EI-481
MICHAEL MATERIA
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SICILY, 1931
AGE 8

SHIP:
PORT: MESSINA (?)
RESIDENCES
ITALY: FRANCAViLLA
US: NY, NY

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I'm here today at the Ellis Island Studio, and it's June 22, 1994. I'm here with Michael Materia, who came from Sicily in 1931 when he was eight years old. Apparently before that you had been here, but you were too young to remember the trips.

MATERIA: Yes.

LEVINE: But we'll talk about that. Well, I'm very happy that you're here, and I'm looking forward to hearing as much as you can remember about this. Why don't we start with your birth date and the town you were born in.

MATERIA: I was born on June 4, 1923, in Sicily, in the town of Francavilla.

LEVINE: And did you live in Franca Villa until you came to America to stay?

MATERIA: Yes. But intermittently in between we did make voyages to America and then back again.

LEVINE: Okay. Why don't you give your father's name.

MATERIA: My father's name was Joseph. In Italian, it's Giuseppe, with a G. The Italians don't use a J.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

MATERIA: Angelina.

LEVINE: And your mother's maiden name?

MATERIA: Scuderi.

LEVINE: Could you spell that?

MATERIA: Uh, S-C-U-D-E-R-I. Scuderi.

LEVINE: And did you have brothers and sisters?

MATERIA: Yes, I have two sisters, both born in the United States. While we were making the various trips, my first sister, Connie, she lives in New Jersey, she was born here in the United States. Then we went back, and she came back with the parents, and then I was born in Sicily. Then we came back to the United States, then we went back to Sicily, and then the last time we came there it was my older sister Connie and I, and while we were here permanently after, after we arrived, my sister Rose was born in the United States. So both my sisters were born in the United States. And I, the way it flip-flopped for me, I was born in Sicily.

LEVINE: So Rose was born here after the whole family had moved here.

MATERIA: Yes.

LEVINE: For good.

MATERIA: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MATERIA: Well, you know, the old story is that when my father moved here, it was a good place to earn money, but the thought of living here permanently didn't really dawn upon him, but later on, as time went on, he realized that this is the place, this is the country to live in.

LEVINE: Do you have any idea of why it was that he felt he wanted to be, to make money here, but really to live in Italy ultimately? Do you know what changed his mind, or what it was that made that difference to him?

MATERIA: You mean staying here permanently later on?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MATERIA: The realization that there is always wars in Europe, and, uh, he served in, in the Italian Army in 1914, in the war to end all wars. (he laughs) And they, they – they realized that America is the best. There is no place like America. And, uh, as – as time went on, like in '36, then there was that war in Ethiopia, and my parents also envisioned that possibly I might wind up in -- with the brown shirts that they had there, like in the youth movement that they had in Italy with Mussolini, and that sort of – sort of made him think about staying here. Then later on in '39 when everything went kaboo, when Hitler invaded Poland, then it

was definite, we stay here. And also they loved the, they learned to love America and realize that there is no place like America.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Why don't you tell about your father's, when he first came, and what his, what his goal was in coming here, initially?

MATERIA: Uh, like most Europeans, they all have an ambition and a desire to own property. Owning property is everything. And there was, there were -- the means weren't there in this little town to make money, and America was the place of opportunity, and he came to America. And my father was a very – he was a very intelligent man that really knew what was going on. And, uh, he came here and he manufactured cigars, he got into that line, Italian cigars. And he used to sell them to a big outfit called di Mobile [ph]. Like a lot of those Italians were smoking what they call a di Mobile cigar, it might have been a Materia cigar made by my father. They sub-contracted for them. Then as he made money, he came back to Francavilla and bought property, because that was his goal in life, property, money.

LEVINE: What kind of property did he buy?

MATERIA: He bought the giardinos. Giardinos are gardens. He bought gardens, and buildings, too. Uh, he owned a number of buildings. He also had some brothers and sisters, and as he bought the buildings, he allowed them to live in them. Like they lived in one building, we lived in another building. He rented another building. And it was a good old capitalist system that he was getting onto, and he thought it was a good idea. And that's why he went back and forth to the United States, to earn money, go back, buy property, and come back, earn more money, buy more property, and he accumulated quite a bit of property.

LEVINE: So he, how many years would you say, roughly, he was, he, before the whole family actually moved here? How many years do you think he was doing that, going back and forth?

MATERIA: At least eight years from the time I, from the time I was born. He was, as a matter of fact, he came here even before I was born and, uh, started to make money in the United States, and started to purchase property.

LEVINE: What did he do before that when he was in Italy? What did he do before he was making cigars in America?

MATERIA: His mother -- his father was a carpenter and he helped the cabinet marker, and he helped him in that, but he didn't have the dexterity of the hands. He didn't have the skill for it. And my grandmother, his mother, she had a general grocery store, and things like that. And there just wasn't enough there to support him and the family and to make money and so forth, so he knew he had to go out on his own. And, uh, America, the land of opportunities, beckoned to him, and he came over.

LEVINE: What was your grandmother's name?

MATERIA: Uh, her name was, uh, Concettina. You might say Connie, or Concetta. And my father, my grandfather's name was Michael, after which I was named.

LEVINE: Do you remember him, your . . .

MATERIA: No. No, I don't remember him, because he died when I was very, very young, or before I was born. And, uh, my grandmother, I remember her. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: When you think of her, what is it you remember? Do you remember any experiences with her?

MATERIA: Uh, yes, yes. She spoiled me rotten. (he laughs) She gave me everything I wanted. And I always wanted an owl or a bird, and that she got an owl for me, and we put it in the cage. And also I used to like to get a piece of wood and float it down the gutters when it rained, or go by a stream. And she would stand by the stream and watch me that I didn't go in too deep of water, because a stream ran by the town there. And also she used to get a broomstick and put a head on it like a horse, and I would mount it, and that used to be my horse. I used to run through the town with it and she was always after me. She was helping my mother, of course. And my mother was around, too. And she did a lot for me. She was -- we spent a lot of time together. I used to like to sleep with her at night, too. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Did you remember any stories that she ever told you? Was she someone who would tell you stories?

MATERIA: Well, she would tell me like Italian fables and stories about Orlando the Knight, and when they were fighting the Moors, the Arabs, and they have these puppet shows that would come around, and Orlando was a big national hero. And, uh, and then she would tell me stories about my father when he was little and so forth, and things like that, just like the average grandmother would.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, how about on your mother's side? Did you have grandparents there in Sicily on your mother's side?

MATERIA: I don't remember them at all. I think they died at a younger age, both her mother and father. But I know that he was a miller. He used to grind up grain and so forth. And in that house they always ate, because they used to get a share of whatever grain they used to work on and so forth. They always ate well at my mother's house, and we ate well at our house, too.

LEVINE: How about aunts and uncles? Do you recall any of them?

MATERIA: Yes. I had, uh, on my father's side three uncles, and they were -- two of them were pretty well-educated. As far as education goes there, they used to be considered intellectuals, but oddly they were considered odd, because their -- their thinking either was way ahead of our time, or whatever it was, and I had some inter-relation with them, I remember. They came – they came to this country too, to live. Peter,

Pedro. Not that I – we -- I don't recall the other one. He stayed in Italy. He didn't come to America. And my mother had a brother, too, that came to this country. I forget his name. It eludes me. And, uh, they both died in this country. Uh, but, uh, he was, one of them was very well-educated on my father's side. Like I said, they used to call him il professor, the professor. He knows everything. (he laughs)

LEVINE: And what did he do? Did he use his education?

MATERIA: No, he didn't. He lived a sort of a Bohemian life. He didn't live well. Like he was just satisfied to be in one room, untidy, as long as he had books to read. The literature, that was his whole life, and he really never used it to make a living. He more or less was helped by my father. And he – and also, my father's mother and aunt, who also migrated to the United States, he would stay sometimes in her house, sometimes in our house, and so forth. And we had another one, uh, Zio Nino. Zio means uncle in Italian, and Nino is Tony. He was very, very skilled with his hands. He was a cabinetmaker. And he moved over with us on the Lower East Side, and he opened up his own shop. He did magnificent work, except that he was one who thought he knew everything. Possibly he did.

And he was, uh, very, very difficult to get along with. He was very temperamental, like all artists are and so forth. If someone would commission him to do a cabinet job, a restoration job, "Here's what I want done." He would say, "No, no, no, it's got to be done this way, it's got to be done that way, and it's got to be done this way." "No, no, but I want it done this way." "No, this period of time requires that it be done this way, otherwise you alter the character of it." So he used to lose a lot of jobs because of that, but he always Tamarini [ph] always stuck to what he thought was right. He was a difficult person to get along with.

LEVINE: Well, do you remember either of those two uncles when you were, before you came here, before you moved to America?

MATERIA: No.

LEVINE: Do you remember any experiences with them in Sicily?

MATERIA: No, I don't. It was later on, as we grew up. As a matter of fact, my Uncle Tony and my cousin Jimmy, he wanted us to come to his shop, and we assisted him. And we found him very, very difficult to work with. Although we were young boys, just, what were we? Ten, eleven, something like that. We didn't like working with him, because he was a difficult person to get along with. Very stern, very tough.

LEVINE: That was here?

MATERIA: Yes, here.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, let's, um, let's talk about Sicily first, and then we'll do the voyage, and then here. But, uh, was your family religious in Sicily?

MATERIA: Yes, yes. They were, my mother was religious. My father was, uh, you might say a practicing Catholic. He was Catholic, but not like my mother. She was very religious.

LEVINE: How did she observe? In what ways did she . . .

MATERIA: All the saint days. We go to church every Sunday. Things like that. My father, whether we went to church or not, he wasn't a steady churchgoer like my mother, and she would take us.

LEVINE: How about your father's mother, your grandmother?

MATERIA: She was religious, because I can recall her lighting candles and having statues all over the place. And when it rained it stormed, she'd go to a window -- the door and she'd light a candle. And it seemed like after she lit the candle and put the same pictures up there with the statues, the storm always went away. It worked very time. (they laugh)

LEVINE: And how about food? Do you remember things that your grandmother or your mother cooked when you were in Sicily that you particularly liked?

MATERIA: Uh, I liked all the foods that they cooked, the Italian foods, the soul dishes, you might call them, the pasta fagiole, the beans and macaroni. We'd have meat, and we'd have that dried codfish that they'd soak in water called vishesto [ph]. And they'd put the water back into the fibers of the meat, and then they would cook it different ways. And, all in all, I had a good time with the food there. I do recall, in the mornings, the milk man, he come with his herd of goats, and everyone would stand by the front of their doors, and you'd hand him your container and you'd tell him how much you want, and they would milk the goats right there in front of you. And I used to have the option of picking the goat that I'd want. When I spotted one, I'd say, "I want from that one there." And he'd get the milk from there, and as soon as he would hand us the bucket, it was all frothing inside, and I used to drink the milk while it was warm.

LEVINE: Huh. Now, did everybody have some livestock of their own or not?

MATERIA: Uh, well, I recall living in the, in the town itself, you had to take them, like the people that had the gardens, you sort of, you had to, maybe you were ten, fifteen minutes away by donkey or by walking, and they all tended to their gardens, and some of them kept animals on it, and they got their own milk. Some had, mostly goats, and some had cows and so forth, and they grew their own food to a certain extent.

LEVINE: Did you have gardens, your family?

MATERIA: My father did, yes. But he had people tending to them. Uh, we weren't wealthy wealthy, but compared to other people we were well-off, we were property owners and so forth.

LEVINE: So would, would the people who were tending your father's gardens supply you with some amount of things from the garden?

MATERIA: Oh, yes. They were like, uh, they either worked for salary or they worked for share, like sharecroppers. They would get a certain share, whatever they raised, and so forth. That's the way, that's the way it worked. Because my father couldn't tend to all the gardens and the buildings that he had.

LEVINE: Let's see. Um, how about school? Did you attend school there?

MATERIA: Yes. I started school there, but I didn't like going to school. (he laughs)

LEVINE: How come?

MATERIA: Like any -- you were young. I was free. But I didn't like the idea of being confined and then this teacher or teachers, uh, they demanded complete obedience there. There was no, uh, no distractions there, and you did as you were told, and there was, they were very highly respected, the teachers, and you had to comply. And I started maybe when I was six, and two years of that I, uh, maybe I might have gotten used to it, but when I started to go to school here in America, I got used to it and went along with it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How about, was there any recreation, or what did people do for amusement or entertainment, do you remember, in Sicily?

MATERIA: Well, the number one thing was work. Everyone went out there and they tilled what soil they had, or what soil that their owners wanted them to do, they worked. And then, at the end of the day, it's not like in America where you have huge farms and everyone lived on their farms and they were isolated from one another. In these towns everyone went to work, whether it's a manufacturing job or agricultural job, they went to it, they walked to it, or went with their donkeys. It wasn't far, far stretched. And then at the end of the day they would come back to their homes. They would have their supper, and then the big recreation at night was taking a walk in the piazza, a walk in the streets.

There you would meet all your friends, you would converse with them. The greetings of the day, catch up on the news. They had these, uh, what they call bars, but not like the bars we know here where you have liquor and so forth, there they sold food and soda and ice cream. If you wanted wine, it was available. And you met your friends there, and you would say, take them over and treat you. "I'm going to take you to the American bar, and I'm going to treat you there." And then you'd meet someone else, and you'd take them, and you would treat them for coffee there, or lemon ices. Uh, or gelato, ice cream. It was really no hard drinking. There was -- nobody really drank. I never saw anyone drunk when I was there as a little boy.

And that was the time, the times that passed away, or we to pass the time away, conversation. There were no TV's in those days. You talk to people. And the time went rather nicely, because I experienced that when I went back there visiting as an adult, and you meet people in the piazza, you get introduced, and it was amazing how fast and pleasantly the time went by. And it was cooler in the evening, and so forth. And, too, all the children, they all, teenagers and so and so forth, they all met and congregated in the piazza, too. So therefore your parents saw where you were, they knew where you were, they knew who you were with. They knew who the bad boys were, and they would forbid you to go with the bad boys, and then your neighbors observed your actions and so forth. And if you stepped out of line, your parents saw you, or they heard about it, and they would straighten you out.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah.

MATERIA: And there was a lot of obedience and respect in those days, in those towns.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you have any duties? I mean, I know you were only eight, but did you have any chores you had to do, or . . .

MATERIA: I don't specifically recall, but I imagine, "Michelino," that was Michael, "Michelino, pick that up." Or, "Put that there." And, "Don't do this. Don't do that." I imagine I had little chores that I was assigned to do.

LEVINE: Yeah. Now, uh, your, your sister Connie was older than you.

MATERIA: Yes. She's approximately, I'd say she's two years older. Two years older.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you think, do you think, can you think of any ways that you and she were treated differently because you were a boy and she was a girl?

MATERIA: Uh, I couldn't, uh, I couldn't pick it out if there was any difference there. I couldn't pick it out.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MATERIA: It didn't occur to me, or it wasn't obvious to me that there was any difference.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah. Okay. Um, is there anything else, before we talk about the decision to come here and all that, is there anything else that when you think about Sicily and about your village, what is it, Francavilla.

MATERIA: Francavilla.

LEVINE: That you think of, that comes to your mind? Any other incident, experience, or something about the place that you carry with you?

MATERIA: Yes. I remember that place is a lot of orchards, a lot of fruits growing, and lemons and oranges and fruits of that type. As far as growing wheat and things like that, it was mountainous, and there -- some valleys. That was grown where they had larger areas of land, the wheat. And they used to barter the fruit for wheat and other things like that. Plus they used to just buy it outright from the money they got from the fruits that they used to sell. And I remember there was a, there was an area there where the women went to wash clothes.

It was huge, it was, water would flow, and there were like tablets made out of stone with ripples in it, like a washboard, at a slant in there, and the water would go by and the women would use the -- those as washboards and then dip it in the water, and then rinse it out, and then put it in a pail to take it out to dry. And it was also a place to get water. They didn't have, uh, plumbing in those – in a lot of the houses there, and there was one place there that I went to later on as an adult that I sort of remember that had cold spring water coming out. And there were other wells around there bubbling out, but that was the coldest one there. And . . .

LEVINE: Who got the water, like, when you were little? Whose job was that?

MATERIA: Well, either my mother, or, uh, whoever was helping out in the family. My grandmother, they would go there. They'd get these jugs, and then they'd balance it on their heads. And they also have bundles, and it's amazing how they'd balance those jugs on their heads. And when you consider that water, one gallon, weighs eight-and-one-third pounds, and you had four pounds -- four gallons of water, you're carrying forty pounds of weight, easily, on there.

LEVINE: On their heads?

MATERIA: Yeah. On their heads and their necks. It gave them good posture, I would say. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Wow. Now, were the jugs ceramic?

MATERIA: They were made of clay.

LEVINE: Clay, uh-huh.

MATERIA: I can recall we used to, some we used to cook in clay pots, too.

LEVINE: Oh.

MATERIA: They used to make some spaghetti sauce that was out of this world out of these pots, specifically for that. Then later on, uh, they introduced, they had metal pots, but those that couldn't afford it, they used clay pots.

LEVINE: Hmm. Do you remember the stove?

MATERIA: The stove was charcoal, charcoal. It would be like, uh, an opening, and then a top with a grate, and they would put the sno—the pots on top of that, and cook with the charcoal.

LEVINE: And the clay pots, too? They would cook on the . . .

MATERIA: Yes, with the clay pots. And then, too, to conserve, after you finish cooking, they would take the charcoal out, and they would wet it. And then they would let it dry, and then use it again. They wouldn't throw anything away. You couldn't do that in those days.

LEVINE: Did they have ovens?

MATERIA: Oh, yes, yes. They had ovens. Uh, a lot of families had the ovens built in, circular. And they would build a roaring fire in there. And then they would, uh, take the fire out, the – the embers out. Then they'd get a cloth and just like wash off the, uh, some of the soot and coal. And then they would -- at that time, I remember, uh, them doing that, but I don't, I didn't know now. Like, for example, I learned later on that you cook, first you cook your breads first. Whatever needed the highest heat, you would cook that first. Then what needed a moderate heat, you would cook that and then a low heat that, because the things cooled down. Because you're taking the fire out of there now, and you -- it's the heat that was retained by the bricks and the cement that was doing the cooking.

And when they'd make bread, sometimes they'd have someone who might have owned a large oven, and they would go there, and they would either pay money or pay off in bread and rolls, or whatever they were baking, barter, to use that specific big, you know, well-functioning oven. And, uh, they used to cook, like, bread for maybe three, four days, five days, and the bread with thick crust would keep. And they thought nothing of eating bread that was stale. Like here we insist on fresh bread. My father would not eat bread that was fresh, even in America. He would buy bread, and then keep it a day or two, and eat it. (he laughs) He didn't like fresh bread, whereas we did like fresh bread. That was the way he was brought up. So they cooked, they cooked for four, five days at a time, depending on the size of your family, too.

LEVINE: Wow. Okay. Well, uh, I think, why, how was it decided, were you just coming back for a short period of time when you were eight years old, to America, thinking you were going back again, or when you left were you thinking you were going to stay?

MATERIA: I think my parents thought that we might go back then later on. But then later on (I mentioned the events that occurred in the world) and they decided also that we were in the heights of a depression here, too. But things were, we thought things were bad in the United States. They were worse in Europe. So they figured this is the place to stay.

LEVINE: Okay. I think what we'll do here is pause so we can turn the tape over, and then we'll continue with the voyage.

MATERIA: All right.

END OF SIDE ONE BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Okay. We're resuming. I'm speaking with Michael Materia, and we were talking now about the time when you actually emigrated to America. Um, your father had come back.

MATERIA: Yes.

LEVINE: So he was, he was there, and he'd been there for a while?

MATERIA: Yes.

LEVINE: And then, um, do you remember, I'm not sure if you said this on tape or not, why it was that your father thought this was . . .

MATERIA: Yes, to earn, oh, because, uh, in America there was religious freedom. You could vote. And, uh, you lived better. No one really went hungry that didn't want to go hungry. We always, we always ate well. And he figured this is the place to stay.

LEVINE: So when you were packing up, do you remember anything that you brought with you, or your parents brought with them?

MATERIA: They just brought a minimum of clothing, a minimum of clothing. That's all you could bring with you. And I can recall like it was, sadly we were saying goodbye to everybody. And we went to, uh, it's an amazing thing, when you're growing up here as a teenager, you don't think of what happened in the old days. You never questioned your parents about it. Later on in life, as you get older, and you say, "Where did I come from?" You know, "What's it all about?" And then you say, "I wish I'd have asked my questio—my parents more questions, more specifically." For example, I don't know what boat we came over on. I don't know the name, I don't know whether it was Greek, Italian, British, or whatever it was.

And I think we left from the Port of Messina in Sicily. And on the way coming over, I recall getting into these boats and, like, being take ashore for a short period of time. I remember seeing little fish swim by, and I believe, I'm not certain, but we made stops along the Mediterranean picking up other immigrants that were coming to the United States, because they don't fill up in one place. You pick them up as you go along. And at that time I might have even, I might have even – might have even gone and touched Africa, maybe, and Algiers, pick up some passengers there, or whatever it is. Because not everyone on the ship were coming from Italy. There were people from other countries as well.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What was it like for you as an eight-year-old, uh, leaving your little town and going on this ship and . . .

MATERIA: I didn't realize the significance of it at that time, like leaving my grandparents and my cousins there and so forth. All I knew is

-- I was with my parents. Wherever they went, I went. I knew that my parents were always there for me, and they always looked after me, and I felt secure with my father and my mother, because they always did what was right by us. They -- we were always clothed, we were always fed. So I had, as a boy I just went along with the parents, like any boy would do.

And, uh, on the ship I recall some incidents. I do remember there was some bad weather, and people weren't feeling too crisp. And as the boat's rocking around, and I thought it was very funny, laughing and so forth. I didn't realize the significance of what was going on. Another incident that I can recall that -- it was I consider very profound was when we hit the harbor in New York – New York City, it -- we hit it in the morning. We had just finished breakfast. And there was a huge commotion going around on the boat, on the ship. And everyone was going topside. So we all followed. We went topside. And as we hit the – hit the top deck where we could see (I don't know if it was the top or whatever it was, but the rail we could see) and here's this huge statue, which was the Statue of Liberty.

And as we're going by, the people are going in asking, in Italian, "Ma chi è, ma chi è" which means, "What is it? What is it?" And somebody said, "It's a Madonna!" Immediately the pious, religious, old women and some of the men, they fell on their knees and genuf--, they're doing the sign of the cross, and they're praying. And they thought it was the Madonna. They thought it was a religious – a religious statue. I didn't know what it was either. (he laughs) But that was one event that I do recall on board boat.

The next was Ellis Island. We were, uh, we were put on some kind of vessel. We were transferred here. I don't know the exact details, but I do remember being on Ellis Island with a lot of people and a lot of commotion. And, like, everyone talked like we were in an empty barrel, you know, with the echoes and so forth, and, "You go here, over here, and there." and I'm just gaping at everything that's going on. And my father's answering the questions and so forth, and he's been through this, so he knew his way around. And, uh, I am not certain, but I think we spent the night here. Because I, in a dorm I played with a metal race car, a metal race car. And then we, uh, left the island, and, uh, we went through a -- we were in America.

LEVINE: Do you remember, uh, your accommodations, either on the ship or at Ellis Island?

MATERIA: Uh, we weren't first class. I know we weren't first class. So my father, uh, he took the, uh, the cheapest rate, because he figured you go to the same place whether you go first class or not. Of course, you're going to eat better and so forth, but whether it was first, second class or third class, or third, I don't know. I don't know. But I don't think it was the worst. I don't think it was the worst, because we weren't down as deep in the ship as other people were.

LEVINE: Were you in a cabin?

MATERIA: Yes. We were in a cabin. Yeah.

LEVINE: And did you go to the dining room?

MATERIA: Yes. We ate in the dining room and so forth. And, uh, the food at times was strange. I don't know, it might have been a Greek ship, or whatever it was. And especially on Ellis Island, I thought the food was very strange, very strange. Like stews and things like that. And, you know, we're used to the Italian-style food, and my father, "Eat it, eat it. It's good for you." So we ate it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Wow. So then when you got off Ellis Island, where did you go?

MATERIA: We first went to Albany, because that's where my father wanted to, uh, open up, uh, the factory and make cigars, a small factory, the same way. And make, make cigars, and . . .

LEVINE: Excuse me, had he been in Albany the other times?

MATERIA: I don't recall. But I do recall that when my father was here, he traveled a lot going from city to city. I heard him talking about, uh, going to Zanesville, Ohio. Now, what's ironic is that I played baseball in the minor leagues for the New York Giants, and Zanesville is one of the towns that we played in. And I thought, "Gee, my father was here years ago, even before I was born," and so forth. And, uh, Albany, then we went to Bridgeport, Connecticut. In Bridgeport, Connecticut, there were other towns, but I don't recall them. We settled on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. There we had uncles and aunts and paisans from the old country and so forth. And then an ironic thing is that not too long ago we were talking with some friends of ours who were anglos, Anglo-Saxon, and they were wondering why did all the Italians and all the Jews and all the Greeks and all the Spaniards, why did they all go in one place and congregate there by themselves instead of going out and spreading out amongst the people?

I said, "Because you don't understand that these people, for common interest and common help, they – they helped one another. If they go into a strange place, who's going to help you? They don't know you. They don't know your customs. They don't realize the situation." This way you had uncles and cousins, and if you didn't have a job, you ate here another time, you ate there another time. When you can, you'd help them. We'd all help one another. It was all, it was all helping one another. That's why they did that, these people that clustered together. And a lot of people outside wondered, "Why, these people, why do they talk Jewish, or why do they talk Spanish, why do they talk Italian? Why don't they talk English?" Because they can't talk, they can't speak it well, and they're more comfortable speaking their, their – their language. That's why they – they did these things.

LEVINE: Can you think of any specific instances where either your family helped, uh, either a relative, or simply a paisano, or the other way around?

MATERIA: Yes. I recall when some of his paisanos or relatives came, they lived in our house with us, whether we lived on the east side, then later on we lived in Sheepshead Bay. And they had a room, and, uh, until they got on their feet and they got work, we supplied the food, we supplied the lodging, give them some carfare -- carfare. My parents would give them instructions how to get around on the, uh, on the transit systems and so forth, until they got on their own, and they went out on their own. And they, in turn, later on, helped others.

LEVINE: So, um, was it in the Lower East Side where you went to school?

MATERIA: Yes.

LEVINE: And what was, how did that compare with the two years of school you'd had over in Sicily?

MATERIA: I – I really have no basis of comparison, because I was too young, as -- what to go on. But when we, uh, on the East Side we, uh, we lived on Market Street, and then funny, Market Street, it starts with an M, then later on we moved to, uh, Madison Street, then we moved to Monroe Street, then we moved back, another place on Madison Street. They all started with an M, it appears. And I recall going to school, uh, going to school P.S. 177, which no longer is there. We lived right alongside the Manhattan Bridge. There were two tenement buildings. We lived in one tenement building right alongside the bridge. We can go up onto the roof and converse with the people that were walking across the Manhattan Bridge. And as children we used to go on the Manhattan Bridge, run across the Manhattan Bridge, take the Brooklyn Bridge back, and then back to our house there. We ran all the way, and as young boys we thought nothing of it. We could run in those days. And the East Side there was like my playground.

LEVINE: Yeah, describe what it was like then.

MATERIA: Uh, underneath the bridge there was like a park there. They had the, they had the fountain, they had water, and we would, uh, keep cool there, go there, get a drink of water. And then I observed this strange game called baseball, softball. I'd never seen that game before. Then later on I, uh, I took it up and I liked it, and, uh, then there were, if you went around South Stree-- South Street, along the waterfront, there were these rag shops. And at the rag shops they used to pick up rubber bands and clips and pieces of paper you might want to use, and we'd go from one place to another. We, we didn't get into any mischief or any trouble -- like to steal something was taboo.

As a matter of fact, when we moved to the east side, my Uncle Frank, he was a carabiniere in Italy, and he preceded us here, and he took my father off right away. "Don't let Michelino play with this guy, this guy, this guy, this guy, and this kid. They're bad kids." And we were told to stay away. And then later on, in observing these kids, I used to say first to my parents, "What do you know about them?" He says, "I am telling you, stay away from them." Then I realized they were right. They were bad boys. We didn't want to be seen, we didn't want to

go around with them. We didn't want to get in trouble. Because if we got in trouble, we'd get a 'zupap' from our parents. (he laughs) We had to keep our noses clean.

LEVINE: Your parents were strict, would you say?

MATERIA: Oh, yes, they were. They weren't tyrannical, or they weren't child abusers, but I took a few licks when I had to, when I stepped out of line and so forth.

LEVINE: What would be a thing you might have been punished for doing?

MATERIA: Uh, maybe unwittingly being seen with some of these kids, because you could be sitting on the stoop there and they'd come over. And then, "Hey, I saw so and so with so and so." But they came over. We weren't, uh. Another time I was punished as my cousin Jimmy was being beaten up by another boy, an older boy. So I, uh, I went over there to help my cousin, and this kid ran away. And as he ran away, I picked up a rock, I threw it at him, and I hit him in the head, and I cut his scalp. (he laughs) And I caught the devil for that later on.

But I told them what it was for. They says, "But you shouldn't have thrown that rock." I said, "I was a little boy." What was I, ten, then? And I did it instinctively. Another thing, too, is if I went to school. I have a tendency to be gregarious, and maybe say something that makes the class laugh, disrupt it, the teacher would punish me, or I'd get a whack in the back of the head, or I'd get my hair pulled. And I'd get a little note from them, and I'd give it to my parents.

They couldn't read it, but they had somebody who read it for them, and when they heard that I would get it from them. If I did something wrong at school, I'd get it from them, because the teachers are honorable people. They're there to help you. And sometimes some of the Italian boys would say, "Oh, the teacher did that to me because I'm Italian." "Baloney," they'd say. "They're not beating you because you're Italian. Because you did something wrong." He says, "The teachers are honorable."

LEVINE: Do you remember any of your teachers from when you were . . .

MATERIA: Oh, I remember from, uh, I do recall, like, when, uh, I don't remember them, like, in elementary school on the Lower East Side, but then going to junior high school I remember some of them. We used to bring our lunch would -- might be some leftover sausages or veal cutlets, and then we would, at school, at about ten o'clock we'd put them on a radiator to heat them up. (they laugh) Then when lunchtime came the teacher would go, (he sniffs) "My God, something smells good here." You know. "What is that?" And then we would give them some of that. And they would ask us, "Could you bring me some lunch like that in the next day? What is this, that sausages, or eggplant, or veal cutlets? The smell is intoxicating," the teacher would say.

I remember a Miss Wass-- a Miss Wasserman. I remember a Ms. Luce. Ms. Luce was an English teacher, and if we cut up in the class, she come over there and she'd grab you by the hair and pull you out of the seat. So in the warm weather we thought we'd get cute. We went out and we got baldy beans. So we went there, and we stepped out of line, and she'd come over there and start to grab our head and she couldn't grab nothing, and we'd sort of smile. What? You know what? She discovered our ears. She picked us up by the ears. And we're not going to get the ears cut off. And I recall a couple of teachers who were very strict, and I admired and respected them, because they helped me in life. 'Cause I learned more from them than I did from those, or maybe a little more 'laxed."

LEVINE: So you, how long did you continue in school?

MATERIA: Uh, I graduated high school, and then I went into the service, the Marine Corps. Uh, then when I got out I, uh, I played baseball in high school, and some scouts were looking at me. And when I got out, I went away to spring training, first with the Brooklyn Dodgers. And they, Branch Ricky, he wouldn't give us any bonuses. He said, "I'll give you a new pair of baseball shoes." So I contacted the Giants, and they gave me two thousand dollars to sign up. Now, two thousand dollars, like in 1945, was like, uh, forty thousand dollars today or more. And my father couldn't believe that they pay people for playing, playing the game here in America. But when I brought home the check, he believed it. (he laughs) And we helped buy a house with that.

LEVINE: So you went to training?

MATERIA: Yes. I played in the minor leagues for three years, but I received a number of injuries. And also, incidentally, when I signed with the Giants, that included a scholarship to Ohio State University. Four years, all I had to do is keep grades, I had to pass. And they would pay for me for four years. After I finished my first season there, I broke a leg in the middle of the season. Then I went to school in the fall in Ohio State, and I took up architecture, and drafting. And then I went home for Christmas around that time, and I was getting homesick, and I went back. I figured I don't need it. I'm going to make it in baseball.

But in baseball, I went at it three years, I kept getting injured. And, uh, then the, uh, I came home in the second year. I dislocated my shoulder, had a piece of bone knocked off my shins with a line drive. And the police exam was out, and the fire exam. And I lived in Sheepshead Bay, my wife is Irish, and all the Irish go for these jobs, and she said, "Why don't you take it?" So I took it, and I did well. And then I went to play baseball again, and then again I got injured again. Then the next time around, I decided to take the physical exam for the police and the fire, and I did well on that. And then the list came out, I was pretty high on the list, and I said, "I'm going to take a twenty-year contract with the city, and forget about baseball. It's too haphazard, it's too uncertain, and so forth."

LEVINE: So how did you meet your wife?

MATERIA: I –I met her at a local, uh, a local dance that they used to have there in Sheepshead Bay, and that's where I met her in this -- the mothers, the local mothers ran that to have a decent place for the teenagers to go to.

LEVINE: So, and what's your wife's name?

MATERIA: Josephine.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

MATERIA: Keenan. K-E-E-N-A-N. Keenan.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So was this a, in Sheepshead Bay, was it an Italian-Irish neighborhood?

MATERIA: Yes, it was, yes. It was basically primarily Irish, and then, like my parents, they bought a house there. And then a lot of Italians started moving in because they were buying the houses. It seemed like the Irish didn't seem interested in ownership. They just rented. And the next thing you know they would, the houses were being bought from underneath them. And, like I said, the Europeans, owning property is primary. You know, a-- amusing story, when I lived on the East Side, on Monroe Street, we were about ten or eleven, in front of City Hall, there used to be a huge fountain, water fountain, spurting. And that used to cascade down onto a lower basin, and we used to go swimming there. And I recall one time, a few times, I would see a big commotion on the City Hall steps. Big limousines would come in, and men with suits and briefcases would get out, and then policemen with brassy uniforms, and fire -- fire department cars, the chiefs come out with brassy uniforms and briefcases, and they used to go in there, and I used to look at that. I used to marvel at that and say, "Gee, I wish I could be one of them." Because in those days if you had a civil service job, I used to hear about that, in Depression time -- you were all right.

And I didn't realize that one day I, this immigrant kid who couldn't speak English yet was in that pond looking on on this, I was part of that one day, because I was going to City Hall to meet with Mayor Lindsay, representing the fire department. And I went there, one time when I was a captain, another time when I was a chief, because of the riots. I handled the riots for the fire department, how to fight the fires, have command posts and so forth. And I -- we'd go in there, all the city agencies, and give a report to Lindsay as how we were progressing. Because we expected the riots, because what happened in Watts. And every time like my men would drop me off, I'd tell them, my chauffeur, I'd tell them that story about that. So when I'd get out of the car, he says, "Hey, Chief, don't forget to wave to yourself over there." And I would do that. I'd go up to the head of the steps, I would turn around, and I'd just go like that." (he gestures) Like I'm waving to myself. Because I remember that incident.

LEVINE: Huh. Well, it must have had a big influence on you.

MATERIA: Yes, yes. That goes to show you that in America you could be part of that game. You could be meeting with the mayor of New York City. You could be contributing towards saving and minimizing the damage that was done to the city during the riots.

LEVINE: What was it that you liked about being a fireman?

MATERIA: Well, first of all, as a policeman . . .

LEVINE: Oh, you started as a policeman.

MATERIA: Yes, yes. And then later on when my turn come up on the list, I switched over to the fire department. As a policeman, you worked on your own, and the, uh, the superiors could be a little harsh on you for their own betterment and so forth. And the fire department, my men were my children. They were my sons. I protected them. I looked after them, the same way that they looked after me when I was starting in as a fireman and so forth. We treat them decently. We live together, we eat together, and we die together. So there's a – there's a bond there with the -- amongst the fire department. And also there's the same thing with the police department, too.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What, um, when you think of yourself as starting out in another country and then living most of your life here, do you think you have certain qualities that you, uh, that you would say come from your Sicilian heritage and other, other parts of you that are American? And can you divide yourself up somehow that way?

MATERIA: Definitely. The, uh, when the Europeans came over, they brought with them a, uh, a sense of family pride and, uh, family cohesiveness, family love. Uh, a certain standard that this was the law, you obey the law, you don't do anything to anyone that you wouldn't want to happen to you. And, uh, also the -- wanting to acquire property, having your own house and so forth. There are old world qualities. You say, "Well, Italians are very family-oriented, they're religious, they're this, they're that." But if you boil it all down, you have that same heritage in a Jewish family, a Spanish family, a Greek family, Irish families, German families. We all basically had this same, this same need, same makeup, but it's not just restricted to one country. It's spread out amongst all of us. You call that Old World values, which we instilled in our children who were born here. We wanted them to have New World values, and also Old World values. But there is a certain, a certain, uh, something inside of you that you remember where you come from, and you appreciate it when you're here.

LEVINE: What would you say the New World values that you wanted to pass along to your children were?

MATERIA: Frankly, I don't know. Outside of, uh, like working hard and getting into the mainstream and playing the game, following standards and so forth, which I always found very akin to the Old World standards. Because the new world standards were created and established here by old world people who came here and they said, "This is the basis." You might say it started from the old Roman Empire, the old Roman law, and so

forth. They brought those values here in America, and they distilled it. And we just came in, and we just sort of blended in, or built on it.

LEVINE: What are the names of your children?

MATERIA: Uh, I have, uh, five children, two boys and three girls. One is Joseph Materia, Joseph. He's the oldest. He's a West Point graduate. And the other one is Maureen. She's a, she was a year older, a year younger, and she married Frank Hancock, who was a classmate of my son Joe at West Point, and he is currently in the army, he's a colonel now, and that's his son out there, Butch. He's going to the University of Tennessee right now. And then there's Michael, who is, he followed like practically in my footsteps. He -- first he went into the police department, then he went to the fire department. And then there's Cathy, who works for the, uh, Port Authority. And there's, uh, Patty, she's the youngest one. She, uh, lives in, uh, in Florida, and she works for a large office supply firm. Five children.

LEVINE: Do you have grandchildren, too?

MATERIA: Oh, yes, yes. We have, uh, seven grandchildren.

LEVINE: What, what would you say you're most proud of that you've done in your life?

MATERIA: Most proud of? Uh, being in the fire department, where I helped the people. I like to think also I, I never was in on a stirring rescue and all that, but I coordinated them, and I've watched my men do it. And I feel when my men do it, we all do it. When someone makes a rescue, we all made the rescue, because there's a -- we're teamwork, that enabled these people to get there to do the – to do it. And I feel that we save property, we save lives. And I went home with a nice feeling every day. And I also feel that we have the respect. Respect is very, very important in life, respect. Promptness, and your, uh, your reputation depends on things like that.

And another thing, too, another proud achievement is not only all my children, they kept their noses clean, never got into trouble with police and so forth. And another thing is my son making West Point was a great pride to us. And our daughter, Maureen, she married a West Pointer. It's ironic, when Frank, he may be running the battalion, or he may be running a brigade, a lot of people don't know the wives also run the brigades. They look after the needs of the wives and their families, and they have periodic meetings and organizations for self help.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I think this is a good place to end. I want to thank you very much. You're a good storyteller, and you have a lot to tell.

MATERIA: Could I just interject one more thing?

LEVINE: quickly, yeah.

MATERIA: I recall on the boat coming over that the first time people ever had a banana. I heard it here on the show one time, but I recall some people saying, "What is this?" Like people, northern people, uh, "It's a banana." "What is a banana? How do you eat it?" "Well, you take the skin off, and you eat it." (he laughs) And they didn't know what to eat, this or that, but they didn't know what a banana was.

LEVINE: Okay. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off. I've been speaking with Michael Materia, who came from Sicily in 1931, when he was eight years old, and we're in the Ellis Island Studio. It's June 22, 1994. Thank you.

MATERIA: You're welcome. It's a pleasure.