

EI-482  
JOSEPHINE KEENAN MATERIA  
BIRTH DATE: JULY 28, 1926  
INTERVIEW DATE: JUNE 22, 1994  
RUNNING TIME: 20:51  
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.  
RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY  
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO  
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 4/1996  
REVISED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, IRV SILBERG

IRELAND, 1930  
AGE 3

SHIP: CEDRIC  
PORT:  
RESIDENCES:  
    IRELAND: SLIGO  
    US: NY, NY; MILFORD, NJ

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mrs. Materia is the wife of Michael Materia,  
Interview EI-481.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm  
here, it's June 22, 1994. I'm about to talk with Josephine Materia, who  
is here with her husband, Michael, who I have just interviewed. And  
Mrs. Materia came from Ireland when she was about three years old, around  
1930. So I'm very happy to have your story in our collection as well as  
you husband's.

MATERIA: Thank you.

LEVINE: Why don't we start out by your saying your birth date.

MATERIA: It's July 28, 1926.

LEVINE: And where in Ireland were you born?

MATERIA: I was born in Belfast, Ireland, and that's where my father  
was born.

LEVINE: Oh. And you lived there until you left for America?

MATERIA: No. My mother was born in Sligo, so she met my father in  
Belfast. She had gone there to get an occupation, business, and she met  
him, they got married, and they came back to where she came from, Sligo.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So is, is Sligo the place where you remember being  
at all in Ireland?

MATERIA: Yes, yes. I just remember a little bit, of course, because I was too young.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What . . .

MATERIA: But I remember my grandfather being a big man. He was about six-four. And I just used to follow him around, hang around his legs and hold onto him, and just run wherever he took me. I just have a nice memory.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What was your maiden name?

MATERIA: Uh, Scanlon.

LEVINE: S-C . . .

MATERIA: My mother's maiden name?

LEVINE: No, yours.

MATERIA: Oh, Keenan.

LEVINE: Keenan.

MATERIA: Keenan.

LEVINE: That's K . . .

MATERIA: E-E . . .

LEVINE: N-A-N.

MATERIA: N-A-N.

LEVINE: And, um, your grandfather, was that your mother's father?

MATERIA: My mother's father.

LEVINE: And what was his name?

MATERIA: His name? Joseph.

LEVINE: And his last name?

MATERIA: Scanlon.

LEVINE: That was Scanlon.

MATERIA: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay. And do you remember your grandmother at all?

MATERIA: Um, not as much as him, because I guess the size of him. But she was a tiny little woman, always busy, because they had, uh, thirteen

children. So she was always busy doing things, cooking, doing the wash, but a very loving grandmother, hugging, kissing.

LEVINE: Um, how about, uh, now, on your father's side, did you know those grandparents?

MATERIA: Um, I really don't remember them. I guess I had left there when I was too young, you know, to come back to Sligo. So I really don't.

LEVINE: And what was your mother's name?

MATERIA: Elizabeth.

LEVINE: And, um, did you have brothers and sisters in Ireland?

MATERIA: No, I'm the only one. ( she laughs ) That's why I always thought when I got married, I'd love a few children.

LEVINE: Yeah. How about aunts and uncles? Do you remember any of them from Ireland?

MATERIA: There was one uncle still living at home, my Uncle Jim. And they said when we left that he loved me so much he hid me. He didn't want me to go. ( she laughs ) So they had to go around and see where he was and where he had me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember him at all? Do you remember experiences with him?

MATERIA: He came to this country one time, and it was just so wonderful to see him. And he had these stories that he told me about hiding me.

LEVINE: And, uh, let's see, is there anything else? Do you remember anything about the town, or about the house you lived in, or, um . . .

MATERIA: I just remember a little bit about the river ran in front of the house. And, you know, they'd walk me across the road, and let me look at the river. And, uh, the boats, and the swans, even, they had on the river, and it was very pretty. And, um . . .

LEVINE: Do you remember what river it was?

MATERIA: Oh, my goodness. I can't recall the name now. But, uh, my husband took me back to Ireland, and we went to see the house, and I went over across the road and looked at the river. It was just beautiful.

LEVINE: Wow. How about coming over? Do you remember anything about leaving, or, um, packing, anything you had, maybe a favorite toy or clothing or anything that you . . .

MATERIA: Um, I remember having a little stuffed toy, and that was the only thing I brought. We brought very little. I think it was just one

little suitcase. And my mother was very nervous. They said she was very nervous, you know, the first trip away from home with a little, uh, three-year-old, going to a strange land, I guess. And my father had gone one year before to get a job, and to get money to bring us over. So it took about a year for him to do that.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

MATERIA: Joseph.

LEVINE: Joseph. And, so he came to America a year before you.

MATERIA: A year before.

LEVINE: And stayed here?

MATERIA: Yes. He was living with, um, I had two aunts and uncles in Sheepshead Bay, so he was staying with them.

LEVINE: I see.

MATERIA: And they helped him, you know, they fed him, and he had a nice bed to sleep in. And, when he got a job, he started saving. So it took him about year, and then he sent for us.

LEVINE: Do you remember, do you know, or were you told, what he was doing here to earn the money to send for you and your mother?

MATERIA: He worked in the post office. That's what he did in Ireland. So, uh, I guess they helped him to get in, or, you know, that's where he got the job.

LEVINE: I see. Were other family members that were here, were they also working in the post office? Did you think that . . .

MATERIA: I think they knew somebody, so they mentioned his name, and he had experience in Ireland, so that helped quite a bit.

LEVINE: I see. So he sent money for the passage, and then you and your mother traveled alone, or were you traveling with anyone else?

MATERIA: Just the two of us. So I think that's probably why she was very nervous.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MATERIA: She said she never let go of my hand in the rough seas. But I think, too, when they passed the Statue of Liberty, like my husband said, there was a big commotion, you know, "We're here, we're in America." And everybody was just so happy.

LEVINE: And what was the name of the ship you were on?

MATERIA: The Cedric.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, um, let's see. Do you remember Ellis Island at all?

MATERIA: No. Just, um, very little, just getting off, holding on -- to my mother's hand, and this big place that we went into. But I don't remember much else.

LEVINE: And, uh, how about the reunion with your father? Well, you probably didn't even remember your father, or did you?

MATERIA: Um, a little, yes, yes. Uh, my mother crying and kissing and hugging and -- it was just wonderful.

LEVINE: So your father, then you left Ellis Island with your father, and how did you go? Do you remember how you, what transportation you took to get where you were going?

MATERIA: I don't think anybody had a car then. I think we went by public transportation. Hmm.

LEVINE: And you went to Sheepshead Bay?

MATERIA: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And . . .

MATERIA: And we stayed, too, with my aunt and uncles, and then my other aunt and uncle lived next door, so there was a big celebration.

LEVINE: And, um, let's see, and then did you stay there? Did you stay in the . . .

MATERIA: We stayed there for, um, it must have been maybe a year or so. And then he got a position in, um, Milford, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, on the borderline, as a caretaker. So they enjoyed that very much, you know. So we stayed there for several years, and he took care of this big home for these, this couple who worked in the city. And, uh, my mother got very lonesome, though, for the aunt and uncles, and we came back to Sheepshead Bay and got a little bungalow, and we were only like two blocks away from our families, the aunt and uncles and cousins. So she was very happy, and we stayed there all our life.

LEVINE: I see. Can you remember your mother from, from when you were a little girl? How would you describe what your mother was like?

MATERIA: Uh, I guess being the only one, I got lots of love. I wasn't spoiled, though. (laughs) But she was very caring, loving, made lots of goodies, got me to school on time, made my clothes. Um, she was a very wonderful lady. Religious, very religious. And my dad, he was, too. I had great parents.

LEVINE: Do you remember any customs that they brought with them that were from Ireland that they, that they kept up in this country?

MATERIA: Um, well, St. Patty's day was always a big day, and they were very proud of their heritage. But they were happy to be in this country, so happy. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: Do you know what motivated them to come here? Did they ever talk about that?

MATERIA: Um, my mother's sister was a nun. She was the first one to come over. And then, um, my uncle and my aunt, her brother and sister. So when they came here they used to write letters all the time. "You have to come to America, it's wonderful." You know, "The land of opportunity, you'll be so happy, we'll all be together." But I think it was very sad knowing she would never see her parents again, because nobody had that much money then to go back and visit. So that must have been very sad leaving.

LEVINE: Were you living in a largely Irish community in Sheepshead Bay?

MATERIA: Um, I think at first, and then it was changing, because I remember Jewish people. We had an Italian family who we didn't really know about Italians. And then we learned they were wonderful, you know. They invited us over at Christmas, and we saw how they observed Christmas, and it was a Jewish family at the end. We lived in a little court in a Bungalow, and, 'cos it was a seaside place years ago, Sheepshead Bay, and then they started being all year 'round homes. And we learned how the Jewish family lived. You know, they'd send up something of whatever they made, and they got to know each other. Like when the ice man came, he was Italian, and he delivered your coal for your heating, and you got to know people. And I learned about different children when I went to school.

LEVINE: You went to school there first?

MATERIA: Yes, uh-huh.

LEVINE: Can you describe what school was like? And, well, you didn't have trouble with the language, because you had that.

MATERIA: No, no.

LEVINE: Were there other children there that had come from someplace else that didn't speak English in your school, in your class?

MATERIA: Just a few. Most of them were born here, that I remember. But it was great to meet, you know, different kids with different parents.

LEVINE: Were you called a greenhorn at any point, or did you feel that you were discriminated against in any way because you had come from Europe?

MATERIA: No, not at all. No, I was accepted. I was just one of the kids.

LEVINE: Uh, can you think of, as a child, how, any games you played, any, what you did for fun?

MATERIA: I loved growing up. ( they laugh ) We played, there weren't too many cars in the streets then, and we played marbles, we played punch ball, hide n' go seek, uh, kick the can, jump rope. And the boys would come over and turn the rope for us. It was wonderful growing up. I made so many good friends.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds like you had a happy childhood.

MATERIA: Oh, I did, I did.

LEVINE: Okay. So then, uh, you, how long did you stay in school? How far along did you go?

MATERIA: I, I didn't graduate high school. I went to six months before, because my father died. And being the only one, my father and mother were so close that she really took it very bad, so I knew I had to get out and get a job and work.

LEVINE: Had your mother worked over here? Had your mother . . .

MATERIA: She - she did work at home. She took in sewing. She was a beautiful sewer. And, um, she'd do a lot in the house. Bake, sew . . .

LEVINE: And so what kind of job did you take at first?

MATERIA: First I went into an insurance company, and they didn't give raises that freely, so I applied for the telephone company, and that's what I went into. I was in the accounting department. And it was very good, a very good company.

LEVINE: And how long did you stay with them?

MATERIA: Till, um, right after I got pregnant. I worked for about seven months, and then I left. And my husband said he'd rather have me home with the baby, and they all came one after another, so I just didn't go back to work.

LEVINE: Do you remember the circumstances under which you met your husband?

MATERIA: Uh, they used to have dances in the neighborhood, in Sheepshead Bay, and the mothers ran it, for a little place for everybody to go to. It was like a meeting place. And they'd cook things and have soft drinks, soda, and one day Mike came in. ( she laughs ) And every once in a while I could see him looking at me, and he'd ask me to dance, and it just felt like there was something there. Hmm.

LEVINE: So did you see him a long time before you got married, or you got married . . .

MATERIA: Five years we went together, five years.

LEVINE: And, um . . .

MATERIA: And we're married forty-five years.

LEVINE: And, uh, why don't you say the names of your children in their order, in their birth order?

MATERIA: Joseph is our oldest, Maureen, Michael, Kathleen. We call her Kathy, and Patricia. My pride and joy.

LEVINE: Your baby.

MATERIA: All of them.

LEVINE: Oh, all of them.

MATERIA: All of them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. I was going to ask you what you're most proud of.

MATERIA: I guess my wonderful husband and our children. And now our grandchildren.

LEVINE: And, uh, is there, are there any ways that you think you have about you that are Irish? Do you think you've . . .

MATERIA: Um, let me see. Well, I'm very proud of being Irish, and I guess I'm, I love to hear the Irish music on St. Patty's Day and watch the parade and have my cup of tea. And I make Irish stew and soda bread and give it to some of my neighbors.

LEVINE: And, um, how about this, this phase of your life, when your children are grown and, what, how is this for you?

MATERIA: I think it's wonderful, because now we can, um, he's retired, we have time off. And the ones that are away, we can go visit them, so it's a nice vacation for us. So we enjoy that. And babysitting. We need it. And we enjoy that.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, is there anything else you can think of about, uh, coming to this country as a three-year-old and living your life out here? Is there anything else that you'd like to say before we close?

MATERIA: I guess I think it was the best thing my mom and dad ever did, move to America. We love it. We had our children here. I met my husband here. And I'm very happy, and I thank God.

LEVINE: Well, I think that's a nice place to end. I want to thank you very much.

MATERIA: Thank you.

LEVINE: And I've been speaking with Josephine Matera, who came from Ireland at three years old in around 1930, and today is June 22, 1994, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off. Thanks. ( they laugh )

MATERA: Thank you very much.  
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