

EI-461

NAZARETH DiGIACINTO

BIRTH DATE: FEBRUARY 7, 1909

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PhD

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ITALY, 1920

AGE 11

NJ

PASSAGE ON "THE PRESIDENT WILSON"

RESIDENCE: ARAITA

US RESIDENCE: JERSEY CITY,

PORT OF EMBARKATION: NAPLES

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mr. DiGiacinto is the nephew of Oreste DiGiacinto, Interview EI-760. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 12/18/1998.

LEVINE: Today is April 19, 1994, and I'm here today with Nazareth DiGiacinto, who came from Italy in 1920 when he was eleven years old. Mr. DiGiacinto is now eighty-five years old, and we're here in the Oral History Studio at Ellis Island. I want to say, welcome, it's a pleasure. I'm looking forward to what you remember, which seems to be a great deal. ( she laughs )

DiGIACINTO: Thank you very much.

LEVINE: Okay. Let's start at the beginning. Give your birth date, and the town in Italy where you were born.

DiGIACINTO: Well, my name is Nazareth DiGiacinto, as you already know. I was born on February 7, 1909, in Arsita, in Italy.

LEVINE: Could you spell Arsita?

DiGIACINTO: A-R-S-I-T-A, the providence of Abruzzi.

LEVINE: Do you, did you live in Arsita up until the time that you came to America?

DiGIACINTO: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay. What do you remember about the town?

DiGIACINTO: Well, it was a small village and, uh, you don't remember much because we, we lived out in the country, and the only time we went to town, maybe once a week, once every couple of weeks, but it was about, I would say, it was about four miles from where we lived, between three and four miles, roughly. And, of course, then, that's where we went to school.

LEVINE: Oh, so how did you get to school?

DiGIACINTO: A nice pair of legs. ( he laughs ) We walked to school and, uh, that was it. But, uh, I went to school till I was about, well, till I came into this country. I started about six or seven years old, and I went to school about three or four years in that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Tell me, um, what did people do in the town of Arsita?

DiGIACINTO: Arsita. Well, it's like any other small villages. I mean, people, it wasn't, it wasn't too big, you know? It was such a big place. We had a church, and we had a couple of canteens, which we didn't see too often because, like I say, we never got there. And, uh, that's it. I mean, my grandparents, they, they had a little place, maybe a couple of acres, two or three acres, and they used to raise anything they, anything they, uh, they used that was, what they raised in the summer was what they ate in the winter.

LEVINE: Oh. Did they have livestock as well as growing . . .

DiGIACINTO: Well, like I say, my grandparents was very poor, and they didn't have an enormous amount of livestock. Oh, they had, maybe, chickens. They used to, maybe they used to, once in a while they raised a pig, and to have that, maybe, for the year, at the end of the year, in autumn, they killed them, and then they preserved the meat and, uh, hang the meat in the kitchen there and smoke it and whatever you done, and, and about three or four times a year you had a piece of meat to eat.

LEVINE: Was this your mother's parents or your father's?

DiGIACINTO: No, it was my father's parents, because in those days when I got married the woman went with the husband. If you had six girls and they married, they each went to their husband's home. They lived together. There's no such thing. And, uh, that was it. That was the custom in those days.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

DiGIACINTO: John.

LEVINE: And his, do you remember your grandmother or grandfather's names?

DiGIACINTO: Yes. Grandfather's name was Joseph, and my grandmother's name was, uh, Francesca.

LEVINE: Do you, can you remember them, what they looked like, how they were with you?

DiGIACINTO: Well, I had, like I say, I mean, it's a long, long time ago but, uh, I mean, we came to this country, as I say, at eleven years old, and I never saw them any more.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember, like, when you think about them, are there any pictures that you have in your mind of, of either times you spent with them, or . . .

DiGIACINTO: Yes, I mean, like, uh, I remember my grandmother and, uh, of course, she was, she was home a little bit more than, uh, my grandfather, he, of course, my grandfather was on a little field he had there from morning, early morning to late at night and, uh, but my grandmother, you know, she'd have a walnut in her pocket, and she'll call me over and she'll give me a walnut, and things like that, you know?

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did she ever tell you stories?

DiGIACINTO: Well, I don't think they, I don't think there was too much storytelling in those days, you know?

LEVINE: Now, uh, did you have sisters and brothers?

DiGIACINTO: Well, I had one brother in Italy and, uh, my sisters, which I have three, but they were born after they, after we came into this country.

LEVINE: What was your brother's name, your brother who was born in Italy?

DiGIACINTO: Valentine.

LEVINE: And, and was he older than you?

DiGIACINTO: No, he was younger. He was four-and-a-half years younger than me. But he's deceased a couple of years now. He died.

LEVINE: I see. And how about your mother? What was her name?

DiGIACINTO: Angelina.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

DiGIACINTO: Panelli. P-A-N-E-L-L-I.

LEVINE: And did you have, did you ever see her mother and father?

DiGIACINTO: I remember her father, but her mother I don't remember, because she died before, before I was born.

LEVINE: What do you remember about her father?

DiGIACINTO: He was a short man, a typical Italian man, short.

LEVINE: Yeah?

DiGIACINTO: And, uh, but he died when I was very young. I mean, I might have been maybe five, four or five years old, six years old, when he died, and I don't remember too much about him.

LEVINE: Do you remember his first name?

DiGIACINTO: No, I'm sorry about that. I don't remember his first name.

LEVINE: Yeah. Um, now, what kind of a woman was your mother? How would you describe your mother from the time when you were, up to eleven years old,

when you were living over in Italy?

DiGIACINTO: Well, like I say, the custom is that you live with your in-laws when you get married out there, you lived with your in-laws. And if you have children, you stay with the in-laws, and you raise it. And you had respect for your grandparents. You had some respect for your mother. You had respect for your father but, like I say, my father, I didn't see too much until I came into this country.

LEVINE: Tell me about your father and when he came here and . . .

DiGIACINTO: The first time my father came here was in 1905. Because, uh, he wanted to get out of the, he knew there was nothing in Italy for him, you know? And he wanted to make, in those days everybody tried to come to America to try to make a living. So he came here for a couple of years. He stayed here a couple of years, and then he went back. He went back, and he joined the Italian army. He was in the army for three years. He was discharged, and, uh, they got married. He married my mother. He married my mother, and he left my mother pregnant

with me, and he came back to this country. He stayed in this country another, well, I would say maybe five or six years or whatever, four or five years or something like that, and, uh, then he came back. I was already born, because my mother was eight months pregnant when he left her, see? And, uh, he was in, he was in Italy, and he stayed in Italy for maybe a year or so, something like that.

Of course, these things was told to me later on. I mean, I don't remember that, that far behind. And, uh, let's see now. Then he was pregnant, my mother was pregnant with my brother, and he was there, my father stayed there till my brother was born, and he was about nine months, my brother was about nine months old when he left again to come back to Italy, to America.

LEVINE: So you were about five years old by then?

DiGIACINTO: Yeah. By then I was about five years old.

LEVINE: Do you remember your father?

DiGIACINTO: Yes.

LEVINE: In Italy, before he came back here?

DiGIACINTO: Yes. I distinctly remember, as if like it was yesterday.

LEVINE: Really. What do you remember about him, then?

DiGIACINTO: Well, I remember he was a, I don't know, you know, like an alert young man, and he came home and he said, one day, because in those days on the other side, in the old country, we didn't have anything to make sandwiches with or anything, but anything we ate was, like, maybe potatoes for breakfast or whatever, onions, and an omelette, or something like that. And we were eating potatoes, fried potatoes. And he said to my mother, he says, "Why don't you make a sandwich for him, for the boy?" And I said, "Pa," I said, well, of course, this was in Italian, you know. I says, "This is not meat that you can make sandwiches with. We don't eat sandwiches here. We have nothing to put in sandwiches here." That I remember just like it was yesterday, see? And, uh, after my brother was born, then he came back here and he stayed here. He saved some money. And then, right away, before, while he was, he come back here, World War One broke out. Well, then he, he stayed here, see, he

didn't come back again, until the war was over.

LEVINE: Do you remember those war years . . .

DiGIACINTO: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: . . . when he was over there. What do you remember about those years?

DiGIACINTO: Well, I remember that, uh, we used to hear, from a distance we used to hear bombs going off, you know. We were, we were nowhere near where they were fighting, but we did hear bombs going off. We would be on the fields there. Of course, I used to go to my grandfather and, uh, work a little bit and make believe I was a big man, you know. I was only about six, seven years old, eight years old, whatever.

LEVINE: What kind of work were you . . .

DiGIACINTO: Well, you dig. You work the ground. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: I see, uh-huh. Uh-huh.

DiGIACINTO: You work the ground, you know. And, and we used to hear bombs go off. And it was, it was shocking, it

was terrible. I mean, but, of course, we didn't have, uh, the knowledge or know-how what's, just like you have today of everything around the world, you know? All you did was maybe you heard, or somebody said this, somebody said that, you know. We had no newspapers to read or anything like that.

LEVINE: Did you have radios?

DiGIACINTO: Radios? Huh, my God. Forget about radios. We didn't ever even have radios when we came in this country.

LEVINE: So, uh, so where did people socialize in town? Where did they get together?

DiGIACINTO: Well, I tell you. They got together, at harvest time they used to get, like, neighbors helped neighbors. They'd come to your house, they'd harvest, well, corn, wheat, whatever, whatever. And after they'd done their work, at night time they used to have a little dance with the accordion, and women dance, sing, young fellows and women, and that was the recreation. Now, you had no recreation what you have today, as recreation is known today. Forget about it.

LEVINE: Did anybody in your family play an instrument or sing, or?

DiGIACINTO: No, because my grandfather, he didn't play any instrument. But, of course, there was neighbors, you know, they used to, they used to have an accordion, and they used to play. Now, like I say, when women, most women, most women worked in the, in the (?) fields. And they'd go in, like, they'd start at sunrise and they'd quit at sunset, and then some. And on the way home the women would start singing, and from a distance you could hear them.

LEVINE: I bet that's a fond memory.

DiGIACINTO: Which brings back memories. ( he is moved )

LEVINE: So your mother would be among those women walking . . .

DiGIACINTO: Occasionally, yeah. She would be there. I mean, she worked on the fields, too. It used to be, like, maybe, one woman stay home and cook, and the other women work on the fields. And then they'd bring lunch in the afternoon. They'd cook and then

bring lunch to the people working. And at nighttime they used to eat, then they went home. Washed their face, ate, say the rosary at night, and go to bed. And get up in the morning with the birds or the rooster. That was it.

LEVINE: What did the town look like? Do you remember?

DiGIACINTO: Well, I can't tell you, I'll tell you too much about the town. I know, it was like, a little, like I say, a little town. I had like a little main street, and up on, up on the hill was a church, and a holy day, holy days they used to have processions, and you had a couple of bakers. Of course, we, we didn't patronize those people, those places, because we, they baked, our people baked their own bread and things like that, you know?

LEVINE: Do you remember any dishes that, uh, your mother made that were particularly good, that you remember?

DiGIACINTO: Well, we still, I still make them now. I cook myself now because I have no wife, so I cook my own, I do my own cooking.

LEVINE: What do you cook that you remember from, from when you were little?

DiGIACINTO: ( he laughs ) Well, like I say, lentils, beans, pasta fagiole, if you know what that means. And, uh, like, uh, today, today we know such a thing as lasagna, but, uh, in those days we knew nothing about lasagna, because, number one, you wouldn't have the ingredients to make it, and number two they didn't have any. It was mostly vegetables. Meat, we got maybe two, three times a year. And that was it.

LEVINE: Did you have, like, cows? Did you have milk, cheese?

DiGIACINTO: No, no, no. We had no milk. But, uh, we used to have a couple of nanny goats. And they used to make cheese with the milk, which you used on your macaroni and your spaghettis and things like that. Like I say, anything you had, you raised. If a doctor came to visit you, you paid him off with a chicken. And that's it.

LEVINE: Do you remember medical care at that time, like if you got sick, what did, what was the usual

treatment?

DiGIACINTO: Well, you call a doctor. You call a doctor, and if you . . .

LEVINE: Was the doctor in your town?

DiGIACINTO: Well, there was a doctor in town. And, uh, if he couldn't come, then I remember one time I was sick.

I was quite sick when I was young, with strep throats and different things like that, which I found out later. And, uh, I couldn't walk, so they took me on a donkey, they took me to town. And you see the doctor, and then you go home, and you go to bed.

LEVINE: Did, were there any folk, folk remedies that people used that were not through a doctor but were, um, you know . . .

DiGIACINTO: Well, yes, yes, there would be, like, you gargle with salt, you gargle with vinegar, or, these home remedies. But, uh, when the home remedies didn't work and the kid was half dead, then you went to the doctor. ( they laugh ) That's the way, that's the way it was.

LEVINE: How about religion? Um, were you . . .

DiGIACINTO: We were Catholic.

LEVINE: Were your family religious?

DiGIACINTO: Yes, my family was Catholic, and we were religious, up until today we still go to, to church, and we still keep our religion up.

LEVINE: Do you remember any observances of religious days, uh, in Italy, that were different than the way things are done here?

DiGIACINTO: Well, like St. Rocco, they would have processions, and the Immaculate Conception and different things like that, they would have processions.

LEVINE: What would the procession consist of, like what would . . .

DiGIACINTO: Well, they have a, they march a saint, like they do here, you know, they march a saint down on the main street and into church, and then you went to church and you prayed, and that's it.

LEVINE: And were there market days, do you remember market days?

DiGIACINTO: Uh, market days, there wasn't, there wasn't market days. There might have been, maybe, for some people that had a lot of stuff that they could sell properly. But, uh, there wasn't, as I say, my people didn't, my grandfather, he didn't have too much. He just had about enough to exist on his own, and he couldn't. I remember when I was a, when I was a young boy, like I say, a young boy, my grandfather used to go in the forest and make a bundle of wood. And I, oh, I would, I used to look forward to going with him, that I would, uh, he'd make a little bundle for me, and we'd go home, and maybe a certain day, I don't know, I don't remember what day it would be, but we'd go to the market, and we'd sell it. So he got maybe a couple of, a couple of pennies. He was, no dollars or lires or anything like that. It was just a couple of pennies you got. Well, it made you feel like you was doing something, you know?

LEVINE: Do you remember anything that your grandfather or your mother tried to teach you, uh, in other words, ideas that, or attitudes that they thought were important for you to have, to live by, or values?

DiGIACINTO: Yes. Respect, and obedience. ( he is moved )

LEVINE: Um, so you were respectful of your elders. That was important?

DiGIACINTO: That's right.

LEVINE: And how did you show it? What were the ways that you showed that you were being respectful?

DiGIACINTO: Well, let's see. How can I put that now? An older man, you never addressed him, you always addressed him as uncle.

LEVINE: Even if he was unrelated.

DiGIACINTO: He was unrelated, uncle. And if he was, uh, your grandfather, you say, "Nonon." Grandmother, you say, "Nonon," too.

LEVINE: Nonon, too?

DiGIACINTO: ( he laughs ) Yeah. And, uh, and if you done anything, you ask forgiveness?

LEVINE: Of whom?

DiGIACINTO: Of the, whoever you, uh, offended. I tell you, we,

as far as I can remember, we were brought up, we had some respect.

LEVINE: Were you a good little boy, or were you a . . .

DiGIACINTO: Well, I guess I was really, I couldn't do anything bad, because I was all by myself in Italy. I mean, I had a, I had, uh, a couple of, well, uh, relatives. I mean, I don't know if they were nieces, whatever they were, but, you know, that way you sometimes used to go to school together. So one day we decided we wouldn't go to school. We stopped at a mill. At that time there was a water mill, it was a water mill. And they had, they had, like, a little lake up ahead, where they used the water for power to turn the mill, see? And the mill was the, everybody, everybody went there to have their wheat ground, their corn, or whatever, you know. So we decided to go swimming. And, uh, so when it was time to go home, we figured we'd go home. I got home, my mother said to me, "Did you go to school today?" I said, "Yeah." Pow! I got it across the face, you know? I said to myself, "What happened here?" I didn't mention it. She said, "Did you go to school today?" I said, "Yes."

Boom, on the other side. She says, "You were swimming down at the mill." The postman, who used to walk from the village, he used to go and deliver mail. He saw us, he said to the, he said to my mother, he says, "Your son was down there with a couple of other kids. Your son was down there swimming." That was the first and last time I went, I played hookey.

LEVINE: Was your mother strict with you?

DiGIACINTO: Yes. We had, they had to be, because when you lived with your, when you lived with your, uh, your grandparents, you know, after all, she's a stranger, and she has to be under the wing, too. I remember one incident, I don't know if it has any bearing on it, but I remember one incident where we were having supper. I don't know, I don't know what we were eating, it was something that I must have liked, and, of course, you get your share, you know? And you went according to size. And, uh, I said to my mother, I says, "Ma, I don't want it. It's too small." My mother says, "You better eat it." "No, I don't want to eat." "You better eat." I says, "No, I don't want. I don't want to eat."

We were all finished eating, clean the table, that's it. So on the way up to, because we slept upstairs, on the way up I said to my mother, I says, "Ma, I'm hungry." She says, "My dear boy, there's nothing I can do." Maybe it almost killed her, but I had to go to bed hungry.

LEVINE: So how did your mother get along with your father's parents?

DiGIACINTO: Well, you have to get along. I mean, they got along. You have to get along, but, like I say, it's not your life. You have to live the life of the household, see? You have to live the life of your household.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

DiGIACINTO: It's a family. It's not an individual. So, that's it.

LEVINE: Did you have chores you did?

DiGIACINTO: Pardon?

LEVINE: Did you have chores to do around the house?

DiGIACINTO: Well, we had certain things like, uh, maybe, say,

well, look, they done this just to teach you. I mean, not that it amounted to anything, but just to teach you. Say, well, look, this piece of ground, it's up to you to cultivate. And, uh, of course, you cultivate, what can a six, seven-year-old kid cultivate. ( he laughs ) But things like that, you know.

LEVINE: Okay. I think we'll pause here and turn the tape over, then we'll continue about coming to America.

DiGIACINTO: All right.

LEVINE: Okay.

DiGIACINTO: Okay.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Okay, we're starting on Side B, and I'm talking with Nazareth DiGiacinto. Let's talk about, now, how it was decided that you'd come to this country.

DiGIACINTO: Well, like I said before, my father came back here after my brother was born, and he was here about four years, four or five years, whatever. And then

he, after the war, he saved, he saved enough money, well, he saved enough money. I mean, when he came here he was working ten hours a day, ten cents an hour on the railroad. Ten hours a day, you got a dollar a day.

LEVINE: Where was he?

DiGIACINTO: In Jersey City here. No, I think, I think, when he first came back, I think he was in Pennsylvania. But, uh . . .

LEVINE: Was he laying ties? Is that what he was doing on the road?

DiGIACINTO: Yeah, yeah. You know, laying rails and ties, you know. And, uh, I don't know how long he was in Pennsylvania, but he was in Pennsylvania for a short while, because when he, I think when he came back he went to Pennsylvania, which he had some friends of his or so, or whatever. But then he decided to come, and he settled here in Jersey City. And, uh, like I say, he was working ten hours a day, ten cents a day, I mean, ten cents an hour. Now, in those days, like I say, I mean, ten cents an hour was nothing, on today's standards.

But ten cents an hour, I mean, a dollar a day, he was able to just about eat. You had no luxuries, you had no shows, you had no plays, you had no cars, you had no radio, you had no television. You grew your own, you grew your own little patch of, see, because, when he worked on the railroad for, I don't know how long, but when he worked on the railroad he used to have a shack. So many guys lived in this particular shack, free of rent, see?

And he used to have a garden on the outside, and then he used to raise whatever they, and they, they used to eat with that. And he was able to save a few dollars. So after the war he sent for us. Now, which was, I don't know how much problem it was, but it was a problem in those days because in those days it's not what it is today. You had a certain amount of people coming in every year from different countries, and you had to have, number one, you had to be in good health, number two, you had to have somebody that when you came here they was responsible for you. So my father was saving up the money to bring us into this country, and, like I say, we left on about the first week of January, 1920. We got here twenty, I think it was

the twenty-eighth of January.

LEVINE: Do you remember what your mother packed when you came?

DiGIACINTO: Oh, no. I don't, I don't think she had much to pack anyhow. Her clothes on her back, I guess. I mean, she might have had something else, but I don't remember. I mean, that I wouldn't remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember leaving, leaving your town of Arsita, and do you remember the actual departure?

DiGIACINTO: Oh, yes, yes.

LEVINE: What was that like for you?

DiGIACINTO: My grandfather . . . ( he is moved ) Excuse me, please, because . . .

LEVINE: That's okay.

DiGIACINTO: My grandfather came with us to Naples, and it almost killed him to see us go. ( he is moved )

LEVINE: How did you go to Naples? Did you go by train?

DiGIACINTO: Well, we went by train. He said to my mother, he said, "I lost three sons." Because he had three

sons that was in this country here. I never felt as bad.

LEVINE: Were you very, you were very close to your grandfather?

DiGIACINTO: Oh, yes, yes. Like I say, my grandfather didn't have much. ( he blows his nose ) He didn't have much but, uh, whatever he had was ours.

LEVINE: Do you feel as though you take after your grandfather in any ways?

DiGIACINTO: Well, I don't know. As far as, I would say respect, I mean, we all, we were brought up under, on respect. And I think we still carry it, the family still carries it. But I can't remember, you know, anything else now.

LEVINE: Do you remember the name of the ship that you came on?

DiGIACINTO: The President Wilson. Of course, this I found out later on from my dad, because at that time I didn't know anything. I didn't know President Wilson from the Statue of Liberty.

LEVINE: ( she laughs ) Do you remember the accommodations on the ship?

DiGIACINTO: Oh, yeah. We had first class, nice rooms, beautiful. We were in steerage. I mean, one room there was about twenty beds. Everybody laying in one, in one, like the women lay here, I mean, was in this section here, and the men was on the other side of the section. Of course, it was partitioned off, but, uh . . .

LEVINE: So you weren't with your mother then?

DiGIACINTO: Yeah, I was with my mother. We had a little bunk with my mother. And . . . ( he blows his nose ) When, we were full of hell, me and my brother, because we were, I mean, my brother was, I was eleven, my brother was seven. So we used to go up on the deck, you know, up on the ship. And my mother used to, used to say, "I can't get out of bed. Watch yourself, You know, watch your step." She didn't try to hold us down. She couldn't. I couldn't stay in the same place all day in and day out. So we used to go up and down on the deck. So this day we were up on top there, and it was a

little windy. And we had a little hat, I had a little hat on. And, of course, the wind came and took my hat and blew it in the ocean, in the Atlantic someplace. Oh, my God, I ran down, my mother, "Mom, you're going to kill me. I know you're going to kill me now." She says, "What happened? Where's your brother?" That's the first thing. "Where's your brother?" "He's here," I says. "I lost my hat." "To hell with the hat." He says, "As long as your brother's all right." ( he laughs )

LEVINE: So did you take care of your brother? Were you kind of . . .

DiGIACINTO: Well, I mean, he was with me. I mean, I was taking care of him, see. We had a little fun, me and my brother had a little fun coming, coming here. Until we docked in. But, like I say, we docked in (?). And, uh, the first time, the first time when we docked we saw a colored, I don't know if I could use this phrase, a colored or a Negro person, you know? And by that time, after we docked, my mother was up a little bit, and my mother said, "I think he forgot to wash his face." So, I mean, that was,

and we had, while they were unloading the ship, then a couple of the, uh, longshoremen, you know, they were downstairs in the hold, they came up, put a bag of walnuts, say there was a couple of walnuts, he says, "Go over there and eat them, but don't show anybody." Because he, "You know, I'm not supposed to give you anything, you know." And, you know, like I say, we were children, we used to get around. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: Do you remember the Statue of Liberty?

DiGIACINTO: Well, I saw the Statue of Liberty, but the Statue of Liberty to me, at that time, meant nothing. It was just something with her hand up, and that's it. Because we knew nothing about America, I mean, we knew nothing about it.

LEVINE: Do you remember how you felt when you were just getting here?

DiGIACINTO: I told you, I looked out, and I felt, I says, "I'm in jail over here. I want to go back on the other side. I want to go back to Italy."

LEVINE: Well, tell me about Ellis Island. When you first

came here, what did you see, and what was it like for you?

DiGIACINTO: Well, Ellis Island, hmm. We came here like a, like a bunch of hoboes, with a little bag on your back, a tag on the side, we came by ferry from down there. We came in by ferry. And, uh, I know we were here, we were quarantined here for a couple of, for two or three days.

LEVINE: Why was that?

DiGIACINTO: Well, they, uh, before, they cleared everything up, before that we were allowed to go out and everything, we slept here about two or three days in the bunks that you have here now. And, uh, I don't know. I don't remember, it was maybe two, maybe two, maybe three at the most.

LEVINE: Do you remember what happened, what, what did they do?

DiGIACINTO: Well, I mean, like I say, they had to go through the procedure of, uh, it took time to, to get you quarantined or whatever, you supposedly get some shots, I guess, or something, or you went to an

examination. Because, number one, if there was anything wrong with you, you turned around and went back. You was not allowed to come in. So we were in good health, and we, after a couple of days we, my father came and he picked us up and he took us down in a residential area. Which was . . .

LEVINE: Did your father come to Ellis Island?

DiGIACINTO: Yeah. Well, he had to be here. How else could we, could we, uh . . .

LEVINE: Do you remember seeing him here?

DiGIACINTO: Well, no. The first time I took a, yes, I mean, but the first time I took a glimpse of him was on a ship. We were up on top there, and, uh, he was down, he was downstairs with a, with one of those little, uh, well, now, after, in later years I, I found out that those boats were like junk boats. They used to shuttle rope and different things from the ships, you know. And he had hired that little boat for that day, just around the ship there, so we could see him. And we saw him, and we waved at him.

LEVINE: Did you recognize him?

DiGIACINTO: Oh, yeah. I mean, he recognized us, sure. And, uh, like I say, then we came here, and then my father had to be here to through the procedure and get us off the ship, I mean, off the, off Ellis Island there, to go where we were going.

LEVINE: Where did you go when you left Ellis Island?

DiGIACINTO: Well, he was living, he was living with my, uh, my aunt, and from there we went into a house. And she kept us for, well, I don't, I'd probably be telling a lie if I, but I don't know exactly how long. Maybe, it could have been maybe a month or whatever, until a family moved out upstairs and, uh, then we took the rooms upstairs, three rooms.

LEVINE: Where, what town was that?

DiGIACINTO: Jersey City, down here, down in, uh, 389 First Street. I remember, I remember, 389 First Street, Jersey City. So the first thing I saw when I came off, of course, I had long pants and everybody was saying, "Oh, there's the wop, there's the wop." You know? So, well, then I, you know, then you

made friends with your kids. It was a little tough going, you know, they didn't, to be recognized as a human being, too, because, you know, they, they looked at you as, you know, you're a foreigner, you know.

LEVINE: Do you remember some things that struck you as being different that you saw when you first came here?

DiGIACINTO: Everything was different.

LEVINE: Is there anything in particular that stands out?

DiGIACINTO: Now, we'll start. Then, the first thing I saw was a couple of, a couple of boys on rollerskates. And I said to myself, I says, "Well, my father hasn't seen me for a few years." I says, "And here's my chance, maybe I'm going to get a pair of rollerskates." I didn't know what they called them, but I saw kids skating, you know. So when I first says it, I says, "Pa," I says, "you gonna buy me one of those?" "I'll give you this, I'll buy you this." And he showed me five fingers. That's what you're going to get. And that's it. I mean, that was the end of the skates.

LEVINE: What was it like being with your father after not being around him?

DiGIACINTO: Well, I mean, like I say, I mean, it's, that I can't very well, you know, I can't very well express myself on that, because, like I say, you were glad to see him. And, uh, but coming from a respectable family, you respected, and that's it. So then . . .

LEVINE: Did you start school then right away?

DiGIACINTO: Then, we came in, like I say, we come into my aunt's house, and in those days they used to have decoration for, for Christmas, I guess, which I didn't know anything about. You know, I didn't know what they done, because we never had decorations on the other side for that. And they had, uh, it's not streamers, but it's something that opens up and goes across the room, like, you know, like this and like this. When I walked in, I says, "What the hell is that?" I didn't say it in English, because I didn't know, I didn't know how to say yes in English. I said, "I don't like this place. I want to go home." ( he laughs ) But

then I got used to it. I mean, I got used to it. I started making friends. And then we went to school. I mean, we got registered in school. And, uh, I went to school till I was fourteen years old. My birthday was in February, I was fourteen, and I got my working papers.

LEVINE: How was learning English for you? Was it difficult, or . . .

DiGIACINTO: Well, what can I say? I'll say that, uh, you are a little bit handicapped but, uh, you, you learn, you know, you don't learn perfect English right away but, uh, you manage to get along, and you start to make little friends with your schoolmates and different things like that. And I went to school, I, they put me in 1A. They put me in 1A, I don't think I was there a month, they put me in 1B. Because, I mean, I had a little schooling from the other side, you know, I know a little bit. And I skipped about two or three times, you know, I was along the line. I went to summer school which for about six weeks or so you skip a grade. Instead of playing in the street, my mother said, "Go to school, go to school, go to school." And, you

know, we went to summer school, and we skipped a grade. I was going, at that time we had semesters twice a year, A and B. I was going into 6B. I went into 6B in February, and I got my working papers, because my birthday came in February and I got my working papers.

LEVINE: What was your first job?

DiGIACINTO: My first job was Regal Sacks. They used to make Sacks, burlap bags, on Fogtree[ph] and Pacific Avenue and, uh, Grand Street, they used to have a factory. That's my first job.

LEVINE: Did you stay there long?

DiGIACINTO: I stayed there about a month. And a couple of my friends from the neighborhood, they had jobs in the postal telegraph in New York. And they said, "Why don't you come to New York? Why don't you come to New York?" So I decided to go to New York with them. Well, New York was not what it is today. But me going to New York from where I came, or from here, where I come from the other side, to go to New York, I was just like a fly on a field there, because, I mean, uh, what the hell did I know about

New York? I didn't know how to get around. I didn't know, you know. But, anyhow, I managed. And we used to deliver telegrams, and we used to get two-and-a-half cents apiece. The first day I think I made about forty cents. And as I gradually worked, I made a little bit more, and I was there about two-and-a-half years.

LEVINE: Did you have any, uh, telegrams that you delivered that stand out in your mind?

DiGIACINTO: Oh, we didn't read the telegrams. All we done was, we had, they had, they had, uh, clocks. You be in the office, you be sitting down, maybe six or seven kids, you know, well, we had rotations. You'd come in, you'd sit down, you know who you're following when you come in, and there used to be a little, a little click, and you each had a number, like. And that would tell you what office to go. So it got to the point after a while, I mean, you stay there long enough you get to know all these, all these, uh, offices, you know, by numbers. I know there's one stands out in my mind, 422. He used to go ( he imitates ) de-de-de-de-de-de-de. It's 422. Now, that was, that was an office that had to go about

five blocks for a telegram. You know, nobody wanted to, because you've got to run five blocks, run back five blocks, for two-and-a-half cents, you know what I mean? If you're the, if you get a dozen of those in a day, what the hell, you don't make nothing. So everybody says, "It's your turn, it's your turn, it's your turn," they said to me. Well, "Look," I says. "Okay, I'll go." I went, and I come back with twenty-two telegrams in one shot. ( Dr. Levine laughs ) That was, let's see, twenty-two, forty-five, that's fifty-five cents, you see? Oh, were they jealous. Were they jealous! Were they mad! So now later on in the daytime the 422 came in again. ( he imitates ) da-da-da-da-da-da-da I run out. It was my turn to go out, I run out. I come back with another fifteen or twenty, because at that time the only communication you had was telegrams, you know? And after that when that, when that box went 422, everybody wanted to run. ( Dr. Levine laughs ) But they come back with one or two. So I put one over on them.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, we've got about seven minutes left.

So why don't you briefly tell other jobs that you had.

DiGIACINTO: All right. Now, we had, uh, then, from there, I went to Continental Can, and I worked there a while, and I went to Pennsylvania Railroad. I started at the Pennsylvania Railroad, I was seventeen years old. I worked there two-and-a-half years. And, uh, I got out of there, my father was working for the Lehigh Valley Railroad on the tugboats. In 1929 I went on a, my father got me to go on the job on the tugboats. After me breaking in for about two weeks, because you had to break in as a fireman, you know, and, uh, I got a job. I got a job there which was, I started there April, April 19, 1929. And I worked about two or three months. September of that year, well, the end of September, the early part of October, the market crashed. I lost my job. And from then on was a very, very, very hard seven years. Nobody expected to, to be as bad as it was. I mean, there was a few suicides from people jumping out of buildings because they lost everything they had in the market. And, uh, well, that's it. And it kept

getting worse, and worse, and worse. So I says, "Well . . ." You had banks that failed. I had, I had a few dollars I had saved, you know, and took it out of the bank and I put it in the post office, because at that time you was able to, like, put it in the post office, just like as a safekeeping. The government, they gave you a receipt of what you put in there. And, uh, so the banks was failing left and right. In 1932, because we were keeping, me and my wife was keeping company at the time, I said before I lose all the money, we decided to get married, and we figured, well, this has got to end up sometime, you know? At that time, in 1932 I got a job about, I was making nine dollars a week. She was working in a laundry. She was making eight dollars a week. So I says, "Well, look." I says, we had money for a, for the furniture and different things like that. We got married. And we figured with twenty-one dollars, you know, you don't get the best, but you managed to get along. Which was a big mistake, because for the simple reason that things got worse instead of better. In 1933 my first, my firstborn, my first son was born.

LEVINE: What was your wife's name?

DiGIACINTO: Laura.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

DiGIACINTO: Bellino[ph].

LEVINE: And your first son's name?

DiGIACINTO: John. Michael is here for me today.

LEVINE: You have two sons?

DiGIACINTO: Three.

LEVINE: Oh. And what's the . . .

DiGIACINTO: Robert, Robert Joseph is the other one. So my son was born in 1933. I wasn't working. In 1933, in one year, the year of 1933 I had three days pay. Three days. And in those days you had no unemployment, you had no health care. You had a job, you ate. You didn't have a job, it was tough, very tough.

LEVINE: How did you get along?

DiGIACINTO: Well, how I got along. It so happened that my dad

had bought a house, it almost killed him. He had bought a house in 1928, and, uh, that's still a house I'm living in now. And, uh, a family moved out, and we lived in his rooms. Like I say, we're making a few dollars, when we first got married, like I say, we're making twenty-one dollars. Well, between us, for a while, we're paying twenty-five dollars a month rent, because it wasn't that, my father couldn't afford to keep me there for nothing because he had a mortgage to pay, he had insurance to pay, he had taxes to pay, you know, you couldn't expect it for nothing. So, ah, you're thinking twenty-five a month, when I was able to. When I wasn't able to I'd say, "Well, Pop, you have to wait." Well, it so happened that my father, if you worked for a railroad in those days you had a steady job. See, and he worked for the, he worked on the tugboats like I did, because he got me the job there. And, uh, he was making five dollars and seventy-five cents a day. And, uh, let's put it this way, we managed. There was a time I got as far as owing him over a thousand dollars in rent. But, like I say, you'd paint a room, and he'd say, "Well, take ten dollars off what you owe me," and

things like that, you know? And we managed. Like I say, we were always a close-knit family. And, uh, as bad as I had it, there were people much, much worse than I was. People selling apples on the corner. There was no such thing as welfare. There was no such, you had nothing, you had nothing. If you didn't have anything, you starved. That's all. That was it. It was up to you to, there'd be times that I didn't have, I didn't have five cents in my pocket, and there was three of us in the family.

LEVINE: Wow. Let me, uh, we're just about out of time. Let me ask you, how do you think it affected you, starting out in Italy, coming here as an eleven-year-old, going through the depression. What effect do you think all that had on you?

DiGIACINTO: Well, I tell you. The effect it has is that I found out one thing. Patience, and hard work, and study, will get you somewhere. You have the opportunity. Like I say, I mean, the little bit I learned in school was very little, because any learning I did was later on, through correspondence courses and things like that. And I was able to

get my marine engineer's license, and I worked in the harbor here for the Lehigh Valley Railroad with forty-five years seniority. I retired forty-five years seniority. Like I say, I didn't work forty-five years for them steady, but in between, I mean, that's what we worked, from the beginning to the end.

LEVINE: Well, is there anything you'd like to say before we close, any last, uh, statement?

DiGIACINTO: What can I say? I can say is that I'm thankful I'm in this country, and this is the land of opportunity if you have the patience and you have the, the gall to go out, study, and work for everything, and don't expect anything in return.

LEVINE: Okay, well, let's stop there. I want to thank you very much for a most, most interesting interview.

DiGIACINTO: Thank you.

LEVINE: I'm talking with Nazareth DiGiacinto.

DiGIACINTO: DiGiacinto.

LEVINE: Who came here from Italy when he was eleven years

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old in 1920, and this is Janet Levine for the  
National Park Service.