

EI-444

ANTHONY GERARD AQUILINA

BIRTH DATE: JULY 26, 1934

INTERVIEW DATE: FEBRUARY 26, 1994

RUNNING TIME: 1:11:04

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: LAKE WORTH, FLORIDA

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 2/1996

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, 5.2006

MALTA, 1952

RESIDENCE: SLIEMA

AGE 17

NA RESIDENCE: TORONTO, ONT

PASSAGE ON "THE NEA HELLAS" PORT OF EMBARKATION: MARSEILLES

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service.

I'm here today with Anthony Gerald Aquilina, who came from Malta in 1952 when he was seventeen years old. Why don't we start, Mr. Aquilina, with your birth date and where in Malta you were born?

AQUILINA: I was born July 26, 1934 at Sliema, Malta. Sliema is spelled S-L-I-E-M-A.

LEVINE: And did you live in Sliema until you left Malta?

AQUILINA: That's right.

LEVINE: Okay. Tell me about Sliema. Could you describe it, what it was like when you were growing up there?

AQUILINA: Yeah. Sliema is a small, uh, town at the east coast, at the, uh, water shores, you know, in the bay. It's a very nice place. This is why I moved to Florida, because I had only two choices, either go back after four years, or move to Florida. And I love Florida, and so I came here instead of going back to Malta.

LEVINE: Was it a big city when you were growing up, or . . .

.

AQUILINA: Well, the whole island is not big.

LEVINE: Tell me about the island itself.

AQUILINA: Well, the island, it's something like fourteen by twenty-two miles. It's, uh, very hilly and very rocky. Ah, population, I don't think ever exceeded three hundred thousand. So . . .

LEVINE: What did people do in Sliema when you were growing up? What was the kind of industry or work?

AQUILINA: Well, most of the people, most of the industry was the, uh, British. We were under the British for something like a hundred and eight years. And most of the people, like my dad worked at the H.M.

dockyard. Most of the people worked at the H.M. dockyard. My dad was a blacksmith. He repaired ship, makes, not a horseshoe blacksmith, but ship repair blacksmith.

LEVINE: So this dock, dockside is it?

AQUILINA: Dockyard.

LEVINE: What, this was where ships came in and were repaired?

AQUILINA: That's right. All kinds of ships. Uh, through the British, and then, of course, after, what, about twenty-five years or thirty years ago they got their independence. They fought for independence. Now any ships goes in there and, uh, we're better off because before we only get ten cents out of the dollar. Now we do a dollar work we get a dollar's pay.

LEVINE: I see. What was it like living under the British, uh, rule there, when you were growing up?

AQUILINA: It was just like anywhere else where you're only a second-class citizen. For instance, when my dad worked beside the British man, doing the same thing,

a British man would have maybe three, four pounds higher than my dad had. And he was working in his own country, but we were, I call it slavery, really.

LEVINE: And was there, was there then friction between the British and the Maltese?

AQUILINA: Definitely, definitely.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How about, uh, the house you lived in? Can you describe it?

AQUILINA: Yeah. I can describe it very well, because I was in it, uh, a couple of years ago, and it's been refurbished by my nephew.

LEVINE: Can you describe the way it was?

AQUILINA: I tell you, it was a three-story house. Of course, Malta being, uh, warm climate, we had flat roofs, and on the roofs we had, uh, like a playground. The laundry room is on top.

LEVINE: Of the roof?

AQUILINA: On the roof, you know. And, uh, I had raising pigeons up there, I had, uh, rabbits, you know, that we used to use for our consumption. And, of course,

then you come to the second floor, which were the two bedrooms and a bathroom. Then you come, uh, to the ground floor where we had a courtyard and a kitchen, and the kitchen we had our own well. Here I believe they call it (?), a well?

LEVINE: Yeah. I never heard of a well right in the kitchen.

AQUILINA: Yeah. Well, that's where it was.

LEVINE: That was typical?

AQUILINA: Well, those days was. Now, where my brother lives, uh, in the courtyard instead of in the kitchen.

LEVINE: I see. What kind of a stove did your mother have?

AQUILINA: That's a very good question. We had, and I remember helping breaking it, it was one of those coal stoves.

LEVINE: Made out of?

AQUILINA: Uh, stones and, uh, ceramics. But I don't remember it being used. It was just, uh, like a block of cement that we used to put things on it, like a sideboard or something. Then eventually as we grew older it was in our way, and dad and some family and

I, uh, broke it off.

LEVINE: Was it, did it have an oven? Did your mother, like, bake in it?

AQUILINA: Yeah. It was, but I don't remember her using that. That's, uh, before my time. We, incidentally, that house is the third house I lived in, because during the war we lost three houses.

LEVINE: Tell about that.

AQUILINA: We, see, Malta got mostly bombed more than the people that started the war. More than the British, more than the Germans, we were bombed day and night.

LEVINE: Do you remember that, being bombed?

AQUILINA: Definitely I remember. That's why I'm, uh, not well-educated, because when I should have been in school I was dodging bombs in the shelters, and so on and so forth. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: Do you remember the attitudes that you had as someone, you know, as a, Maltese, do you call it?

AQUILINA: Yeah, that's right.

LEVINE: As a Maltese person, do you remember what the attitude was towards the British and towards World War Two, and . . .

AQUILINA: Well, the attitude as a kid is a grown-up's attitude. Whether you're here, you've been influenced. And being such a bad time, the war was going on, then you pick other resentment. I was hungry. I waited for people to go to shelters so I can see what I can get for, help myself to other people's stuff. Uh, so there isn't much good feelings for anything else. As a matter of fact, I came to North America, which is Canada, with a chip on my shoulder, and I had it for a long time.

LEVINE: What was the chip? Could you say what the chip was?

AQUILINA: Well, I didn't care for nobody, you know.

LEVINE: So you felt like you'd been victimized?

AQUILINA: Right, yeah.

LEVINE: Um, so did you have to, like, stay in some kind of shelters for any length of time?

AQUILINA: Right. There were times when we were there, uh, I

would say, exceeding three weeks. See, Malta is as big underneath as it is on top, because Malta is small and we couldn't build bomb shelters like other countries did, of iron and stone and whatever, or cement or whatever it is. So we dug underneath, and my family, we had a room almost just as big as this apartment, and it was done by my aunts, my uncles, my mother, us kids carrying the pieces of stone that they break, you know, they blasted them off and they use big chisels and chipped them off with sledgehammers. But when that was done then we had bunks and, uh, because shelters was more like our home during the war.

LEVINE: So the shelters itself, you had bunks to sleep in and you had . . .

AQUILINA: That's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you put as much food away in them as you could, and all that?

AQUILINA: Well, food, whatever we had, because, like I said, uh, you got to know the history of Malta during the war. Practically everybody was hungry because Malta doesn't produce anything. So we used to have to

wait for ship bringing in stuff. And the Germans and the Italians who were letting the ships coming, and as soon as they hit near the island, they sink it. And there is, uh, some kind of a feast or a religious thing, I don't know, Santa Maria, they call it, an English St. Mary, it's such a big holiday that, uh, one ship escaped and came in, and we were ready to give up, if that ship didn't make it. So even today, fifty years later, still when that day comes, incidentally I was there for a time last time, but since I came to North America I did not keep my, uh, tradition in religious, so when I go there I'm like a dumb stranger.

LEVINE: Were you Catholic?

AQUILINA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Is that your religion?

AQUILINA: Well, I'm Catholic by birth, but I don't observe.

LEVINE: So this, uh, Santa Maria, was this the day that you came in?

AQUILINA: That's right, that's right. So today there's a big holiday, a big feast, that's about seven districts

in this small island, and they make this feast. Of course, they have fireworks for about a week, they have marching bands all over the district, you know.

Which later on, uh, you can see some of the festivities and some of the pictures that I took.

LEVINE: Do you remember the feast and the festivities of the Santa Maria before you left?

AQUILINA: No, no, no, no.

LEVINE: No.

AQUILINA: (he coughs) Excuse me. There was very little thing that I remember of good times.

LEVINE: Is there anything of good times that you do remember?

AQUILINA: Well, good times that I, uh, had good friends and, uh, it was a nice place to live. You, although you were hungry, you couldn't say you were cold and hungry, because it's semi-tropic. That's one thing that was in our favor. If it was a country like it is in Bosnia, not that you're hungry, but you'll freeze to death. Fortunately we were in a warmer climate.

LEVINE: How about school? It was interrupted, but did you get to go to school at all there?

AQUILINA: Yeah. I went, I went to school till 1948. So that means I was fourteen years old when I left school. And then, of course, being the island, and being after the war, there was no jobs. There was this six-foot kid, three hundred pounds, penniless, you know. There isn't many places to go to even misbehave, and, uh, people were immigrating and, uh, I wanted to immigrate, and my dad, being, you know, I'm the boss, he didn't want me to immigrate. So I started the procedure, and I went very far till I had to have police documents. And being a small island, everybody knows you from the island, you know. And when I came to the police to have my application for the passport verified, I remember the policeman grabbed me by the ear. He didn't have far to go. And he dragged me all the way home, and he said, "Look what your son's doing. He's getting all these papers together to leave the country." And my dad went inside, and then, of course, I made it miserable for my mother. I said, "If you guys don't let me go till I'm eighteen, I will leave and

nobody knows where I am. I'm determined I'm gonna leave, and that's it." I used to make it so miserable for my mother, because my mother was a different person, she was the old European type, very, very religious, it's easy to get her all confused, and I was very good at doing that.

LEVINE: Were you the oldest child?

AQUILINA: I'm the oldest, that's right.

LEVINE: What's your mother's name?

AQUILINA: My mother's name is Christina.

LEVINE: And do you know her maiden name?

AQUILINA: Yeah. Gerada.

LEVINE: G-E-R . . .

AQUILINA: A-D-A.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

AQUILINA: Uh, Gaetano [ph].

LEVINE: Gaetano. And, uh, your brothers and sisters, in the order that they came.

AQUILINA: Well, see, we are three that came before the war, which is myself, my sister Tessie and my sister Rita. And then when the war broke, my dad was working at the dockyard in Egypt, not in Egypt, in Tripoli. And then just before the war started, a year or two before, my dad came back, and that's when the twins born, and that's when my youngest brother was born, after the war.

LEVINE: What are the twins' names?

AQUILINA: Uh, Spiridiona [ph], which we call him Perry, and Doris.

LEVINE: And the youngest?

AQUILINA: Alfred.

LEVINE: And (she clears her throat) what else do you remember about your mother when you were growing up?
Uh, you know, that would kind of tell you what kind of a person she was and how she was in relation to you?

AQUILINA: Oh, my mother, it's hard to describe her because she, she was too good for other people but herself.
She was strong as a bull.

LEVINE: What did she do? In other words, on a given day, what kinds of things . . .

AQUILINA: On a given day, she was busy twenty-four hours a day, and don't tell me why, because she gets up at five, maybe earlier, she's got to go to the first mass. Now, we didn't have a fridge at that time. We didn't have TV. So shopping was done daily. So right at the church district there is, like, a market, which comes out every day, people comes with horse and carriage and one sells vegetables, the other sells dry food, the other person sell, uh, things that you make dresses and so on and so forth. So my mother, out of church, stops about an hour, roaming around, and trying to cut prices on whatever it is to make ends meet. And then she comes home, and it's one big commotion after the other, either cleaning, they got to clean the house every day right to the outside step. If you had any brass on the door, they got to polish it.

LEVINE: These are the girls and your mother?

AQUILINA: Well, my mother, because I was the oldest, I was the girl. I was the go-for and do this and look after

that. And when the younger start to fight, I have to be the older one to separate them, one upstairs, one downstairs, and so on and so forth. I couldn't even have my recreation because either my grandmother from upstairs, or . . .

LEVINE: Your grandmother lived with you?

AQUILINA: My grandmother lived with us. So in our house was six kids, Mom and Dad and Grandma. And my grandfather used to, he had the room in between the roofs on top of the house, and that was his space, he had like a couch there. And when he felt like it he came over and, uh . . .

LEVINE: What were their names?

AQUILINA: My, uh, grandfather's name was Joseph and, uh, my grandmother was Carmella.

LEVINE: Now, was this Appolina. This was your father's, or your mother's?

AQUILINA: That's my mother's parents, which they were Gerada.

LEVINE: What do you remember about your grandmother? Any things that you did with her, or ways that she

treated you, or . . .

AQUILINA: My grandmother, you wouldn't believe that she was the mother of my mother for the simple reason that she was shrewd, she was smart, and, uh, you can't, uh, do anything without her finding out. She was, and, uh, she used to insist in walking me to school, uh, I hardly had any time for myself because she was always watching me.

LEVINE: Did you like her?

AQUILINA: Oh, she was, she'd give you, uh, she'd give you the shirt off her back.

LEVINE: How was she, as a woman in Malta at that time? Was she unusual?

AQUILINA: I don't follow you.

LEVINE: In other words, the way that she was. She was so kind of astute and . . .

AQUILINA: No, that's, that's typical, uh, old European people. You know, uh, they're sort of smart. Of course, she couldn't even write her name. She was not educated at all. But her, uh, (a telephone rings) oh, I'm sorry about that.

LEVINE: We'll stop here for a second. (break in tape)
Okay. We're resuming again and, uh, we were talking
about, uh, Malta and . . .

AQUILINA: Family.

LEVINE: Your family. Oh, your grandmother.

AQUILINA: Right.

LEVINE: And, uh, how about your grandfather? Can you say
something about him, what kind of a person?

AQUILINA: Grandfather, you mean my mother's? Well, he was
sort of the bully of the island. He was the
strongest man on the island. And he was, uh, a
firestoker, if you know what I mean, on the ships.
That's where he worked, on the merchant navies, and,
uh, he also worked at the dockyard, and he used to
be the fireman, fire stoker, you know, putting coal
on the fire, in these tugboats and stuff like that.

LEVINE: So would he go off for periods of time on these
ships, or he was doing it when they were in dock?

AQUILINA: Well, if I really want to tell the story of my
grandfather, is my grandfather was, nobody can pull

anything on him. He was womanizing, and so on and so forth. He was the king of the island. When they see him coming, if he's drunk everybody holds their house, because the house might come down. But as far as that goes, he was a gentleman. He was, he'll give you his heart out. But don't you ever double-cross him, because I know what it's all about. I used to be helping him. He used to, he's the one that he used to make the hatches for my, uh, pigeons and rabbits, and a lot of time, you know, kids distract you, and while he's nailing he, the hammer slips and hits his finger, and I start laughing, and he starts whacking me around. This is no laughing matter. And he was that kind of a person. Yet, if he got a dime in his pocket, he'll spend it on you, you know, and he goes around broke. I mean, it's very hard to, we all, my brother and I, we all have that, his system in us, because it's a different altogether from my father. My father was different.

He was, me, I have I alone, and, uh, yet my grandfather, if he's sleeping, he takes you to bed with him. He hugs you, he kiss you, he wants to take you places where my father, all he did was when it was time for him to rest, he'll make you face the

wall in the corner so he can sleep in peace. But my grandfather, my mother's father was a first-class gentleman, as far as I'm concerned.

LEVINE: Do you remember any other places where he took you?

AQUILINA: Oh, yeah. He took me to his ex-girlfriend, to his girlfriend's, and to bars where he used to hang out, because in Malta there is no strict rules about drinking, and so, and that's why there is not so many alcoholics and so many drunks. You know, I mean, uh, as a matter of fact, as soon as I was born my parents always told me the first thing I ever consumed is a teaspoon full of whiskey.

LEVINE: (she laughs) Why?

AQUILINA: Well, my grandfather just opened the bottle of whiskey, and that's the first thing that they sipped out of, well, this is strictly European, and being tough and macho and what have you, you know.

LEVINE: How were the girls treated differently than the boys in this kind of a macho system?

AQUILINA: Well, see, I believe, even today, Malta woman have no rights. You know, but they're treated, well, uh,

in my time, a woman never worked. A woman is, uh, more like baby factories. I mean, our neighbors, they're all, we were a small family at six. I mean, twelve and fifteen and eighteen around me was all over the place.

LEVINE: How about school? Did they go to school with the boys?

AQUILINA: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Except we had classes for girls, and classes for boys.

LEVINE: Was there religion in the school?

AQUILINA: Definitely. Religion is, uh, the number one thing on the island.

LEVINE: Were most people Catholic on the island?

AQUILINA: Ninety-nine point nine percent, the only one who's not Catholic is the foreigners. And there's as many churches as there is banks in North America. For the island, I believe there is some, I read there's something like three hundred churches or something.

LEVINE: For such a small island, yeah. So, um, when you were little growing up, what were your aspirations?

Did you have any idea of what you were gonna do when you grew up?

AQUILINA: No. The only thing is I knew that I had to get away, because there was nothing for me to do, you know. We were poor as poor can be. Never had any toys, never, you know, so, uh . . .

LEVINE: What did you do for playing when you were little?

AQUILINA: Just outside, uh, misbehave or, uh, play ball or something like that, you know.

LEVINE: So when you, when you decided you were going to leave, and then you went to get your papers and the, uh, who was it took you to your father?

AQUILINA: The, uh, the police sergeant, that I needed, just like anywhere else, you've got to have, uh, a police, uh, statement, you know, conduct, we call it. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: You mean, the police had decided that your conduct was . . .

AQUILINA: Right, right.

LEVINE: Good enough so that you . . .

AQUILINA: Right. He's got to get all these documents when you're going to immigrate, you know. And he says, "I know who you are. I know when you were born. You're not eighteen years old. What are you trying to do?" And dragged me to my father, and I'm going to repeat myself for a while to catch up, uh, my father wouldn't let me go, and I made it miserable for my mother because we switched talking around. It was so bad that my mother had no peace, and when my father used to come from work, which he always expected to have dinner on the table as soon as he comes in, mother had nothing ready. "What's happening? Chris, what's happening?" "Sign those papers, let him go. The guy is driving me crazy." That is the reason I came under eighteen, because I insisted that if they don't let me go now, I will leave when I become eighteen and no one knows where I am. I was that kind of determined person. My way, or no way. I was always like that.

LEVINE: You were always like that. You think that was your temperament from the beginning?

AQUILINA: Yeah. I was always like that.

LEVINE: Um, let's see. So how did you team up with the, uh, friends?

AQUILINA: Well, being a small island, and being schoolmates, one guy makes a move, "Oh, I'm going to try to emigrate." "Oh, me, too, me, too." You know, so I'm in the, we were willing to do anything, because I, we always thought that anything would be better than what we have, and fortunately so.

LEVINE: So once you got your papers, then do you remember packing up?

AQUILINA: No. Then, uh, my dad didn't have the money. So I had to go coax him to borrow money from his father, which is my grandfather, my other grandfather. And we borrowed something like ninety pounds, and if you look at the back of my passport, I left the island with six pounds. The other eighty-four pounds I paid for the fare. (he coughs) Excuse me.

LEVINE: So after you finally got your father to say you could you, you got him to borrow money to go.

AQUILINA: Right. Which I paid as soon as I came back, right.

LEVINE: Okay. So then, um, when, let's see. Did you have

any, uh, do you remember the leaving? What was that like?

AQUILINA: Oh, it was a big thing, sure. Uh, my mother, from what she could do, so here she goes, she goes to the grocery store, she tries to get the empty sacks from the coffee, that was my, what my underwear made of. That's what sheets were made of, you know, flour bags. Do I have to tell you more? That's how poor we were.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

AQUILINA: And the coffee bags, the darker ones, those were our curtains, out mats, because the floor is, uh, all ceramic tiles. There is no carpets, you know. Carpets on top of the floor. So then somehow or other she got something, she got me a basin which I believe I still got it, because, oh, you've got to have something to wash your face. You know, the way mothers are. I brought most of the stuff that I had in the suitcase, other than the underwear that she made for me, was useless. And that almost got me in trouble, because when the customs opened my bag, I

even had three lemons in case I get sick to my stomach. And, as you know, you can't bring anything, which we didn't know, and the first thing he took is those three lemons. And I remember the hall had sort of like shelves there, and he grabbed these three lemons and threw them, and he said, "You know you can't . . ." What did I know at that time, you know, that you can't bring any foreign fruits and stuff like that. But other than that everything went okay. But in my suitcase there was nothing, uh, because when I came to Canada and to Ellis Island, I had holes in my shoes, my pants from (?), together I had holes in my crotch between the legs, you know. So the suitcase, which my wife threw out, was made out of plywood, which my grandfather made for me, my good grandfather made for me.

LEVINE: So it was plywood, and it had handles?

AQUILINA: Yeah, it had handles, it just had handles, yeah. See, my grandfather was very practical. He used to make guitars, you know. Other than being the stoker, that's the word used down there, a stoker, stuffing the coal in the fire. He was a good carpenter. He was a good, uh, all around man. You

know, not like me. I can't drive a nail in the wall.

LEVINE: How did your grandfather feel about you leaving?

AQUILINA: Well, my father, my grandfather and my father both were, uh, went abroad, so, uh, they could understand. But, like, my mother went nowhere, and my grandmother went nowhere, and those are the ones that, what the hell you gonna do? What are you up to, you know, and all this. But my father didn't want me to go because he's stubborn, I'm still a boy, you know. It was my father, he was the oldest man in the house, and he made you know that.

LEVINE: How about your grandmother, the one that was so sharp? How did she, did she have an attitude about your leaving?

AQUILINA: Oh, she, she definitely didn't want me to go. And at that time she was sort of a cripple. She had a stroke before I left. Incidentally, it was an argument with dad and her that brought the stroke on.

LEVINE: About your leaving was the argument?

AQUILINA: No, no, it was another affair. We always had bad affairs because, like I said, we were poor, and my grandmother probably would go to her sister and try to borrow money, and my father was the kind of person to say, "I don't care what you do for my kids. I am not obligated. What you do, it's from your, the good of your heart. Don't keep me obligated. My son is running without no shoes. I can't afford it. You want to get him shoes, that's your business. Don't hold me responsible." That's how my father was. That's a very bad situation.

LEVINE: So when you left your house and you went, where did you go to get the ship?

AQUILINA: (he coughs) Excuse me. Uh, well, my brothers, my father's brother was in the taxi business. So what I remember is my, uh, uncle taking me to, uh, the port, and that was, I believe, at Marseille. I don't quite remember.

LEVINE: You remember the name of the ship?

AQUILINA: Yeah, Nea Hellas. That's a Greek ship, and I believe the meaning of Nea Hellas means New World.

LEVINE: And you think it was from Marseilles? Marseilles.

AQUILINA: Left from Marseilles, yeah, Marseilles.

LEVINE: Okay. And did you know that your friends were going to be n that same ship?

AQUILINA: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. My friends were just from the neighborhood, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah. So how many of there were you?

AQUILINA: We were six.

LEVINE: Six. And what do you remember of the voyage?

AQUILINA: Oh, that's a very good thing. The voyage, first of all, on the ship was nothing but women and kids. These were women with their kids going to meet their previous immigrants, so there were very few men. And although it was summer, the seas were rough, and everybody was sick, except me and my buddies. And we made a, I don't know how to describe it, a massacre, or whatever you want to call it, when we go to the dining room, we eat, and we clear all the wine bottles from our table, and we go to the next table. It was just one great, big party, because

everybody couldn't eat, and we were having a ball.

LEVINE: Were you in steerage? Were you sleeping in the hold of the ship, one big bunk?

AQUILINA: Yeah. It was, uh, I believe there were four of us.

LEVINE: In a room.

AQUILINA: In a room.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. So it was a cabin.

AQUILINA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. And anything else about the ship, the accommodations, or what . . .

AQUILINA: Well, to me the ship looked like the Queen Mary, but apparently I find out that it was an old tug. It was a hospital ship during the war, it was a passenger ship. During the war, they converted to a hospital ship, and then they converted back to, not a luxury ship, but for immigrants, you know. Because those days were the immigrants' days. And I believe that ship sunk two trips after I was on it. That's how raggedy it was.

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

AQUILINA: Yeah. I remember, I tell you why I remember. Because you asked me what happened on the boat. It couldn't happen very much, because I had no money. The little money I had, I spent it before we got halfway there. And I was broke on the ship. The money I landed with on land is money that I earned, like I told you, there were a bunch of women, and I earned money on the ship bringing heavy suitcases and trunks from the bottom of the ship for these women up top, and who gave me a quarter, who was generous gave me fifty cents, and that's the money I landed with. I earned my money right on the ship, because the six pounds marked on my passport, that, between buying, incidentally, I had a very, very cheap watch that it conked out on me, I had to throw it out. So I believe I bought a watch, and the rest is cigarettes and, and beer. And by the time I was half the trip, I was broke.

LEVINE: So when you came into the New York Harbor, do you remember seeing . . .

AQUILINA: I remember, like I said, I was hauling these ladies' stuff, and I remember, and I never forget that big statue that we went by.

LEVINE: Did you know what it was?

AQUILINA: No.

LEVINE: Do you remember how it impressed you as a teenager coming?

AQUILINA: Well, uh, the biggest thing I ever seen is when, in the religious festivities in Malta, they bring these religious statues. So I never expected I was going to see a statue that big. And, uh, I was too impressed to be impressed, you know. It was just a huge, big thing, you know.

LEVINE: Were people responding? Did they get up on deck and all that?

AQUILINA: Oh, yeah. Well, ship's whistling, you know, and so forth.

LEVINE: How about Ellis Island? What was your impression of that?

AQUILINA: Ellis Island was, I remember it was nothing but a

great, big hall. And, uh, where they, uh, processed people. It was just like a factory, you know.

That's all I remember of it. And I don't know if I was near the front or the end, but I know I was on the right-hand side at the end. Now, I don't know which end it was, but I was on the, sort of on the left-hand side.

LEVINE: Now, you said that you were going to Canada. Why, why were you choosing to go to Canada instead of the United States?

AQUILINA: I believe I told you, uh, oh, first of all, there was no immigration to the States. I'm sorry to say, the States never did anything for Malta or tried to help Malta, and there was no immigration for the states. So, uh, actually I was not going to Canada. I was going to Australia. But I was playing football, and I sprained my ankle. And being over three hundred pounds, I was about three hundred thirty-six pounds at the time, between my weight and the bad leg, my doctor would not pass me the doctor's test. So I missed the boat I was going. I would eventually end up in Australia. But then when my foot healed, I went back to the immigration, and

I said, "Where is the next ship going?" The next ship going was for Canada, and that was my destination. Then when, uh, I got everything in process and knew everything, like I told you, I had a choice, whether I get off at the east coast of Canada or the states. And being young and being to a few movies and heard of the song New York and all that stuff, so we took New York.

LEVINE: So you, um, came into, came through Ellis Island to New York, and then you were going to Canada?

AQUILINA: Yeah. I believe it was about ten o'clock at night. Something like twelve to fourteen hours I spent. And because we didn't have no money, we just hanged around. But I believe ten o'clock at night we, they took us to the train station. I don't know if it was far north, I don't even remember. They put us on the train, and when we got to Toronto I was met by immigration people, which the first thing they asked me if I need anything. I said, "I need something to eat." I said, "I forgot when I ate last." Because all that time in New York, I didn't eat, and I forgot when I ate last on the ship, so it was a long time before I ate. And I remember they

took us to a restaurant, and I must have ordered about ten sandwiches at that time, that's how hungry I was. And after that was done with, they took us to an office, I believe it was an immigration office, and then they board us on another train, and they took us to a camp, and in Ottawa, Canada, there was a camp, like Guantanamo Bay in Florida, except it was a big tent, and that's where they put the immigrants, and they feed you three square meals, and, uh, they come with trucks and buses and they take you to the main cities to find a job. But this is Canadian story.

LEVINE: Yeah. So where did they take you?

AQUILINA: They took me to this camp. I believe I was there no more than three days. Then they took me Toronto. And, uh, I met this Russian descent person, Mr. Kingsburg, or Kingswell, it was, and he had a summer resort, was Moscoco [ph] Lodge in Moscoco, Ontario. And he gave me a job as a pantryman, and, uh, dishwasher. So they took us over there. I still remember it was room and board and eighty dollars a month. And we stayed there till the end of the season.

LEVINE: Were your friends also working there?

AQUILINA: No. My friends, I was the only one that took that job, but then I met other Maltese that got a job there, too. And, uh, but then when it closed up, six people were heading for Toronto got into a taxi beside the boat ride, and in September, I don't remember the date, September '52, they dropped us in a corner, (?), where it was the unemployment office. And those days were not the days you run around like a hippie with short hair, but me being away on that resort, I had long hair, so we hit the barber shop in between going to the unemployment office, and that same day I got a job in a restaurant for an owner, like he had a franchise of cottage restaurants, it was called, and the name was Benny Windbaum [ph], and I worked with him. I was a blue-eyed boy. And then he wanted to open a restaurant outside of Toronto, a place called Lindsay, and he wanted me to go there and work for him, but me being a new immigrant and like the big city living I said, "No way I'm gonna go in a small town." So then he said, "I have no room for you here." He said, "But my nephew is open a restaurant in the city uptown."

Would you work for them?" And I did. I started like more construction work. In other words, after we build the restaurant there was, you know, cement to clear off. And I started there, and worked dishwasher up to pantryman, soda jerk, and I was making soda sundaes, cutting fries, you know. And, of course, I was ambitious, so every time between washing glasses and had a counter with about eight stools that I used to serve the customers, and it was an open kitchen beside the fountain. So I was more interested in what was going on over there. I wanted to promote myself to being a cook. So as soon as I, whether I was washing the dishes or doing any fountain work, as soon as I had a moment, I'm hanging around the cooks. And then I start finding cooks that they wanted somebody else to do their dirty work. So if there was a chicken to clean, they gave it to me to clean it. If there was French fries to haul, and eventually I became a short order cook and, uh, then I'm not, I don't mind saying I was one of the best short order in Toronto for the simple I was young, fast and good memory. And, uh, then I begin, I guess, too cocky for my own good, that I wanted good pay for my work. So I start

looking around, I switch jobs and this and that. And then for a while I went back on unemployment, because I was getting top money at that time. I was getting sixty-five dollars a week. That's how good I was. But then there was restaurants that they were not willing to pay that. So I stayed on unemployment, and every time unemployment gave me a job, and it was a thirty-five, forty, I turned it down. I said, "I was making sixty-five." So, uh, then one day they called the house, and they told me I, they got a job for me that I cannot turn down. And it was for the railway. I started as a third cook. It was for the Canadian Pacific Railway. And I worked twenty-five years, and I moved from third cook to second cook. I became the dining car chef. And I retired as a, on disability, because I was not old enough. I had my legs all shot up in accidents and this and that, uh, as the terminal chef. I used to pre-cook, because near the end of my working days, trains were not what they used to be. They didn't have chefs and second cooks doing the cooking. They were more like the airplane style. So we had a great, big hall, the Union Station, and underneath there was a big kitchen and,

uh, I was the commissary chef. I used to pre-cook the meals, and then they heat them in the microwave.

LEVINE: Well, how did you meet your wife?

AQUILINA: I met my wife in 1956. She was, she was a new immigrant. She was working as a domestic, uh, with a Jewish family. And, uh, I was working for a Jewish boss, Jack Herman. He was owner of the restaurant. And when her boss, he was one of the tight-fisted person, when he was going, I believe it was New York he was going, he did not want to take the maid with him. So he turned to Jack Herman, he said, "Look, I got a maid here, can you give her a job while I was over here?" In other words, she was trying to cut her wages and somebody pays for it. Meantime, uh, she came to work for Jack, and she looked after the home. And, uh, I believe then, when they came back, she realized that, first of all, she was mistreated, and I mean by that she didn't have the right accommodations that she promised her. When it came to meals, she got second or third grade meals, it was not what was supplied for the family. And then, of course, she liked the restaurant life. And I remember I was, like I told

you, the short order cook upstairs and had the main kitchen downstairs. And I remember going downstairs for something, and I see this person head in the sink, except they're a (?). And I asked one of the cooks downstairs, I said, "Who is that?" They told me, "That's Helga. She's our dishwasher." And that's how I met my wife.

LEVINE: (she laughs) What is Helga's last, maiden name?

AQUILINA: Uh, Barth. She's got a very nice maiden name, short and sweet. Barth, B-A-R-T-H.

LEVINE: And where was she, had she immigrated from?

AQUILINA: Berlin, Germany.

LEVINE: And then did you have children?

AQUILINA: No, we never had any children.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How do you think coming to, well, now, wait. So now you're in the United States. So you stayed working in Canada until you retired.

AQUILINA: Right.

LEVINE: From the railway.

AQUILINA: Right. But, if I may go up a little bit, see, before the train, before the planes took over, I used to come to the States. I used to cross the border. I used to go to Detroit on the day train, or to, uh, Buffalo on the day train. See, actually I didn't like the Transcontinental. And then when the planes took over, came in full strike, then all these locals died out. So I had to go on the mail line. On the mail line was a different story, because locals, I used to go in the morning, come home at night, which I liked. But when you're on the transcontinental, you go for three-and-a-half days, you work around the clock, you know, it's like being on the ship. And then, of course, when you came back, you had five and six days off. But, uh, that's not a life I wanted to lead when I was, uh, twenty-six or so.

LEVINE: So, um, why did you decide to come here after that?

AQUILINA: Well, first of all, I hold my Social Security from when I worked on the trains. I used to have to have Social Security to come across the border. And those days, if I wanted, I could have even had the green card. I didn't want the Social Security. I

didn't want any green card. I didn't want nothing to do. I came to Canada, I liked Canada, I'm going to stay in Canada. As I grew older, I find out that I can't tolerate the cold weather, and then in 1966 I took my first trip to Florida, incidentally, which is here, Lake Worth. And I said, "Oh, there is a heaven on earth besides Malta." So after then I start making plans that by fifty-five or so I'll be planning on retiring, this and that. And my wife always told me, "Go and put your name there." Ah, and I was, I'm always a (?), that I wait till the last minute for everything. But I would have no problem if I listen to my wife. When we start making the idea of some day moving here, incidentally, I bought my first piece of property in 1966 when I came to Florida, right. Then we bought the second one in 1968. So definitely these were the plans. My wife said, "Now, we have property, you know, you've got to have papers to go to the states. Why don't you start the procedure?" She was hundred percent right, I was hundred percent wrong. I was stubborn. I didn't. And then when I went in 1976, I remember going to Toronto American embassy, and I met one of the smartest lady I ever

met, was the consul, and I gave her my story, gave her my papers, because I filled in form, what you have to have and everything. And she told me right there and then, she said, "You're just a little too late. Immigration is not what it used to be. Immigration is strictly under humanitarian reasons."

So I applied, and she insist on putting me on there, I believe they had about sixth categories, and they put me on the sixth category, which is the non-preference. And I keep checking with the embassy, and they keep telling me, "Since '76 we haven't moved one person from this qualification, because we got so many people that walks in there freeloading, that we have no, and me being an immigrant, I know what's immigration's all about. This is why I detest the way the immigration system is in the state." So I fought tooth and nail. I hired a lawyer. It took me twelve years, but I won.

Now, my wife had a better idea. She said, "Tony, Malta's just as nice as Florida. Why don't you go there, and we avoid the aggravation?" Being me, what I am, I said, "No, I'm gonna fight for my right. I want to go to Florida. That's where I'm going." And I fought and I won.

LEVINE: Okay. We're going to stop here, because we're at the end of the tape, and we'll continue with a few last questions.

AQUILINA: If you have time, I have time.

LEVINE: On another tape. Okay. This is the end of the first tape of Tony Aquilina, and we're here in Fort Worth, Florida.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: This is tape two. I'm talking with Anthony Aquilina. We're in Fort Worth, Florida.

AQUILINA: Fort . . . Lake Worth.

LEVINE: Oh, Lake Worth, sorry, Florida. It's February 26th.

AQUILINA: I believe so. I believe it.

LEVINE: (she laughs) 1994. And, uh, we're gonna keep talking. Let me ask you this question. Coming from Malta as you did at seventeen, going to Canada, spending the rest of your work life there, coming now to Florida. How do you think growing up in

Malta and then immigrating effected you as a person, and has influenced you later in your life?

AQUILINA: Well, it, it affected me due to the fact that beside Malta there is better worlds. And what I mean better worlds, is for working and for living. But Malta is not something to run down. It's just not big enough to have jobs for everybody. And people that didn't leave Malta, they would swear by it today, just like I swear by North America, you know. If they working and making decent living, it's a beautiful place to be. But I knew then that I was the oldest of six, so if I was seventeen, uh, my youngest brother, he was maybe four, and my other brother and sister were about seven, and we didn't have a penny anyway. I'm running around penniless, and I had to do something. You know, but if I had a job I probably would never know anything about North America except what I see in the movies. So it affects you that way but, uh, you got to be here to know what it's like, you know. From down there you wouldn't know, but once you're here you say, "Well, this is better." But if you never left, you wouldn't know it.

LEVINE: How about the, um, the fact that, that Malta was under the British rule when you were growing up, and then you came to Canada?

AQUILINA: That's also under the British.

LEVINE: Did your attitude, you said you came with a chip on your shoulder.

AQUILINA: Right.

LEVINE: Did that change?

AQUILINA: No. Not really, no, because, uh, it took me a long time before, uh, I start to improve myself. As a matter of fact, my first episode was a sad episode.

Coming from Malta, I don't know nothing about money and about banks, and the first three hundred dollars that I had was stolen from me, at the restaurant I was working.

LEVINE: You just had it in your pocket?

AQUILINA: I had it in my pocket. And it was around Christmas, and I believe I just finished paying the ninety pounds that my father borrowed for me, so I already paid that, and I was accumulating into helping, was

Christmas coming, into sending some money home.
(sound of a plane landing can be heard on the
tape) But I didn't know how the bank system worked
or nothing till I had this episode. I was working
in a restaurant. I was the soda fountain man, and I
changed. In those days, I had a lot of hair,
beautiful hair. So I used to keep my comb in the
wallet, and I just changed my pants, put my whites,
went upstairs, went to, and I used to comb my hair,
like all young kids were, every two seconds. And I
reached for my comb, it's not there, I run
downstairs. It was a matter of maybe ten minutes
and, uh, the money was gone, and everything. And,
uh, the two people I was working for, Benny Stuckle
and Morrie Cooper, they felt so bad because I was
such a hard worker, you know, young and, uh, had
nothing. And, of course, they brought police to
investigate, and they collected for me from the
workers, plus their donation, and I got forty
dollars back. This is just before Christmas, 1952.
That's all I had in the world, those forty dollars.
Because I had three hundred dollars were lost, were
stolen.

LEVINE: How did you feel about coming here at that time?

AQUILINA: Well, this is to show you that my chip on my shoulder had to stay there for a long time. But I was smart enough to realize as things got better I had to change my attitude, because I met a lot of nice people, and I always appreciate nice people and, uh, I can tell a person where to get off if I don't like him. And, uh, so I said, "I don't need to be running around with a chip on my shoulder. I can say, 'There's a nice person, there's not a nice person,' but I don't have to come out, you know."

LEVINE: Uh, is there anything that you could point to as being something you're very proud of, or very satisfied about that's transpired in your life?

AQUILINA: Well, I'm very proud and satisfied that I met my wife in 1956, the best thing that ever happened to me. Incidentally, she have the same technique and system like my good grandmother have. I always compare her with her. Unfortunately, she never met her. My wife never met my mother and grandmother. She met my grandfather, and she met the rest of the family, but my mother and grandmother. (he

coughs) Excuse me.

LEVINE: When you say "the same technique," what are you thinking about?

AQUILINA: Oh, she's generous, goodhearted, you're not going to put anything over her eyes, you know, unless she wants you to. No, she's smart, and I had a good life with her. It's been thirty-eight years. And if I had to do the same thing, I'll do it again.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How about this phase of your life? How do you feel about this time, retirement time?

AQUILINA: Oh, I'm enjoying the best time of my life, because when I have to do something, I do it. But I could entertain myself real good. Doing nothing is a big job for me.

LEVINE: Yeah. It's hard to do nothing well.

AQUILINA: I hear people talk about boredom, and, you know, I don't know the meaning of being bored. Because I can amuse myself doing nothing, and I can, you know, besides, if there's nothing doing, I go out and, you know.

LEVINE: Do you . . .

AQUILINA: I don't sit there and wait for something to happen.

LEVINE: Do you keep any of the ways or customs or traditions or, are there any things about you that you attribute to having grown up in Malta, any things that you retain, or do you think you've become . . .

AQUILINA: Bad habits.

LEVINE: Bad habits. (she laughs) Yeah?

AQUILINA: Yeah.

LEVINE: You got your good habits since, huh? (she laughs)

AQUILINA: Yeah, well, with direction, from my wife, yeah.

LEVINE: Is there anything else that you'd like to say before we close, about coming here, about being here now, or changes in your life?

AQUILINA: No, no. But I would like to see a country like this to go back to the old system of good immigration, not uninvited people walks in and they expect things, you know, because the real immigrants is the

people that build North America, and the people we're getting in now, it's just they have everything, and it's not enough. They're always asking for me. And if you go through what I've been telling you, how I had to earn my living, and how I had to do things, it's not like the immigration now.

Now people come in here and they get legal aid and food stamps and HRS to look after them and all that stuff, you know, and it's never enough.

LEVINE: Would you have any advice to give an immigrant who came here legally and, you know, wanted to start a new life at this time? Is there any advice you could give based on your experience?

AQUILINA: You couldn't be in a better place. So, uh, it's up to you to use your head, and if you're smart enough, you're bound to go forward.

LEVINE: Okay. That sounds like a good place to stop. I've been speaking with Anthony Aquilina. I'm in Lake Worth, Florida, at Mr. and Mrs. Aquilina's home. It's February 25, 1994. This is Janet Levine signing off for the National Park Service. Thank you.