCIO: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. It was a real villa. It was, you came in the front door, which was on a wall, a big wall, with a great big key, on a wall. And then you go in and you go into gardens, and there was one room on one side that was a gardener's cottage. And you walk past that to a long, long area. And then on one side you go into the woods. It went down a hill. Then there was another room there that belonged to the caretaker. But we didn't have these people. I mean, we did all the caretaking ourselves. And then you go up a few steps through an arbor, and then you come to the main house. In front was our grandparents' home, which was one story. Then you went around the side and you went to a two-story

house, which is where we lived.

VASSALLO: And it's all stone.

CASCIO: All stone.

SIGRIST: What kind of a roof on it?

CASCIO: It had a stone roof on it. And it was, we had a staircase that went around, a spiral staircase to go up to the roof. And it was all flowers, flowers as far as the eye could see. Our gardens, what do you call it, tourists would come through our gardens, it was so beautiful.

SIGRIST: Was this an older structure that you . . .

CASCIO: Yes.

VASSALLO: Very old, yes. And it overlooked the harbor. It was up on a hill.

SIGRIST: That sounds beautiful.

CASCIO: It was beautiful, breathtaking.

SIGRIST: Have any of you been back to see it in your adult life?

CASCIO: My sister-in-law has.

VASSALLO: My brother and my sister-in-law have been there three or four times.

SIGRIST: Mary, let me ask you. When you were growing up did your parents, or your mother, specifically, did she talk about Malta a lot?

MOLLO: A little bit, about the beauty of Malta, you know, about the flowers, like Dolores said.

SIGRIST: Would you say that's what she missed the most was just the aesthetic beauty of the place?

MOLLO: I think so, and the air quality too.

VASSALLO: Her relatives.

CASCIO: Her relatives. You know, all the relatives were there.

SIGRIST: You mentioned Grandma and Grandpa.

CASCIO: That's right.

SIGRIST: Tell me, what do you remember about Grandma and Grandpa?

CASCIO: They were wonderful people. They were so loving, they were so loving.

SIGRIST: Describe what Grandma looked like.

CASCIO: Grandma had a round face like Mom. She was always dressed in black. And she was sweetness itself. She was all for the children. Everything was for the children. And Grandpa, he was for my older brother. They were together all the time, and they loved each other so much. He was, he had a moustache and he, when he dressed up, he was all dressed up. He would have no shoes on.

VASSALLO: Except for shoes. That's right.

CASCIO: He never had no shoes on. I never remember him with shoes. It just, the memories are all good. It's hard to describe them, but it's all love. We had all love in that house.

SIGRIST: Joe, what do you remember? When you think about your grandparents, is there something that sticks out in your mind about them?

VASSALLO: Nothing, nothing too strong. I just remember being loved by everybody.

CASCIO: Just loved.

SIGRIST: Did they come to America, the grandparents?

CASCIO: No.

MOLLO: No.

SIGRIST: Never. So you don't remember your grandparents.

MOLLO: All I know is that he gave me a little pink coat, a little pink fur coat. It's not real fur, but it was a furrish pink coat when I left Malta.

VASSALLO: Artificial fur.

MOLLO: Artificial, you know. And I had that for a long time. I put it on my dolls later on after I outgrew it, you know, because it was from my grandfather.

SIGRIST: What did that mean to you when you were in America growing up? This coat, it's from my grandfather, what does that mean to you if you've never actually seen?

MOLLO: You know, we had that closeness. I mean, it was my mother's father, you know what I'm saying? And I wasn't going to see him again.

SIGRIST: So she had a father, you know, like you had a father.

MOLLO: And we weren't going to see them again, you know,
because of the distance. So that meant a lot to me.
That was the only thing I had from there.

CASCIO: They had something else. We lived right below the
Caputian monastery, and every evening at sunset one
of the monks would come down and say rosaries with
us. So we would sit on the wall and he taught us to
pray. He used to tell us, "Only pray to God. Shut
everything out around you." So there were always
prayers in the house.

VASSALLO: Right.

CASCIO: Always that religion, and it was beautiful, and
that's what they taught us.

MOLLO: To bless ourselves before we leave the house in the
morning. There was always prayers being said with
our mother. You know, before bedtime we'd all be
around our mother on the bed and we'd be saying
prayers with her, the rosary beads in Maltese.

VASSALLO: Even when we came to this country.

MOLLO: Yeah, always.

SIGRIST: Do any of you still remember any of the prayers in Maltese?

MOLLO: I don't. We used to say them in Maltese, but . . .

CASCIO: Only the prayers for the dead, I remember in Maltese.

SIGRIST: I'd love to get just a little snippet of Maltese on.

CASCIO: (Maltese) No, I can't say it. (Maltese) Amen.
That's the prayer for the dead.

SIGRIST: Can you say anything in Maltese, Joe?

VASSALLO: (Maltese) Amen. That's Glory be to the Father,
Son and the Holy Spirit.

CASCIO: Now I remember it when you say it.

VASSALLO: The language is a mixture of . . .

MOLLO: Arabic.

VASSALLO: Arabic and Italian and a little Spanish.

SIGRIST: Interesting. And I imagine those cultural influences possibly were . . .

VASSALLO: Well, because the island changed hands so many times from the time of the Phoenicians. It's got quite a history.

SIGRIST: Everyone wanted it, of course, because of its strategic position.

CASCIO: That's right. I imagine people settled there, like from France and all the neighboring countries and inter-married, and that's how the language was originated.

SIGRIST: So Dad's going back and forth. Dad's in America, he's in Malta, he's in America.

VASSALLO: I like the way he puts it. Yeah, go ahead.
(Ms. Cascio laughs)

SIGRIST: And you said it was usually in intervals of three years.

CASCIO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me, and I'll ask you again, what did you know about America when you were a kid. I'll start with Dolores. What did it mean to you?

CASCIO: Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Just where my father

is. It didn't mean anything.

SIGRIST: Dad's kind of an absent figure for the most part.

CASCIO: That's right. That's right.

SIGRIST: So it's particularly murky, then.

CASCIO: Yes. It was someplace my mother was bringing me to die, really, because I was supposed to die.

SIGRIST: Because you were not well.

CASCIO: I wasn't well. I had kidney trouble, from the water. So, you see, this is why I'm afraid to go back.

SIGRIST: From the water of . . .

CASCIO: Our water went through stone.

VASSALLO: Lime. The limestone.

CASCIO: Yeah, limestone and sulphur, and I'm allergic to it. I found out when I came to this country.

SIGRIST: Oh. And so you were an unhealthy child.

CASCIO: That's right, that's right.

SIGRIST: When you were in Malta. Joseph, what, did you have

any expectations as to what America would be, or did it mean anything to you?

VASSALLO: To me I liked it because it was altogether different from what we were used to as growing up. It was an experience.

SIGRIST: But before you got here, what did you know about it?

VASSALLO: We didn't know what to expect.

CASCIO: We didn't know anything.

SIGRIST: Can you explain to me a little bit about how your mother went about getting ready to go? How did she tell you kids, "We're leaving now."

CASCIO: She cried a lot. She did a lot of crying.

VASSALLO: She was heartbroken.

CASCIO: Yes, because she's leaving her mother and father and she's leaving her home, the home she lived in all her life. And she didn't know what she was coming into. The language is strange, everything is strange. She didn't know what the future was. And so she did a lot of crying, but we came here with one trunk. How she fit everything in one trunk, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you took?

CASCIO: All our clothes, I mean, as much as she possibly can.
And she took vases and quite a few things, personal things, that she took with her.

SIGRIST: Did you take anything that was yours, an object that you remember?

CASCIO: No. The only objects I got was what I got here in Ellis Island. When we come to that, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: We'll talk about that when we get to Ellis Island. Joe, did you take something with you when you left?

VASSALLO: Yes. One of my uncles had given me a beautiful replica of a boat. And on our way up to Italy we, because we had to go by ferry to Sicily and then take a railroad up to, into Italy. And there I left this boat on the railroad. That is, that is what I seem to remember. And I always loved this boat and it was from a relative, you know.

SIGRIST: And you were probably unbearable after you left.

CASCIO: He was always unbearable. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Mary, other than your little pink coat, do you remember anything that was packed for you that you had later on when you were here?

MOLLO: No, not that I can remember. That little pink coat, we used to say in Maltese, we used to say (Maltese). It don't make too much sense in English, but it's like "Coat made of fur, it falls, but it don't suffer, it don't get hurt." (they laugh) It's artificial.

VASSALLO: Those little backward countries had ways of saying things.

CASCIO: You really remember.

SIGRIST: So Dad didn't come to Malta to bring you back with him. He's here.

CASCIO: He was here, yes.

VASSALLO: He sent for us.

SIGRIST: So you took a ferry to Sicily.

CASCIO: Yes.

SIGRIST: From Sicily you went to Naples?

CASCIO: We took a railroad to Naples, and there we were vaccinated again, double vaccinations.

SIGRIST: More examinations of some sort.

CASCIO: We were both, we were all vaccinated twice. We were vaccinated in Malta, and then they vaccinated us in Italy. And apparently they used a dirty needle on Mom, because her arm swelled up to double the size, infected. And she didn't want to let anybody know, because she thought they wouldn't let us into this country.

SIGRIST: Did the swelling happen while you were still in Naples or after you had boarded the ship?

CASCIO: After we boarded the ship.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the boat, Joe, I'll ask you?

VASSALLO: The Vulcania.

SIGRIST: Can you describe, from an almost six-year-old boy, what it looked like to look at it?

VASSALLO: Gigantic.

CASCIO: Yeah, it was big.

VASSALLO: And, again, it was a new experience, and we had the run of the ship, right. We used to get around a little bit. And I remember the dining room, the main dining room, and the . . .

SIGRIST: What did it look like?

VASSALLO: The main dining room was enormous, and it was tables and chairs, rows of tables and chairs and beautiful chandeliers. And the cups all had napkins rolled up and set in it in a European fashion, and the aroma of coffee was enough to drive you crazy. And even as kids we always drank coffee.

MOLLO: That's what I remembered. The smell of coffee somehow always comes back to me.

SIGRIST: So you do have a vague recollection of this.

MOLLO: Yes, yes. The smell of the coffee that he's talking about.

CASCIO: You see, as we talk he's even giving me memories, because, and you, too. It just seems like you remember when someone talks about it.

SIGRIST: What comes to your mind about the boat?

CASCIO: Oh, the food was so delicious.

SIGRIST: Was there something on the boat that you had never seen before?

CASCIO: Well, we were in third class. You didn't see too much in the third class. And, but my brother, he wouldn't, he always made acquaintances right away. He was very friendly. He got acquainted with all the sailors. He made friends with all of them. And we were always on the first class. He always took me up there to eat. He took me to their movies, everything upstairs. And we used to bring food down to Mom, because Mom was sick in the cabin.

SIGRIST: And her arm was swollen at this point.

CASCIO: Right. Now she's very sick with fever and all, see.

SIGRIST: Oh, your poor mother. Tell me a little bit about Mom on the boat.

CASCIO: She was very, very sick, very sick. And she stayed all the time in the cabin. She never got out. And we did the running around, but she stayed there.

SIGRIST: Did they offer her medical attention on the boat?

CASCIO: She didn't tell them she was sick. She kept it a secret.

VASSALLO: She was afraid she'd be sent back.

CASCIO: So she suffered all by herself.

SIGRIST: Did the arm discolor at all, or . . .

CASCIO: No, just swelled up. It turned red, but really discolored, especially around the vaccination. But we used to get cold towels and put cold towels on her. That's about all we could do.

SIGRIST: Did you, Joe, celebrate your birthday on the boat?

VASSALLO: No, no. My birthday was on the sixteenth, and . . .

SIGRIST: Before you left.

VASSALLO: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you have any kind of special celebration for that birthday that you can remember?

VASSALLO: No. We didn't do, we never did things up too much.

CASCIO: We never celebrated birthdays.

SIGRIST: You were preoccupied anyway.

VASSALLO: We were poor. We had a large family, and things were, especially after we hit this country. As soon as we hit this country the stock market crash followed in September, or October, was it. And from then on things started getting worse.

SIGRIST: Mary, you remember the coffee. Thinking back, as we scan your mind, is there anything else that, a vague impression that you remember from the boat?

MOLLO: No, not really.

CASCIO: She was pretty much with Mom.

MOLLO: And just that smell of the coffee. Sometimes I smell coffee that reminds me of it, you know. Just like sometimes I cut a vegetable, like I cut a potato in half and I smell it, and somehow it brings me back to something I smelled on the other side, you know, on the farm, a vegetable or something. I would bring it . . .

CASCIO: You used to dig up roots and eat them.

MOLLO: And I say to her, "You know, this potato brings back some kind of memory to me." And I was very young,

you know, I was only like a baby.

VASSALLO: When I cut lettuce, it tastes just like fava beans.

CASCIO: That's right, that's right.

MOLLO: Right, exactly.

SIGRIST: How powerful the mind is.

ALL: Yes.

MOLLO: Not too much of anything else, though, you know.

SIGRIST: How long did the trip take?

CASCIO: Let's see now, you know, I don't remember.

VASSALLO: It had to be like three weeks. I believe three weeks.

CASCIO: Two-and-a-half to three weeks. It was over two-and-a-half weeks.

SIGRIST: Are you talking about from the time you left Malta till the time you arrived?

CASCIO: That's right.

SIGRIST: I see. So we're including a couple of

different . . .

CASCIO: Overnight to get to Italy, just overnight. And then part of all the next day to get to Naples, and then we left Naples. It was about two-and-a-half weeks.

SIGRIST: Good. We're going to pause now, and Peter's going to flip over the tapes, and we'll get you into America.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: All right. We're now resuming. Let me ask all of you, is there anything else that sticks out in your mind about the boat? Anything else, being on deck or maybe games of some sort.

CASCIO: I'm going to say it. Somebody's going to kill me, but I'm going to say it. I had kidney trouble, you know, when I came. And I was sleeping on the upper berth, and my brother, my older brother was on the lower berth. And in the middle of the night I had an accident. So naturally it went down to him.
(she laughs) And he ran out into the hall, and he was yelling, "The boat is sinking, the boat is sinking." The thing I wanted to keep secret the

most, all the people came out of their staterooms.
(they laugh) And I had to tell everybody what
happened. (Mr. Sigrist laughs) I don't think I'll
ever forget that the rest of my life.

VASSALLO: I remember it was a very long trip. To a small boy
that was a long trip. And finally when we did arrive
here and we saw the Statue of Liberty, that was the
most beautiful experience.

SIGRIST: What was the date that you arrived on?

VASSALLO: Uh, I don't recall exactly what the date was.

CASCIO: The twenty-ninth of August.

VASSALLO: Yes, that sounds good.

SIGRIST: And it was during the day time?

CASCIO: Yes.

VASSALLO: And it was a beautiful experience.

CASCIO: And the ferry, the ferry that we took, the boat, went
right to the New York pier, and let out the people
that were to get out. The names were being called,
and our name wasn't called. So we were told we had

to stay on the boat. They turned around, put us on a ferry and came back to Staten Island. And we didn't know why.

VASSALLO: To Ellis Island.

CASCIO: To Ellis Island. Did I say Staten Island? (they laugh) It would have been nice.

SIGRIST: Of course, this is your mother's worst fear, isn't it?

CASCIO: The worst, the worst.

VASSALLO: The worst nightmare.

CASCIO: Now, you go, when you see the back of the New York Harbor it's horrible, it's horrible looking. You don't see a beautiful skyline. And that's when this fear struck her. She says, "Why did I do this? Why did I come here?" Coming from a beautiful island, you know, flowers and all. And they brought us back to Staten Island . . .

VASSALLO: Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Ellis Island.

CASCIO: Ellis Island. And then as we got off we would see the grey building, the old part of the building. And when we came in right away they took the two children away, and we didn't know why.

MOLLO: Him and I.

CASCIO: They didn't tell us why.

SIGRIST: Mary and Joe they took away.

MOLLO: Yeah.

CASCIO: The youngest.

MOLLO: We had chicken pox, right?

VASSALLO: No.

CASCIO: No, you had a rash on your face.

VASSALLO: I had a rash on my hand.

CASCIO: It was from the water. You had been swimming with a cousin and you had developed a rash.

MOLLO: I was swimming?

CASCIO: You went swimming. You had the little pond by the bay where the children can swim, it was shallow.

MOLLO: Oh, yeah?

SIGRIST: In Malta.

MOLLO: I don't remember that.

CASCIO: And she got a rash on her face. They both did. And naturally there was a scare of smallpox in those days. So I don't blame them for taking the children away, but we didn't know why. So Mom walked around with her rosaries and crying all that time.

MOLLO: Because she didn't understand English and she couldn't speak English.

SIGRIST: She probably thought it was her fault you were there in the first place.

CASCIO: She thought that they were going to keep her because of her arm. But when they took the children away, it surprised her. She didn't know where they were taking us. You know, so she was really beside herself. She couldn't understand what was going on.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever in later years talk about this experience, or did she just kind of want to forget about it?

CASCIO: She put it behind her, I think.

MOLLO: I hear it more or less from my older brother and sister.

CASCIO: She put it behind her, and when we came to this country we lived on Madison Avenue. She said, we tried to speak Maltese to her, she'd tell us to speak English. Now, she spoke real broken English at this time, and she insisted we speak English. We're in America now. I wish everybody else would do that now, because that's the way you learn, when you're children.

SIGRIST: So she was quite distraught at Ellis Island.

CASCIO: Yes.

MOLLO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What about your dad? Did he come to meet you?

CASCIO: Couldn't. We saw them. We saw them waving, but we couldn't get off the boat. So we couldn't see them. They're in quarantine. We couldn't see them either. So my brother and I were treated royally, my older brother and I. We were given toys. We were given a

paddle with a rubber ball, I remember. And we were given, I was given a doll. It was a little tiny doll, that I had to put back. That I had to put back, but the paddle was given to me. And he had, what was that called? The . . .

VASSALLO: Jai Alai.

CASCIO: No. Jacks.

VASSALLO: Jacks.

CASCIO: Jacks. He was given jacks. They treated us beautifully, though.

SIGRIST: Did you stay with your mom . . .

CASCIO: Yes.

SIGRIST: On the island, while they were off in the hospital?

CASCIO: Yes.

SIGRIST: And can you describe where they kept you with your mother and brother.

CASCIO: I can't remember that. Isn't that funny.

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

CASCIO: I don't remember that. I remember the bath only. I used the showers. I don't remember the room.

SIGRIST: Were you forced to take showers?

CASCIO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what that was like for you?

CASCIO: Well, we had never had showers before in Malta. We only had tub baths. And they gave us, we made our own soap, too. Then they gave us Lifebouy, which smelled delicious to me. It really smelled good.

VASSALLO: It tasted good, too.

CASCIO: It tasted good, too. I had a piece. I used to take a little piece of soap. (she laughs) I'm telling you things I don't even tell my husband.
(she laughs)

SIGRIST: He'll hear the tape later.

CASCIO: And so I can't remember where we stayed. That's gone from me.

SIGRIST: Get back to the showers, though. For instance, do you remember what the procedure was?

CASCIO: Yes. They put us into the shower. Somebody made sure we got in there, and made sure we scrubbed down, and scrubbed down good, hair and all. And then we'd come out, we're given a towel, and that's it.

SIGRIST: Was this an embarrassing thing for people to do?

CASCIO: Yes, because it was all open, everything was out in the open, and we weren't used to that, you see. It was very, very modest.

VASSALLO: We had no privacy.

CASCIO: No. No privacy at all.

SIGRIST: So what do you remember, because you're one of the reasons why you're here in the first place. What do you remember about this experience?

VASSALLO: Well, I remember coming here and being up in the large waiting room, and we spent a lot of time there, until finally we were called. Then we came up to the offices up here where the doctors would check us over and examine us, and we'd go from one room to another and just keep going from one room, it seemed like that's all you did was keep going from one room to the other for examinations, all kinds of

examinations. This one's pulling your ears and looking in your ears, this one's checking your throat and everything.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how your rash was treated?

VASSALLO: No, no. Actually it was in the scalp. She had it in the face, I had it in the scalp. And I just don't remember after that what happened.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you were taken on Ellis Island away from your mom?

VASSALLO: Just a large room with a lot of beds.

SIGRIST: Like a ward of some sort.

VASSALLO: Yeah, a ward, that's it.

CASCIO: All white, all white.

SIGRIST: Do you have any impressions, Mary, of being here?

MOLLO: Of being here on Ellis Island?

SIGRIST: Of being here on Ellis Island, because that must have been pretty traumatic for a little kid to be . . .

MOLLO: No, not really.

VASSALLO: She was in the same room, the same ward, with me, in the next bed.

MOLLO: Yeah. But I don't remember it. I don't remember it. I only go by, you know, what we've been talking about, like from my older brother and my sisters.

SIGRIST: How long were you kept here at Ellis Island?

CASCIO: Two weeks.

SIGRIST: Two weeks. And do you remember where you were fed on Ellis Island?

CASCIO: We went to a large eating room, a large cafeteria. And I remember the food was very good. It was really good food. But when the two came to us after the two weeks, Mom hugged him and hugged him. She didn't want to let you go. Do you remember that? She held your hand, and she wouldn't let you go. She held on tight. She was so happy to see you both. I don't know why. (they laugh) But she was very happy to see you.

SIGRIST: Of course, you know, they would have had interpreters for the more standard European languages, but not Maltese, so she really was . . .

CASCIO: Probably Italian maybe they would have, you know.

SIGRIST: They'd be trying to speak to her in Italian.

VASSALLO: But my father understood several languages, but Mom no. And when she came here she didn't understand signs and there was no interpreters, and she was on her own. And things happened that she couldn't understand why, and naturally she rebelled. And she even struck out after the woman that took us away, because she didn't know whether we were being kidnapped or taken for any reason, and she went after her. And the woman couldn't explain to her what she was doing, and vice versa. So it was a situation.

SIGRIST: And your mother was not allowed contact with your dad during this time?

CASCIO: No. Someone else contacted my father to tell him that we'll come after the two weeks, because he and my uncle met us at the pier.

SIGRIST: Dolores, since you seem to have the best memory about this experience, is there anything else about Ellis Island that you remember? For instance, any kind of, was there a certain person that sticks out in your

mind who was here at that time, maybe a doctor or something like that?

CASCIO: A teacher, the teacher that we had. We went to school. We went to a school room.

SIGRIST: Here?

CASCIO: Yes, on Ellis Island. And the teacher was the sweetest person I ever met. I can't remember the name, but she was the sweetest person, and she treated us so special, my brother and I, both.

SIGRIST: Do you remember some of the other kids, where they came from, or any of that kind of thing?

CASCIO: No, because everybody sort of stuck by themselves. You know, they spoke the language. My brother and I stayed together because we knew our language.

SIGRIST: Everyone was frightened over here.

CASCIO: Yeah. It was a scary situation, really. And you couldn't make friends because you can't speak the language, that's it.

SIGRIST: You said that when Mary and Joe came back, your mother just wouldn't let them go, understandably.

CASCIO: Right. She was thrilled.

SIGRIST: Tell me about getting off the island, seeing your dad.

CASCIO: Well, we hugged, we hugged and, you know, he was glad to see us.

SIGRIST: You met him in New York?

CASCIO: In New York, yes. New York Harbor. And then he took us to our first apartment, which was in a brownstone. It was on the fifth floor. That was 1582 . . .

VASSALLO: 1581. It was a five-story walkup.

SIGRIST: 1581 Madison.

CASCIO: Yes.

MOLLO: Madison Avenue.

CASCIO: And then we moved to 1582.

VASSALLO: Right.

CASCIO: It's a good thing you've got a memory.

SIGRIST: Joe, tell me what it was like to see your dad for the

first time, because he's probably someone you really don't know a whole lot about, actually.

VASSALLO: I really don't remember that well. I remember going to our first home in Manhattan, and we loved it because we had a fire escape. We could look out of the backyard. And we used to have, a musician used to come around the back yard and play the violin, and we used to toss him pennies rolled up in newspaper, and clotheslines criss-crossing like telegraph wires. And it was nice. Once in a while the guy would come around with a monkey, and the monkey would climb up the fire escapes, and we'd give them a penny. And it was nice. We were not too far from Central Park, and at that time we were able to walk to Central Park.

SIGRIST: Did your mother, Joe, let me ask you this question. Did your mother like this apartment?

VASSALLO: No.

SIGRIST: Tell me about your mother and her relationship to this apartment and to New York in general.

VASSALLO: My mother was a captive up there, because once she went up five stories she would never come back down.

She was, she had become heavier, and she developed high blood pressure and all she could do was look out from the window. It was very seldom, it was a very seldom occasion when she'd come down, maybe to take a car ride over to a beach out in Lido Beach or Hechster State Park out on the island. That was the only time she ventured out of the apartment.

MOLLO: That was rare, very rare. To go shopping sometimes.

SIGRIST: Mary, let me ask you, can you kind of summarize what your parents' relationship was like now that they were back together and around each other all the time.

MOLLO: They were always together.

VASSALLO: It was a loving relationship.

MOLLO: Yes, it was a loving relationship. I remember more in Brooklyn their relationship.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you moved to Brooklyn?

MOLLO: I was six.

SIGRIST: Oh, so you were quite young still. Tell me a little

bit about what you remember about going to Brooklyn and their interaction.

MOLLO: Well, in Brooklyn they were always together. He used to have the day off on Monday from work, and on Monday he used to make us a big breakfast and him and Mom, my mother, used to go out into the garden. Both of them were interested in the garden, and they used to take care of the flowers together. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: What job did your dad have at that point?

MOLLO: Well, he was a porter. He was a porter in a building on Madison Avenue, 200 Madison Avenue. And he used to take care of cleaning the brass, and he also did some painting there, you know.

SIGRIST: So when you moved to Brooklyn, he was still commuting back into New York.

MOLLO: In Manhattan. That was, yeah.

SIGRIST: But you would say that once they got back together that there was an emotional closeness.

MOLLO: Very close.

VASSALLO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Even as unhappy as your mother probably was.

MOLLO: He was a churchgoer and so was she.

SIGRIST: Was he sensitive to your mother's unhappiness?

MOLLO: Um, I don't think she let on that she was unhappy. You know, she was happy once we got to Brooklyn. She liked Brooklyn.

VASSALLO: Yes, Brooklyn wasn't bad.

MOLLO: Brooklyn she loved because, you know, it was all country-like. You know, she could walk, and we had the chicken farm there. (she laughs)

VASSALLO: Yeah.

MOLLO: And, you know, she was able to go shopping. The peddlers used to come around. She loved Brooklyn. She was happy.

SIGRIST: So it was more of the life that she was accustomed to.

MOLLO: Yes.

VASSALLO: Closer.

SIGRIST: More rural.

MOLLO: Right.

SIGRIST: You were saying something about the chicken farm, and I want to pick up on this.

VASSALLO: We had chicken coops in the back yard. And it was similar to what she's used to in the old country. You know, trees, flowers and roses.

CASCIO: And my brother hated chicken. He still does to this day, so this is why we're laughing about the chickens.

SIGRIST: Dolores, let me ask you, because you're the oldest. Tell me about being a young woman, you know, old girl, young woman, from Malta, and adjusting to this country. Because it, you're the oldest of the kids, what was the adjustment period like for you?

CASCIO: It wasn't bad, it really wasn't bad. Because when you're young you adjust to anything. And we moved to a neighborhood where there were a lot of Maltese people.

SIGRIST: This is in Brooklyn.

CASCIO: No, in New York, when we moved to Madison Avenue, straight from Ellis Island. And you make friends because they were all Maltese, you know. We were like old friends.

VASSALLO: It was a community.

CASCIO: So it wasn't hard to adjust.

SIGRIST: How did you learn English?

CASCIO: I told you, I read a lot. As soon as I learned to read, that was it. I could speak English.

SIGRIST: But how, did you learn in school?

CASCIO: In school. There was a little Jewish girl that helped me a lot. She became friendly with me, and helped me a lot. Ruthie, remember, Mary?

MOLLO: I remember Ruthie.

CASCIO: And she helped me so much, in so many ways, that I became accustomed to the country real fast. And we went to a predominantly Jewish school. And my mother had made a vow on the other side that if I became, got over my kidney problems she would dress me up as a monk. So there I am going dressed up as a monk to

a Jewish school. (she laughs) So that was an adjustment, let me tell you.

SIGRIST: Oh, my God! (he laughs) That's a lot for a little girl to go through.

CASCIO: And I started to grow taller and I thought, "Oh, how wonderful, I'll grow out of this thing." She had a big hem in it at the bottom, and she had a big hem on the sleeve. And summer and winter I had to wear this heavy brown thing with the rope and the rosaries and a cowl on the back. (she laughs) It was a long time before I outgrew that thing.

SIGRIST: It's amazing anyone wanted to be your friend, actually.

CASCIO: Yeah. Because they made fun of me, so they became friends. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Joe, do you remember any kind of difficult adjustments? You were young enough where it probably went pretty smoothly I should think.

VASSALLO: It did. We went to public school, and I adjusted very fast. I had nice teachers, and I learned fast, and folded right in.

SIGRIST: Did your dad speak English?

VASSALLO: Yes. My dad spoke English. He spoke several languages.

SIGRIST: And you said that, before Dolores said your mother spoke broken English.

CASCIO: Yes.

SIGRIST: How did she learn any English?

VASSALLO: Through us.

CASCIO: She picked it up. We taught her more, because as we come from school, children learn fast. So we taught her, but then she would not accept Maltese any more. She won't talk Maltese. So I remember her always telling us to speak English, which was very, very good. I admire her for that.

VASSALLO: That's how she learned.

SIGRIST: Did she try to Americanize herself in any other ways, for instance in adopting a different hairstyle or a different mode of dress?

VASSALLO: No.

CASCIO: No, no.

SIGRIST: Some outward sign.

CASCIO: No, no.

SIGRIST: Nothing.

CASCIO: Nothing.

SIGRIST: Mary, do you . . .

MOLLO: Well, she dressed, she dressed the way the people dressed in Manhattan at that time, you know.

CASCIO: She didn't change in any way. She didn't change. She didn't accept, she didn't accept a change from Malta to here. She didn't like, she didn't like the change. She didn't accept it.

SIGRIST: Yes. I know you all have to go. We'll wrap up very quickly here. Mary, I have one question for you. Being the youngest and perhaps the most American of all the kids, was it ever embarrassing for you to have immigrant parents, or was it ever something that you were very conscious of that maybe your parents were different than your friends' parents?

MOLLO: No. It never bothered me. It never really, I never gave it a second thought, you know. I adjusted to school. I had a lot of friends. The only thing is that I had gotten lost a couple of times, you know, but that's about all, you know.

CASCIO: We were proud. We were proud of our parents. We really were.

MOLLO: Right. And we were proud to be, you know, Americans. We wanted to speak the language. We wanted to do what American people did, and I think we still are.
(they laugh)

CASCIO: Once in a while I'll put out my flag.

SIGRIST: Well, I know you have to catch a boat, so we're going to have to end now, but I want to say what a pleasure it has been. It's always a pleasure to interview siblings.

CASCIO: Same here.

MOLLO: It was our pleasure.

SIGRIST: I'd be here for hours, probably. Anyway, this is Paul Sigrist signing off with Dolores Cascio, Joseph

Vassallo and Mary Mollo on June 17, 1993.

CASCIO: Thank you very much.

VASSALLO: Thank you.

MOLLO: Thank you so much.