

EI - 554

BENNY PANELLI

BIRTHDATE:

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INTERVIEWER: ELYSA MATSEN

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: JASMINE NACHIT

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ITALY 1922

RESIDENCE: ;MONTELUONGO

AGE: 18

US RESIDENCE: NEW YORK CITY

PASSAGE ON "THE TORREMINA" PORT: GENOA

MATSEN: Good afternoon, this is Elysa Matsen for the National Park Service.

Today is September 22, 1994 and I'm at Ellis Island with Mr. Benny PANELLI who came from Northern Italy in January of 1922 when he was 18 years old.

PANELLI: Right.

MATSEN: Mr. PANELLI , can you tell me the name of the town you were born in?

PANELLI: Yea. Montelungo.

MATSEN: And can you spell that for me?

PANELLI: I gave you the picture the name is there. Montelungo.

MATSEN: Oh, okay... M-O-N-T-E-L-U-N-G-O.

PANELLI: Si.

MATSEN: Can you tell me a little bit about that town?

PANELLI: That town, they all farmers.

MATSEN: What did the farmers grow?

PANELLI: They grow wheat, corn, potatoes, vegetables and all that stuff.

MATSEN: Now, how long did you live in that town?

PANELLI: Since I was born and raised 'till I was 18 years old.

MATSEN: 'Till you were 18 years old...

PANELLI: Yea.

MATSEN: Can you tell me what your father's name was?

PANELLI: Raymond PANELLI.

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

PANELLI: What he done for a living? Farmer.

MATSEN: He was a farmer? What crops did he farm?

PANELLI: The same thing; wheat, corn, potatoes, vegetables. All that stuff.

MATSEN: Can you tell me what your father looked like?

PANELLI: What?

MATSEN: What did your father look like? Can you describe him for me?

PANELLI: My father looks like? If I had a picture, I would show you, but I haven't got it. How can I describe?

MATSEN: Was he a tall man?

PANELLI: He was a little taller than me, a little chubbier than me. He had a lot of hair, I haven't got. He had a lot of hair. He a little, you know, them days, mustache.

MATSEN: And what can you tell me about your father? What was he like? Do you remember a story from your childhood?

PANELLI: Well, I lost my father when I was five years old and... I still remember my father, but I was five years old.

MATSEN: You were very young. How about your mother? Can you tell me about your mother, what she looked like?

PANELLI: My mother was a beautiful woman, oh yea. She was tall, slim, nice shape and, uh I don't know. What can I tell you?

MATSEN: Is there anything you remember from your childhood? A story that you associate with your mother that you remember from your childhood?

PANELLI: My mother was left with six kids without a father, so she had to help in the farm. The work in the farm, and tried to grow up the family.

MATSEN: So that was a lot of hard work.

PANELLI: Then, the first World War broke out. My older brother had to go in the army and I was the oldest to take care of the family.

MATSEN: How many brother's and sister's did you have and what were there names?

PANELLI: My brothers? I had three brothers. Three brothers and two sisters.

MATSEN: What are their names, were there names?

PANELLI: All of them?

MATSEN: Yes, please. If you know.

PANELLI: 'Ey! I can't even spell all of them.

MATSEN: You could just tell me what their names are, what you can remember.

PANELLI: The first one, John PANELLI, Alfredo PANELLI and one Massimo PANELLI and my sister was Louise PANELLI and the other sister was Judita PANELLI.

MATSEN: What did your house look like?

PANELLI: In Europe?

MATSEN: Yes, in Italy.

PANELLI: In Italy we had a nice home.

MATSEN: What was it made out of?

PANELLI: Made out of stone.

MATSEN: It was a stone building? Did you have a garden? Your own? For your family, do you remember in your backyard did you have a garden?

PANELLI: Of course! We had a farm, we had everything. The only thing my mother had to buy; oil. Olive oil. That's it. The rest we had everything in the house, because we had wheat, we had flour. From the wheat you make flour, from the corn you make flour, potatoes you make... potatoes. We had sheep, cows and we had the, eh, pigs. You kill the pigs. When my mother used to, anybody in the house that makes clothes, shoes... we used to raise the calf. Raise them big, nice and then we used to take them in the market and sell it. That's how we make money. You know? To buy whatever we need. My mother used to do that.

MATSEN: So the family was very self sufficient.

PANELLI: Sheep the same thing. They used to raise the little lamb and then we used to sell it in the market. That's how we lived there.

MATSEN: So, everything was taken care of from the farm.

PANELLI: Everything was taken care of from the farm.

MATSEN: Do you remember what your mom used to cook for you for dinner? What would she make for dinner?

PANELLI: We used to eat a lot of polenta, you know polenta?

MATSEN: Yes, I do... yes, I do.

PANELLI: Ahhh si. We used to have a lot of corn and we used to make flour. My mother used to make polenta with gravy, she used to make gravy with the polenta. We had cheese, a lot of cheese, hard cheese. Because we used to make cheese, our OWN cheese.

MATSEN: Do you remember how you'd make it?

PANELLI: Oh yea.

MATSEN: Tell me about how you'd make it. Describe it for me.

PANELLI: You boil the milk and then you got the presuno and you dissolve it, put it in the milk and it cracks up. The milk cracks up and you put 'em in the form ... and you squeeze it and squeeze it and squeeze until it don't draw no more juice. When it's finished making the juice, you put 'em in shelves in a dry room and it dries up there. Then you turn it the other way, and it dries up there... you see?

MATSEN: So it was parmesean, romano that kind of a cheese?

PANELLI: No, we made only farm for ourselves. We didn't sell it. It was only for our own use in the house. Then we used to make cheese...that big...that's in the cellar in the winter and it doesn't come up because of there's a lot of cream of the milk and you don't...you take it like...and you used to eat it with the polenta. Nice, soft... like cream. You see? Who was better than us? Right? Why'd they come here for?

MATSEN: (laughter) Did you have vegetables? Do you remember eating vegetables with your dinner? Did you have any certain ones that were your favorite?

PANELLI: Everything.

MATSEN: What was your favorite?

PANELLI: Salad.

MATSEN: What was your favorite thing to eat?

PANELLI: Salad, onion, uh... what do you call this? I got to think a little.

MATSEN: How about your grandparents? Do you remember your grandparents?

PANELLI: Oh yea.

MATSEN: Tell me about them.

PANELLI: And, my grandparents they were not farmers.

MATSEN: They were not farmers?

PANELLI: No.

MATSEN: What did they do?

PANELLI: Like my mother's mother, they had to transport... go in the city and transport stuff, whatever. Wine or whatever they had to transport with horses.

MATSEN: Oh, so they had their own business.

PANELLI: Yea.

MATSEN: Do you remember their names? What was your mothers' mother's name? First name?

PANELLI: My mother's name? My mothers' mother?

MATSEN: Yes. You're grandmother.

PANELLI: Oreoli, I know. The second name.

MATSEN: Can you spell that? Can you spell it? Spell the name?

PANELLI: O-R-E-O-L-I. Oreoli.

MATSEN: What can you tell me about holidays in your house? Do you remember celebrating holidays when you were living in Italy?

PANELLI: New Years holiday... La Madonna, la Madonna del Grazie.

MATSEN: And how would you celebrate the holiday?

PANELLI: They celebrate like they do here (laughter). You got a face in the house, outside, they go to church. They used to go to church...

MATSEN: Was there a special food your mother would make for you?

PANELLI: Oh yea.

MATSEN: Do you remember what those things were?

PANELLI: Uh, la Madonna used to make ravioli. Homemade. You know ravioli?

MATSEN: Yes, I do.

PANELLI: You do? Well they used to make all in the house.

MATSEN: Do you remember how it was made?

PANELLI: Oh, because we make them home now. We make them home, me and my wife.

MATSEN: Tell me about that. How do you make it?

PANELLI: Like now, I make everything home.

MATSEN: You do the cooking?

PANELLI: Of course.

MATSEN: Well tell me how you made that!

PANELLI: I make my own pasta home. I make my own ravioli. I make my own capiletti, right?

MATSEN: Can you tell me how you make it?

PANELLI: Of course. You gotta make your filling, you gotta make your pasta. Got the machine to make pasta.

MATSEN: What goes in the filling?

PANELLI: The filling ... cheese, parsley a little garlic, spinach...

MATSEN: So ravioli was one thing they would make special on the holidays?

PANELLI: Then we'd make homemade pasta... noodles.

MATSEN: What about dessert?

PANELLI: Huh?

MATSEN: How about dessert? Would there be anything special for dessert on a holiday?

PANELLI: Dessert, we don't cook no cake. We not a bakery in the house. We don't cook that.

MATSEN: Okay, what can you tell me about church when you were in Italy? Where was the church? Was it far?

PANELLI: The church in that town, you have to go to church. Because you know everybody in town. Everybody. And you go to church and the boss of the town is the priest. If you don't go to church...you have to come to church, so we had to go to church, so I served in church too in Italy. I served the priest in church, alright? Oh yea.

MATSEN: Do you remember your neighbors who lived around you when you were in Italy?

PANELLI: Don't forget I'm 74 years old in this country. I'm 90 years old. You loose a little bit of memory, you're not 20 years old anymore, you know? I'm lucky I got all my senses and I remember most of everything, you know? I'm lucky about that.

MATSEN: What about the war? Do you remember wartime in Italy? What was it like to live there then?

PANELLI: First World War?

MATSEN: Yes.

PANELLI: Like I told you before, my brother was in the army and my mother was there with five kids. I was the oldest after my brother and my mother had to work the farm with me, you know?

MATSEN: Did the war effect your town? Did they come in to your town? Was there any fighting in your town, any air raids, anything?

PANELLI: No.

MATSEN: What about school when you were in Italy? Did you go to school while you were in Italy? Can you tell me what it was like to go to school there?

PANELLI: We start from first grade. You go to school for two years the first grade, that's not like here. You go two years first grade, two years in the second grade, two years in the third grade in the school.

MATSEN: Do you remember what you studied?

PANELLI: After that we started to read and write. After 17, 18 years, if you have the money you go to a higher School. But if you haven't got the money, you gotta graduate to the third class. That's as far as you go. You go to the third class that's

it. You graduate in the third class... that's it. Then if you have money, you go to a higher grade.

MATSEN: How about as a child, do you remember any games that you used to play when you were in Italy with other children?

PANELLI: Games? Oh yea. You know bocce? Nice. That's what we used to play.

MATSEN: Well, when you decided to come to America, can you tell me about that? Who decided to come to America and why did you come to this country?

PANELLI: I know why. I still think about the day, why did I come here...

MATSEN: Did you come by yourself? Or did you come with other family members?

PANELLI: Oh, I came with somebody old, much older than me... about 30, 35 years old because my mother said to watch after me.

MATSEN: Was it a friend of your mother's or a relative?

PANELLI: From the town.

MATSEN: Somebody from the town.

PANELLI: Somebody from the same town, sure.

MATSEN: Where did you leave? Do you remember which port you left from?

PANELLI: Oh yea. Genoa.

MATSEN: And do you remember the name of the ship that you came on?

PANELLI: The Torrenina.

MATSEN: And you came in 1922, it was January? And what did the ship look like? Can you tell me about the ship?

PANELLI: The ship? You get on the ship, you go in line to eat like in the army with a tin plate and a tin cup and in the cup they give you wine. No water, or anything else... always wine while you eat. And when you go, you gotta wash your own plate, your own cup, you gotta put it in your place where you live, where you sleep.

MATSEN: Do you remember what that room was like?

PANELLI: No. I came in on the third class. Third class you have no room, you have like an army.

MATSEN: Everyone stays together.

PANELLI: 1, 2, 3...

MATSEN: Oh ok...

PANELLI: ...Down below, you know understand? When the ocean is so bad that it goes over the ship, they send you down below and they lock you down there. They used to lock us down there, below. Anything happen that the ship sink, you can't come out! You're dead!

MATSEN: You're stuck down there. Was the ocean very rough when you came?

PANELLI: Yea.

MATSEN: Was it cold?

PANELLI: The ocean was very rough when I came here.

MATSEN: Was it cold? Do you remember if it was cold?

PANELLI: In the winter. Most of the time I was in the ship hospital. I got very sick.

MATSEN: Where you seasick or did you have another type of illness?

PANELLI: No, no. Sick from the ocean! Seasick. I used to get seasick, very very bad.

MATSEN: So you were in the hospital of the ship?

PANELLI: I went into the hospital, they used to give us nothing. What can they give you when you're seasick. But the guy that was with me, he was afraid I was going to die because I couldn't eat no more. As soon as I smelled food I used to vomit green. You had nothing more, no more in your stomach to throw up and you vomit green. So, my friend that used to take care me, he used to take me to the hospital. They used to give me something to drink, but I don't remember what kind of stuff they used to give me. The way I used to drink, I used to throw up.

MATSEN: So, it wasn't a very nice trip for you.

PANELLI: No.

MATSEN: How long did it take?

PANELLI: From Genoa to Gibraltar was very good. I didn't get sick at all. After Gibraltar then it began to get rough and I used to get very sick. As soon as the boat stopped over here, I was fine. That's obviously a seasick case.

MATSEN: Now, how long did it take you?

PANELLI: Sixteen days.

MATSEN: And when you arrived here, do you remember Ellis Island? Do you remember seeing the Statue?

PANELLI: I saw the picture I saw today, I remember everything. From the boat they took us to this place, Ellis Island and they used to give us coffee and cake or something like that, I remember. And then they used to call you, one by one to go under an examination. They used to examine your eyes...the doctor. The one that wasn't good, sick, they go in one room. The one like me, I was alright in the other room. [unclear] You go back to Italy. They used to send them back.

MATSEN: So there were three places for you to go.

PANELLI: Right. A lot of people used to have red eyes, sometimes...they would send them back.

MATSEN: Now, which line did you go on, were you okay?

PANELLI: Yea.

MATSEN: How long did you stay at Ellis Island?

PANELLI: I think, uh, two days.

MATSEN: Now, why did they keep you there for two days? Do you remember why?

PANELLI: Because they had a lot of people they couldn't go through in one day.

MATSEN: Oh, so there were just too many people.

PANELLI: You know? They couldn't get through in one day. So they used to keep us one day. We arrive here at the port in the morning, then the ship... with the boat, another boat... you get on the boat and and they took us to the island...

MATSEN: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

PANELLI: I remember! Oh yea! I remember every little thing that we did.

MATSEN: Well, you have to tell me all these things!

PANELLI: Yea, I remember...

MATSEN: Who came to pick you up at Ellis Island?

PANELLI: My sister's brother...no, my sister's husband.

MATSEN: And what was his name?

PANELLI: Joseph Pinelli. Instead of PANELLI he was Pinelli with an I. See, he picked me up because them days you had to have somebody in this country. You had to have someone to go with. If you didn't have anybody, they didn't take just anybody in a strange country by yourself. You don't know where to go. You don't know nobody. You gotta have somebody that you go with in the house... that you had a house to go.

MATSEN: When did your sister come to America? She was already here, in America, when you came? When did she come?

PANELLI: I didn't get it...

MATSEN: Your sister...

PANELLI: OH! She came... let me see. She came about 5 or 6 years before me.

MATSEN: Did she come by herself?

PANELLI: No she came with another woman.

MATSEN: But no one from your family went with her, just your sister. Did anyone else from your family come to America? Anyone from your family beside you and your sister.

PANELLI: Me, my sister and one of my brother's. John PANELLI.

MATSEN: When did he come?

PANELLI: He came after my sister. My sister, then he came, then I came.

MATSEN: What was your first job in America?

PANELLI: Wash dishes in Hotel Chelsea. Hotel Chelsea still there today! At 23<sup>rd</sup> st. 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

MATSEN: Where did you live?

PANELLI: I lived with my sister.

MATSEN: How long did you live with you sister before you got your own place?

PANELLI: Since 1927, then I got married in 1927.

MATSEN: How did you meet your wife?

PANELLI: I met my wife in the country, like she's a farmer.

MATSEN: What does that mean? Where did you meet your wife?

PANELLI: I told you, in the farm in this country.

MATSEN: How did you meet.

PANELLI: We used to go in this farm, go in this farm... that's how I met my wife. I married my wife when she was 16 years old. And I was 22.

MATSEN: And when were you married?

PANELLI: And I'm married now 65 years. And I'm going to 66, I'm going to make it to 70 then I'll have a party.

MATSEN: What did you do after that? Tell me about your careers in America. What did you do after you worked in that hotel?

PANELLI: I told you, I work in Chelsea Hotel as dishwasher...

MATSEN: Then what'd you do next?

PANELLI: After dishwasher, I worked in the kitchen as breakfast man. In the same hotel. From there they changed everybody, all the cooks. A new crew came in. You're out of a job. Then you work different places. I don't remember where because this wasn't hotel, this was only nightclubs and I don't think they exist anymore.

MATSEN: What was your very last job?

PANELLI: A cook.

MATSEN: And what can you tell me about your family? How many children do you have?

PANELLI: I have two. A daughter and a son.

MATSEN: And what are their names?

PANELLI: Louis PANELLI and Rachel PANELLI.

MATSEN: And do you have any grandchildren?

PANELLI: No.

MATSEN: No grandchildren

PANELLI: I got one.

MATSEN: You have one grandchild that I know of.

PANELLI: Only one.

MATSEN: Maybe you have two.

PANELLI: Only one, and he's thirty-three years old. From my son.

MATSEN: What else would you like to tell me about your life in America? Is there anything you'd like to tell me for the tape?

PANELLI: What can I tell you? My life consists of me have working, go home, I'm married... like I told you 65 years was with one woman. Isn't that nice?

MATSEN: It's very nice.

PANELLI: What can I tell ya?

MATSEN: Are you glad you came to America?

PANELLI: Sometimes. But sometimes I'm thinking... but too late now because I'm 74 years old in this country. Meanwhile when I came in this country, the next day I wanted to go right back to Italy. I asked my sister gimme the money because I want to go right back with the same ship. I want to go back. So she started to tell me, because you don't know the language, you don't know nothing, you have nobody, you'll find yourself in one building over here, one building on this side...you're used to open air in the farm and you have to understand with your friends and you're young. You miss your friends in Europe. I wanted to come back in the worst way. She finally, "today, tomorrow" there pass a month, two months passed and that's it.

MATSEN: So you got used to it.

PANELLI: I got sick of malaria on 62<sup>nd</sup> street. I don't know, what can I tell you.

MATSEN: Thank you very much for telling us about your story and about coming to America.

PANELLI: And the worst thing to leave your country that you was born and raised and you leave your mother...

MATSEN: It's hard to do that.

PANELLI: Yes, it is.

MATSEN: Well, Mr. Panelli, thank you very much for doing this interview with me. This is Elysa Matsen signing off with Mr. Benny Panelli and it is September 22, 1994 for the Ellis Island oral history project.

Thank you Mr. Panelli

PANELLI: Thank you.