

SABIA: Valada, Avalino.

SCISSURA: And that's in Italy.

SABIA: That's in Italy. Now, that was a town laying between two big mountains, like in the valley, and it was called Valada. And there I remembered a fountain that we used to get our water from the mountains surrounding. And at the fountain there was where it was what you call the, where they gather around, play cards and different little business, shoemakers and barbers around the area. It was more like a community, a hangout. As I remember at that age, anyway. I've been back three times.

SCISSURA: Have you?

SABIA: And I covered Europe pretty well.

SCISSURA: What was your father's name?

SABIA: Frank. Francesco Antonio, but we called him, he was called Frank.

SCISSURA: And your mother's name?

SABIA: Ermiana.

SCISSURA: A-R-M-E-N-A?

SABIA: E-R-M-I-A-N. Ermiana.

SCISSURA: And what did your father do for a living?

SABIA: He was with the railroad, New Jersey Central.

SCISSURA: No, what was he doing in Italy?

SABIA: Oh, he was a baker. He, my grandfather had the bakery, and then it was my father and his brother, my uncle, that run it. And I was named after my grandfather, and my sister was named after my grandmother, Assunta Sabia. And that was on my father's side, he was a baker. And then on my mother's side my grandfather was a tailor and they had like a little farm out of the village there. We called Barula.

SCISSURA: Okay.

SABIA: And there I visited, oh, some twenty years ago I stopped by with my first wife.

SCISSURA: And did your mother work?

SABIA: No. During the hard times I think she did work for a short while, but Pop was the . . .

SCISSURA: He was the breadwinner.

SABIA: The breadwinner, right.

SCISSURA: What was the town like? Was it a big town, or a small town?

SABIA: No, a small town. And if there was maybe seven or eight hundred people it was a lot.

SCISSURA: And what type of house did you live in?

SABIA: Well, it was all stone, a typical, what you'd say, country-like house there, I remember. And we had just the one baker that my father and my uncle, after my grandfather got old and unable to do any more, they run it. And then Pop had a run with the priest.

SCISSURA: Tell me a little bit about the priest.

SABIA: Now, this priest would get a group of kids, anything from nine or twelve, fifteen years, who had any change, money. And playing cards, my father and his friend, they were about eleven or twelve years old at the time, they jumped the priest, they caught him cheating. He never had any use for priests or for the religion after that. And he had to leave the country and came to America.

SCISSURA: So he came when he was about eleven, to America?

SABIA: No. He came before we, my mother and my sister and

I, we came after my father was, let's see. He come in 19, I was born 1907, and I think he came here back in 1911.

SCISSURA: Okay.

SABIA: And he stayed there until he called us in on . . .

SCISSURA: So he was living here before you came over.

SABIA: Yes, that's right.

SCISSURA: Now, while your father was here, what was your mother doing?

SABIA: Oh, she, just, housewife.

SCISSURA: Right. And your father was sending her money?

SABIA: Yeah.

SCISSURA: And do you remember what sort of things you used to do in the town? Was the church life very important?

SABIA: Well, that was just the one church there, you know, and we attended pretty regular. And then when my father had the run, he had to leave the country, because the priest was going to run him out of town anyway. And we was ostracized too, then, the family. And that made us, in a way, losing the Catholic religion. And when we came here it wasn't long after playing

with the kids in the neighborhood I started to go to their church, Methodist Church, or Mission, that was in our community, and I found it. My mother thought we were going to St. Anthony's Catholic Church, but we used to bring home our lesson leaf, and she had a Bible from my uncle that was her brother who was in World War I, he had gotten the Bible. And we used to bring home the lesson leaf, and she enjoyed sitting. Pop was working nights sometimes on the railroad, and after supper and all that we, she would get us around the table, my sister and I, and read different part of the lesson that we had in Italian. So after we were out of the church we didn't go there because it was, the three weeks previous my aunt saw us coming out of there and told my mother about us coming out of the Protestant Church. That was terrible, you know.

SCISSURA: Now, were you going to school in Italy?

SABIA: Yeah, I went, I think about two years.

SCISSURA: Do you remember what the school was like?

SABIA: Oh, yes. It was strict.

SCISSURA: Really. What do you mean by strict?

SABIA: Well, you didn't answer any, or any jokes or anything like that. And your lessons, you had to bring them in or else

you was punished, and it was really a strict way of, that I remember very well the teacher, Don Pasquale was his name, you know. And he wouldn't hesitate to give you a slap in the face, you know, or anything, if you done something wrong. And it was very disciplined, that I remember, the school. My sister didn't have school in Italy, but I had, I think, two years.

SCISSURA: Was it a big school, or . . .

SABIA: No. No, just a small country . . .

SCISSURA: And there was just one school.

SABIA: Yeah, just one. As I said, it was only, maybe if there was seven hundred it was a lot.

SCISSURA: Right. Now, did any of your grandparents or uncles or aunts live with you in your house, or everybody lived in their own house?

SABIA: No. In Italy? No, we had our own home, my father and mother.

SCISSURA: But did you get together often?

SABIA: Oh, yes. It was family ties there, different than over here.

SCISSURA: Right. Holidays were very important.

SABIA: That's right. And it was more on my mother's side, the family tie, than on my father. On my father's side there was more of the baker for the town, on bread. And my uncle and my father, he was glad to get away. They had to go out and get the wood, the straw and all for the baker furnace.

SCISSURA: So when your father came to America, what happened to the bakery?

SABIA: Well, it was left to my uncle, his brother. It was just the two brothers. And then there was three sisters. And the three sisters, they had come in this country before him, my father. And when we came we went into, with my aunt, until we were able to rent a place.

SCISSURA: Right. Now, was your mother working in the bakery at all?

SABIA: No.

SCISSURA: So the bakery was just . . .

SABIA: No. We were small.

SCISSURA: So you didn't work either.

SABIA: But I remember the way they used to go and get their bread, and how my grandfather with the long, what you call that, to get the bread out.

SCISSURA: Uh-huh. For the oven, right.

SABIA: Wood-burning oven. And I remember the town, and then when I went back some eighteen or maybe twenty years ago, the town's still the same.

SCISSURA: It's still the same, yeah.

SABIA: When I went there it was a saint's holiday, and I used to play a trumpet, and they were darn good musicians playing the la fontana, you know. And the results of which, my wife and I, we just stood and listened to that music. It was good music. And my uncle's daughter was married in America here, but her husband had a trucking firm and her son run this trucking. And they had a nice furnished home and asked the wife and I.

SCISSURA: In the town.

SABIA: In the town. But they were on the outskirts. They had a modern home, and they were pretty well off, in a way.

SCISSURA: So let's go back a little bit to your coming to

America. Now, your father was living here.

SABIA: Yeah.

SCISSURA: And you said he came in 1911.

SABIA: Right. And we came then . . .

SCISSURA: Okay. And then you said he called you and your mother and your sister. And it was 1916.

SABIA: Right.

SCISSURA: So tell me a little bit about what that was like leaving the town and coming to America.

SABIA: Oh, well, it was, with my uncle, he took us to Naples, and from the Port of Naples, I'll never forget the crowd there waving to them, you know, and all. It was quite an experience that I remember. Now, I'd done quite a bit of travelling. While I'm working, I'm retired. It will be twenty-five years in October. I went back to see when, with my first wife. We were married three months short of fifty years, and I was widowed four years. And we took this tour with this friend of mine that I worked with and went to Alaska on the New Amsterdam. Now, we flew out of Kennedy.

SCISSURA: Why don't we talk about, first, about the port in

Naples when you left to come to America.

SABIA: Oh, well, I remember Naples there, all these shopping area, like what we have here, what would you say? Beautiful arts and different things of furniture. Where the heck is my wife? Tess? (Off-mike comment) Come on. You sit down and listen to me, too. Don't you want to know more about me. (he laughs)

SCISSURA: So your uncle took you and your mother and your sister to . . .

SABIA: Yeah. When we came from the other side. They had a small grocery store in an Italian neighborhood in Elizabeth, New Jersey. We were with them, maybe, I don't know, a month or two, and then we finally rented a house.

SCISSURA: Why don't you tell me, first, about what it was like coming over from Italy? Tell me about, tell me about being, going from your town to Naples.

MRS. SABIA: (to her husband) It was, what they want is background when you were a child. They don't want to know about right now, about now. They want to know, like, when you left the town . . .

SABIA: He's asking the questions.

MRS. SABIA: I know. But I'm trying to bring it out to you. How you felt leaving your town, having to come to a new land, what the experiences were on the ship and what hardships you had and how long it took. That's what he wants to know.

SABIA: Well, it took us a good while. I don't know whether it was twenty-seven or thirty-seven days. One of the old ships. It was the S.S. Guglielmo. Now, in leaving the town, well, my uncle arranged to get us by car to Naples. And in Naples there we spent a few days just looking around the town. And at that time they had all these, not malls, but beautiful stores with different artifacts, you know, that you go from one to the other. And we had no trouble, as what we saw when I went there the first time. I had an experience in Naples which, one of my cousins that lived in Rome, her husband was retired from the railroad. We had quite a little between us. And he took us to Naples. From Rome I think it was maybe five or six hour train ride. And when we got into Naples it was the railroad and bus terminal there.

SCISSURA: This is where you left, now, this is in 1916 when you left?

SABIA: Oh, no. This is after . . .

SCISSURA: Tell us about when you left in 1916.

SABIA: Oh, when I left now, I'll tell you.

MRS. SABIA: You have to keep him on track. I know it.

SABIA: You see, when we left.

SCISSURA: Right. You got your mother, it was just your mother . . .

SABIA: Yes. My mother, my sister and I.

SCISSURA: You got on the boat, and . . .

SABIA: We got on the boat, yeah. And on the boat is where I think I slept up on the top, and my sister and, they were on the bottom.

SCISSURA: Right. Now, were there other people, was it one big room where . . .

SABIA: One big room, yeah. It was, and then during the day we would all be on deck, and someone would fall asleep, and what happened to me was my mother was sleeping and my sister and I said, "I wonder what that is that they're drinking. Let's go and get a drink." So I ordered one beer, I didn't, and I asked her for this. I didn't even know it was beer.

SCISSURA: Right.

SABIA: So the results, when I went to, my mother wakes up and sees me with the glass. She said, "That's donkey urine. Throw it out." (he laughs) We had to throw it out.

SCISSURA: You had to throw it out.

SABIA: Yeah.

SCISSURA: You had taken the money from your mother?

SABIA: Yeah. She was asleep, as I said, you know. My sister and I, we took a little change, enough to get one beer.

SCISSURA: Was it a rough voyage, or . . .

SABIA: Well, it was a scary voyage. We sighted one submarine. We all had to get in our lifesavers. And it was a U.S. sub, which they thought it was German. And the results was just that beginning, before the war broke in '16.

SCISSURA: Right. Do you remember what month you left from Italy?

SABIA: I think it was maybe April or May.

SCISSURA: And what else did you do on the boat during the day? What was there to do?

SABIA: Well, there was different activities. Some of the old timers playing their cards and all, out in the sunshine, you know, and on the boat, and just looking.

SCISSURA: Now, was anybody in your family sick on the boat ride?

SABIA: No, none of us. The three of us, none of us got sick.

SCISSURA: Was it a crowded boat?

SABIA: Oh, yes.

SCISSURA: A lot of Italian people, or people from many nationalities?

SABIA: No. It was mostly Italian, I would say. But I don't remember running into any other foreign-speaking, you know, people. Now, at Ellis Island, my father came to meet us.

SCISSURA: So when you got, when the boat landed in New York, let's take it from when the boat gets to New York. Did you all go up to the deck?

SABIA: Oh, yes. We were all on deck.

SCISSURA: Did you see the Statue of Liberty?

SABIA: We were all on deck and we, oh, we saw the Statue of Liberty, and we spotted my father, and my father spotted us on the boat. We were waving. And passing through the inspection of, you know, the physical end of it, we passed without any problem, which we were glad we didn't waste any time, you know. Like some of them were held.

SCISSURA: Right. Okay. So when the boat arrived in the Port of New York, did they take you with another boat to Ellis Island? Do you remember?

SABIA: I don't remember that. I remember . . .

SCISSURA: You got to Ellis Island.

SABIA: On the deck there, and spotting my father waving at us, you know. And I don't know, we didn't get on any other boat. It was right from the ship that we were on.

SCISSURA: So what happened at Ellis Island?

SABIA: Well, we passed through the inspection and our baggage, no problem at all. And then we seen others put on the side, you know, that had some trouble with their eyes or ears, you know, there's some infection.

SCISSURA: But you, your family went to, right through. Was

your father with you at the time, or . . .

SABIA: No. He was downstairs waiting for us, to pick us up.

SCISSURA: So you must have been happy to do that.

SABIA: Sure. It was a nice feeling.

SCISSURA: Did you remember your father? You were young when . . .

SABIA: Oh, yes. Well, I was about eight-and-a-half, something like that. And . . .

SCISSURA: So what else do you remember about Ellis Island itself?

SABIA: Well, going through the building there, it was like corral, people going through with their luggage and all, some of them with bags, you know. And it was a sight I don't . . .

SCISSURA: A lot of people?

SABIA: Yes. It was an awful lot of people.

SCISSURA: Now, did your mother speak any English?

SABIA: Not a word, none of us.

SCISSURA: Were there people there who spoke Italian?

SABIA: No.

SCISSURA: No.

SABIA: There were Italians, yes, speaking Italian, but none of them spoke English. We run into . . .

SCISSURA: Right, right. Okay. Did you eat on Ellis Island or spend any amount of time?

SABIA: No. We didn't spend any time on the island there. We just, as I said, we came through the inspectors, you know, with the baggage we had and physical condition and questions, you know.

SCISSURA: And then they let you pass through.

SABIA: Yeah. We passed through.

SCISSURA: And you met with your father.

SABIA: That's right.

SCISSURA: And where did you, what did you do after that?

SABIA: After that we came right into Elizabeth with my aunt and uncle in Elizabeth.

SCISSURA: Is that your father's . . .

SABIA: On my mother's side.

SCISSURA: Your mother's side.

SABIA: Yeah. See, my father, I don't know how many years after, he called for this brother of my uncle, and the family was six or seven. Let's see, there were four daughters and three sons, seven children, that he and my aunt had to put up the bond for getting the uncle over.

SCISSURA: So the aunt that you went to stay with was your mother's sister?

SABIA: My mother's sister, yeah.

SCISSURA: Okay. And she lived in Elizabeth, you said?

SABIA: Right. And she had a little grocery store.

SCISSURA: Right. And what part, what was it like, now, living here in America?

SABIA: Well, it was a little Italian community there, and it was just a small general store with everything, you know.

SCISSURA: And did she live upstairs from the store?

SABIA: No. It was all on one floor.

SCISSURA: Oh, all on one floor.

SABIA: Yeah. And my mother and my father had the one room and my sister and I had the other. And I don't know if it was a month or two months, Pop finally got a house rented.

SCISSURA: Oh, good.

SABIA: And there was another experience that we had gaslight. And while we were having supper, an uncle on my father's side was having supper with his, and the smoke coming up. The people that were moving downstairs, the mattress caught fire. And my father and uncle, they picked up this mattress and pushed it through the window. It ignited on the gaslight. That was another experience.

SCISSURA: Right. Did you start school when you came here?

SABIA: Oh, yes. Now, in starting school there was a few Italian families in the area, and they would take us to school.

SCISSURA: Right.

SABIA: And my sister had just started the first grade. I got into the second or so, and I advanced to the third. And I was pretty well-up on arithmetic, where my sister didn't have that, you know. And I advanced to the third grade, and it's no

problem going through.

SCISSURA: Was it difficult learning to speak English?

SABIA: No, I didn't have, neither one of I, my sister and I were . . .

SCISSURA: Because you were a child. You were both children.

SABIA: Yeah. In school we had a good teacher, I mean. And then with the neighbors that we'd walk with them to school.

SCISSURA: You would speak English with them.

SABIA: They would help us with different . . .

SCISSURA: Right. And what was, what was your father doing at the time?

SABIA: He was with the railroad. He had all these, well, he started on the tracks. Then he went into the powerhouse as a fireman. From fireman then he became a stationary engineer. And he stuck out forty years, and he had to retire at sixty.

SCISSURA: Okay. And what was your mother doing?

SABIA: She was a housewife.

SCISSURA: A housewife, right. And she didn't have any more

children when she left?

SABIA: Oh, yes. We had another brother, first brother, he passed away as a child. It hit him with pneumonia, and he passed on when he was a couple of years old. And the fellow who was supposed to sponsor him, he passed away, and then his son took the place of the godfather for my brother Rocco. And after he died, well, we still maintain our friendship. They lived in Raritan, and we used to visit them on the different holidays, like.

SCISSURA: Now, were you living in an apartment? You said you moved after two months.

SABIA: No. It was a first floor and a second floor, a two-family house. And there was five rooms, I think we had. And . . .

SCISSURA: Do you remember how much they were paying?

SABIA: (he laughs) Oh, I wouldn't want to say. It was pretty minimal, you know. But we were there a good while, and then this family, which one of the brothers I used to go to school with, he took us into his, you know, home, like. And we had very good, uh, in that street, within the block, there was four other families from the same town.

SCISSURA: Oh, so that you had nice neighbors.

SABIA: Yeah.

SCISSURA: Did your parents learn how to speak English when they came?

SABIA: Well, not too much too, to get by, my father, and my mother, she didn't get to it. But Pop had a little.

SCISSURA: Right. Now, your mother had left her parents back in Italy.

SABIA: Oh, yeah.

SCISSURA: Did they ever come here? Did she ever call for them?

SABIA: No. Just her brother.

SCISSURA: She called for her brother.

SABIA: Yeah. He came here, and he became a citizen, and he lived with us for a while.

SCISSURA: Did your parents both become citizens? And yourself?

SABIA: Oh, yes. I became a citizen through my father, but then at the war years I went and got my own citizenship paper, and my sister, too, so that we had our own citizenship papers.

SCISSURA: Right. So you went through, you, right through grammar school and . . .

SABIA: Oh, yeah. High school, and some college, Newark College of Engineering. And . . .

SCISSURA: Very good. And anything else that you could remember about being an immigrant in the United States at that time?

SABIA: Well, I had learned my lesson. I never had seen any color. And at the fountain we ganged up and this colored fellow pushed me and I said, "You black son-of-a-b," you know. And he hauls off and gives me a punch in the rib. I never forgot that. It was a good lesson. You don't call.

SCISSURA: That's right.

SABIA: And we had a group. I think it was six or eight families across the street a little ways from us, all black. Now, we got along with them without any problem, and never had any street fights or anything. But it's different now. And, of course, we were there I don't know how many years. Then we moved to Nile Street with another family there on the second floor, and in 19, I don't know whether it was '37 or '38, we bought a house, an old house that was then over a hundred years old. It was a priest retreat home. A block away was the Holy

Rosary Church. And Pop and I, we started trying to paint, paper and all that. And I'll never forget in one room there were fourteen or sixteen layers of paper. We kept soaking and soaking that paper till we got then almost to the last, and then the plaster come with the paper, and that was another job we had, taking all the rooms and putting plasterboards up. And we had fireplaces, all marble and all that. And, gee, we thought we had a good house, and it was a well-built house, one of those houses that on the top had these slate shingles. I don't know if it was a French roof. And, uh . . .

SCISSURA: So were your parents glad they had come? I mean, they got a house.

SABIA: Oh, yeah. Well, we were, you know, fell right into the living condition. And Pop was working, and Mom didn't work then.

SCISSURA: So all in all you were glad that you had come.

SABIA: Yeah. Oh, yeah. We had a good start, to say, with school and the friends and the relatives that we had.

SCISSURA: So it was an easy transition from Italy to America.

SABIA: Yeah.

SCISSURA: Well, good. It was nice to have you as, nice for you to give us an interview, and I'm glad we did. We got a lot of good information. Thank you for . . .

SABIA: Well, if you want more, after we came.

SCISSURA: Should we?

SIGRIST (also present): It's up to you.

SCISSURA: If you want to tell us a little more.

SABIA: Well, as I said, we started in school, and I got started with scouting and YMCA. I got involved, and I've been involved ever since, enjoy the National Guards, YMCA. I was pretty active in scouting.

MRS. SABIA: A sixty year Mason.

SABIA: And when I was twenty-two or twenty-three I joined the Masonic order and went through the chairs in 1930.

SCISSURA: Had your parents joined any clubs here, like Italian clubs, things like that?

SABIA: My father belonged to the Sons of Italy and he belonged to the Modern Woodmen. And we had a trip out California and we stopped in Colorado, Pike's Peak. There was

the Modern Woodman home, and we stopped there and had quite a treat there, the games that was out there, and they gave us a dinner and all, the family.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SABIA: It was quite an experience, then, too, that we had. And then I became a Mason and I never knew too much, and it was in the early '30s that we went out there. My mother and father and my brother, Pop had a railroad pass, he could go all over the country. And he, my mother and my brother, we met them in Los Angeles, and we had some relatives there, but in San Francisco is where we met a friend of my father who had this motel and restaurant and when we asked about any opening he said, "Yes." And he asked us if I was Italian, I said, "Yeah." "And where are you from?" And he was from the same town, that he knew my father. Well, my father and mother was in the car. My sister and I and the wife was in, and they're asking about. And it was through him that we met other people from the home town in that area.

SCISSURA: Who were living in San Francisco.

SABIA: Yeah. And we went to visit them, and one of them had a very nice restaurant and a hall for weddings and all that, and

he told us, you know, what their conditions were in Watsonville, Florida where they had a lot of salads and vegetable raising. But they had this big restaurant and hall. So we asked if they had any room for a wedding and all that, and we kidded them until they found out the name, you know, and they were glad to see us, and gave us a nice dinner and all that. And it was through them that we met two other couples. And then, in return, every year they would go to Italy and they would stop and visit us before they would leave.

SCISSURA: And now you said you've also been back to Italy.

SABIA: I've been back three times.

SCISSURA: And visited the town.

SABIA: The town, yeah.

SCISSURA: The same? Is it pretty much the same?

SABIA: Yes, only at the time I was there they had just had one cemetery, and there was just one road going into it. When I was there the last time they had a road all around the cemetery to drive on, and there was this fence and all. But what I enjoyed there was the band, the la fontana, you know, that I remember. And that music sort of struck to me that I wanted to play. And I started playing the trumpet, and I appreciated that

when I heard that music, you know. Well, I played with several bands too. It was when we had the saints' holidays I didn't go to church but I would play with the band and would get maybe a couple of dollars or five dollars for a day playing. And I would turn it into my mother, you know. And then my teacher said to my father, "You'd better get him a better horn. He's doing very good." Pop takes me to the Howitzer Music House in New York and looking at the trumpets. This one trumpet hit me, my eye, all gold-plated and nice gold on it. "This is what I like, Pop." I never realized what the price was. But anyway, it was a hundred and sixty-five dollars for that trumpet, and I'm talking about back in the '20s. And, of course, I didn't realize, and I said to Pop, "I didn't think it was that much money, Pop. I don't want it." He said, "No. You made the money, and you're going to have it." You know, no problem.

SCISSURA: So you bought it.

SABIA: Yeah. And I had a lot of fun with it.

SCISSURA: Now, when you went back to Italy were you glad to be back there?

SABIA: Oh, yes. But I'll tell you, there wasn't much of a change in the way of living there. Some of them had to still go to la fontana to get their barrel of water, you know. Some had

water.

SCISSURA: So all-in-all you're glad that your family came here.

SABIA: Sure.

SCISSURA: Well, I thank you again, and it was wonderful having you, and I think we'll end it off here. This is Carlo Scissura for the National Park Service.