

EI-005

MARIA ALONGI PANAPINTO

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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SICILY, 1920

AGE 22

RESIDENCES: MONTE ALEGRO, SICILY

PIERMONT, WV; BROOKLYN, NY, STATEN ISLAND

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist with the National Park Service. I'm here with Maria Panapinto, who is going to tell us about her life. She came to this country from Sicily in 1919 and 1920.

PANAPINTO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Okay. Could you please give me your full name and the year and date you were born.

PANAPINTO: Maria Panapinto. I come to this country in 1920, the end of 1919 and the beginning of 1920.

SIGRIST: Okay. Could you please give me your birth date, please?

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PANAPINTO: My birthday?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

PANAPINTO: I'm ninety-two years old. October 27th I'll be ninety-three years old.

SIGRIST: I see. What town were you born in?

PANAPINTO: I was born in Sicily, Monte Alegro.

SIGRIST: I see. And can you tell me, what was your father's name?

PANAPINTO: My father's name was Antonio Alongi.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. And what did he do for a living? What did he do for a living?

PANAPINTO: He was working, and after he come to this country he has a business store. And he (?) my mother (?), and my brothers.

SIGRIST: I see. Could you name all your brothers for me, please?

PANAPINTO: One is named Tommy, one Jim and one Joe.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you have a sister?

PANAPINTO: No.

SIGRIST: No sisters.

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PANAPINTO: No.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

PANAPINTO: Vincenza (?).

SIGRIST: I see. What was her maiden name? Yes?

PANAPINTO: Like in (?).

SIGRIST: And did she, was she in the house all the time, or did she have a job?

PANAPINTO: Yeah. In the house all the time, take care of home.

SIGRIST: I see. Did she do the cooking?

PANAPINTO: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Was she a good cook?

PANAPINTO: She's a very good cook.

SIGRIST: Yes. Can you tell me about, what religion are you?

PANAPINTO: Catholic.

SIGRIST: And was your family very active in the church in Sicily?

PANAPINTO: You know, they go, you know what I mean.

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SIGRIST: Sort of? Uh-huh. And since you were the only girl in the family, right?

PANAPINTO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you have to help out with the housework? No? (he laughs)

PANAPINTO: At that time, who helped?

SIGRIST: Did you do any cooking? Did you help your mother cook at all?

PANAPINTO: Well, I learned. I learned how to cook.

SIGRIST: From your mother?

PANAPINTO: From my mother, I learned.

SIGRIST: I see. What was your favorite thing that she made?

PANAPINTO: My favorite thing? You want to know the truth? Spaghetti.

SIGRIST: Spaghetti.

PANAPINTO: And meatballs. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Mmm. Sounds good. Okay. Did you live, this town in Sicily, is it a big town? A small town?

PANAPINTO: A small town.

SIGRIST: A small town.

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PANAPINTO: A small town, my home town.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you live in a house, or did you have an apartment, or?

PANAPINTO: No, no. I lived in a house. We owned a home.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you have animals at all?

PANAPINTO: No.

SIGRIST: Did you have a horse or anything like that? Nothing like that.

PANAPINTO: Not too much over there. Nobody can use too much there.

SIGRIST: I see. And your father worked in town, then, in that same town.

PANAPINTO: Yes. I don't remember my father in Italy, because he come in this country in 19, 1902.

SIGRIST: Oh, he came, then, before you did.

PANAPINTO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. Why did he come to America?

PANAPINTO: Well, he wanted to try and be best and all, take care of the family right.

SIGRIST: I see.

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PANAPINTO: He did it.

SIGRIST: And did he send money to Sicily?

PANAPINTO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Yes.

PANAPINTO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: I see. When he came to America, where did he live?

PANAPINTO: Who?

SIGRIST: Your father, where did he live when he came to America.

PANAPINTO: Up to West Virginia.

SIGRIST: He went right to West Virginia.

PANAPINTO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And what kind of work did he do in West Virginia?

PANAPINTO: He had a business, a store business.

SIGRIST: I see. So he was sending money to your family? Then . . .

PANAPINTO: Oh, yes, sent money. He was sending money for the trip to come to this country.

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SIGRIST: I see. So did you come over with your mother and your brothers, then, or did they . . .

PANAPINTO: First I come with my mother.

SIGRIST: Yes.

PANAPINTO: No, first I come with my bigger brother, Tommy (?). And after Mama. After Mama come over here with me, and another brother stay there. He passed away over there and not come.

SIGRIST: I see. Now, when, do you remember when I assume your mother told you that you were going to go to America. Do you remember being excited about that or disappointed or . . .

PANAPINTO: No, I don't remember very well, you know. That's a long time ago.

SIGRIST: Yes, yes.

PANAPINTO: And I had a big family home. You forget everything. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: You hadn't seen your father in a long time.

PANAPINTO: Thirteen years. After thirteen years I see my father.

SIGRIST: I see. All right. Do you remember, do you remember what port you left out of in Sicily?

PANAPINTO: No.

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SIGRIST: You don't. Do you remember the boat or anything?

PANAPINTO: One thing, I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Let me get this straight. You came over with your mother and one brother. When you came over to America you came with your mother?

PANAPINTO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And one brother. Okay. And what was the year of that again? I forgot.

PANAPINTO: When?

SIGRIST: The year that you came over.

PANAPINTO: With my brother?

SIGRIST: When you came over.

PANAPINTO: I come with my mother and my brother.

SIGRIST: I see. And this was in 1919?

PANAPINTO: And we go straight up to West Virginia.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything about the boat ride over?

PANAPINTO: No.

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SIGRIST: Do you remember was it stormy?

PANAPINTO: No, no.

SIGRIST: Nothing like that.

PANAPINTO: No. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

PANAPINTO: You know why I don't remember, because I think my mind was on my father. I wanted to see my father.

SIGRIST: Yes, yes.

PANAPINTO: Because I never see my father. I don't remember him come before us over here.

SIGRIST: Did you have photographs of him or anything like that? Photographs of your father after he went . . .

PANAPINTO: Oh, yeah. He was a gentleman.

SIGRIST: I see. Okay. So you arrived at Ellis Island. And then what happened? Were you, you were processed, yes?

PANAPINTO: After come my father picking me up and taking me up to West Virginia.

SIGRIST: I see.

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PANAPINTO: That's all.

SIGRIST: But you said you were here for a while.

PANAPINTO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How long were you here for?

PANAPINTO: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: A week, maybe?

PANAPINTO: A week, about a week.

SIGRIST: Why were you detained here?

PANAPINTO: You know why? We passed over there, there was a woman that died in the boat. She was an old, old woman. And they can (?), they try to make it. She die in the boat.

SIGRIST: And so they brought everybody to Ellis.

PANAPINTO: They keep everybody off.

SIGRIST: Were they afraid that she had a disease or something? Did they want to just change it all out?

PANAPINTO: She die old age. A nice person.

SIGRIST: So, now, when you were held here at Ellis, were you, did you stay in a

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dorm room with your mother and your brother, or . . .

PANAPINTO: Actually, I was like one wing, you know, and we look all sides once in a while. My cousin was there, and I call her name. I say, "Where's my father?" He was there next to my cousin. He said, "I am your father." "No, it can't be him. I left him in Italy." The man over there, my uncle, looked like my father, the moustache, the white hair, good-looking. Actually, no. Actually, Uncle Tony. My cousins says, "That's your father, honey."

SIGRIST: So were you really excited?

PANAPINTO: I didn't remember.

SIGRIST: But you hadn't seen him yet.

PANAPINTO: I don't remember. He left me, he left a young kid to take care of.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when you were, when you were at here, at Ellis Island, was your mother very frightened? Did she not know what was going to happen?

PANAPINTO: My father. My mother stay home. My father come and pick me up.

SIGRIST: I see. So you were here by yourself, then.

PANAPINTO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Your mother . . .

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PANAPINTO: Well, my father was here, my mother was here, my bigger brother.
Only me.

SIGRIST: Only you. And you don't know why you were held here, why just you
had to stay here?

PANAPINTO: Yeah, because I didn't have enough money to come.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see.

PANAPINTO: They told me you've got to pay.

SIGRIST: That's right.

PANAPINTO: Mmm.

SIGRIST: So did your father have to bring the money for you?

PANAPINTO: I think he had the money home, pay their trip. I pay my trip, thank God.
Everything turned out all right.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, tell me a little bit, then, about what happened afterwards.
You went to West Virginia, you said.

PANAPINTO: I went to West Virginia and got married.

SIGRIST: Okay, well, wait. Let's, (they laugh) did your father have a house for
you all in West Virginia?

PANAPINTO: Yeah. I had the house. Paid the rent every month. They don't want no

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house, (?). But they had the money, thank God. They had nice possessions, you know what I mean?

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Did your mother like West Virginia? Was she happy about being in West Virginia?

PANAPINTO: Yeah, she was happy.

SIGRIST: She was happy to see your father.

PANAPINTO: She was happy to see my father, happy got a brother, got a son there.

SIGRIST: Yes. And your brother, he went and lived there, too?

PANAPINTO: Yeah. Would you believe my brother is still in West Virginia? My bigger brother.

SIGRIST: Where in West Virginia, specifically?

PANAPINTO: Piermont.

SIGRIST: Piermont.

PANAPINTO: Piermont, West Virginia.

SIGRIST: I see. And did, and you said you, you paid rent, and you all lived together.

PANAPINTO: Yeah.

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SIGRIST: I see. And so you were a family again.

PANAPINTO: No, if you want to know the truth. When I come this country, I come the end of November. No. (she pauses) Yeah, I come the end of November. I stayed about three months single, and got married.

SIGRIST: Oh, so you got married right away, then, when you got here.

PANAPINTO: Oh, my God, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you know the man that you married beforehand?

PANAPINTO: No. You know what happened? He used to live with his brother and, of course, come, he wanted to marry me. I said to my father, "Hey," I says, "I don't know (?) a man." My father said, "Listen, I say to you something. I left you. I know he's a gentle man, I know good, working man. If you want to marry, he don't want to in (?). Do what you please." He was a nice gentleman.

SIGRIST: You liked him when you met him.

PANAPINTO: Very nice, gentleman, my husband.

SIGRIST: Was he handsome?

PANAPINTO: You can't get a better man than what I have.

SIGRIST: Yes. And did you, when you married this man, and what was his name, his first name?

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PANAPINTO: My husband?

SIGRIST: Yes.

PANAPINTO: Christiano.

SIGRIST: So he was, was he from Sicily also, or from . . .

PANAPINTO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see.

PANAPINTO: From Sicily.

SIGRIST: And he lived in that town in West Virginia?

PANAPINTO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Were there a lot of Sicilians in that town?

PANAPINTO: No. Actually, he lived with his brother, and they go and double the house. My mother live there.

SIGRIST: I see. I see.

PANAPINTO: Thank God I had, thank God I had a wonderful man.

SIGRIST: After you married, did you stay in that town in West Virginia?

PANAPINTO: We stayed there, and after we move to Brooklyn.

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SIGRIST: To Brooklyn.

PANAPINTO: To Brooklyn. My husband got a job at (?) High School, a high school.

SIGRIST: Doing what? What did he do there?

PANAPINTO: He was a good, working man. He could get a job any place, thank God.

SIGRIST: So, and how long did you live there? How long did you live there?

PANAPINTO: Together? We lived about twenty-five years, a little bit more.

SIGRIST: I see. And did you have children?

PANAPINTO: He was a nice guy. You can't get a better man what I had.

SIGRIST: And how many children did you have? You had four kids!

PANAPINTO: I had three girls and one boy.

SIGRIST: And what are their names?

PANAPINTO: Uh, Betty, that's my daughter. Uh, Jeanette, Tony, (?). And then my son is Jimmy.

SIGRIST: So now when did you, when did you move to Staten Island?

PANAPINTO: Uh, I think in 1926 or '27.

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SIGRIST: Oh, so you've lived in Staten Island a long time, then.

PANAPINTO: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Yes. Were you involved in the church in Staten Island at all?

PANAPINTO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Your husband was Catholic?

PANAPINTO: Used to go on Sunday, that's all.

SIGRIST: Did you, you were busy raising your kids, right? You were busy raising the children.

PANAPINTO: Of course.

SIGRIST: Yes. And did you, did you see your parents at all? Did you go to West Virginia to visit your parents after you were married?

PANAPINTO: With my father and mother?

SIGRIST: Yes.

PANAPINTO: Well, no. I would stay once a year because they were too far away.

SIGRIST: Did you go down there to visit them?

PANAPINTO: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

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SIGRIST: I see. And how long did they live? When did they, did they live in West Virginia for the rest of their lives?

PANAPINTO: Yeah. Oh, that was a long time.

SIGRIST: I see. Did they live to be, to be old?

PANAPINTO: Oh, yeah. A long time.

SIGRIST: Yeah? Let's see. And you said you had some grandchildren. Would you like to tell us about your grandchildren at all?

PANAPINTO: Yeah. We raised about, yeah, five, five. Four girls and one boy. A big family.

SIGRIST: Yes, a big family.

PANAPINTO: One day I was with one of my daughters and I see a lot of kids. I call my older daughter and said, "Who left this kid here?" Mom, your grandchildren. But I don't see. Too far away. They live too far away. I got a nice grandchild, I tell you. Oh, God bless. A good family.

SIGRIST: Yes, yes. So we'll just wrap this up. So you've felt you had a good life, then?

PANAPINTO: Thank God.

SIGRIST: Worked hard all your life.

PANAPINTO: I worked hard. My husband (?), and through Depression can't get no

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job. I had children to support. Somebody said, he said to somebody, "I don't know what to do." The gentleman said to my husband, "Do what I'm doing." He said, "What are you doing?" "Sell your blood." He sells his blood and supports four kids.

SIGRIST: So that's what you did during the Depression. How often did you do that?

PANAPINTO: Every two months.

SIGRIST: Really? Did your husband do that, too?

PANAPINTO: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Really!

PANAPINTO: But after got a job.

SIGRIST: I see. What did he get a job doing? What job did he finally get?

PANAPINTO: Uh, bricklayer work, help.

SIGRIST: I see. And you were living in Staten Island at that time.

PANAPINTO: Oh, yeah. We had a little house. I paid rent. I paid regular rent.

SIGRIST: The good old days.

PANAPINTO: No more, no.

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SIGRIST: Oh, I know. (he laughs) But, well, is there anything you'd just like to sort of say to end this interview? Is there anything?

PANAPINTO: Thank God I got a wonderful family. I could tell you. It's all wonderful.

SIGRIST: It's important to have a good family.

PANAPINTO: I got wonderful children, nice grandchildren and nice great-grandchildren.

SIGRIST: Yes. How many great-grandchildren? How many great-grandchildren?

PANAPINTO: Who knows.

SIGRIST: A lot?

PANAPINTO: Yeah. I don't know. I got twenty-seven in grand-children. I don't have any great-grandchildren. I don't know.

SIGRIST: Oh, my God. Probably a lot.

PANAPINTO: Okay.

SIGRIST: All right, well, I want to thank you very much for giving us this interview.

PANAPINTO: I thank you for asking me questions. I answered as much as I could.

SIGRIST: Oh, you did. You did a wonderful job. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service, signing off for Maria Panapinto.

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PANAPINTO: Now you take care of yourself.