

EI-575

PETER MONTERISI

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PhD

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ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Peter was joined in the interview by his wife.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And I'm here today in Wakefield, Massachusetts. It's December 4, 1994. I'm here with Mr. and Mrs. Peter Monterisi. Mr. Monterisi came from Italy in 1920 when he was eight years old. Today, at the time of the interview, you are eighty-two.

MONTERISI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, I'm very happy to be here. I'm looking forward to anything you can remember related to what we – we talk about.

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

MONTERISI: What do you want to know?

LEVINE: Okay. I'll ask some questions.

MONTERISI: [superposed] All right.

LEVINE: And anything you can think of. And if you don't remember something; it's fine, doesn't matter. Okay, let's start at the beginning – if you'll give your birth date.

MONTERISI: March 12, 1912.

LEVINE: And where in Italy were you born?

MONTERISI: Bari. B-A-R-I. Bari.

LEVINE: Okay.

MONTERISI: At the seaport there.

LEVINE: Oh. And did you live in Bari the whole time until you left for the United States?

MONTERISI: Well, Bari and [not understood], the small town where my mother came from.

LEVINE: Where's that?

MONTERISI: Terlizzi, they call it. [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh boy. Could you possibly spell it?

MONTERISI: Oh, yeah!

LEVINE: Okay.

MONTERISI: T-E-R-L-I-Z-Z-I. Terlizzi. L-I-Z-Z-I. Terlizzi. T-E-R-L-I-Z-Z-I. That's it.

LEVINE: Okay. And so you were back and forth between Bari and Terlizzi?

MONTERISI: Right, right. 'Cause my father was in the First World War. And I remember that.

LEVINE: What did you do?

MONTERISI: I went to school there.

LEVINE: Ah ha.

MONTERISI: 'Til the second grade.

LEVINE: I see. So when your father went off to the First World War, then your mother and the children went to Terlizzi?

MONTERISI: Nah—nooo! She came from there. We stayed – we stayed with his folks. In Bari.

LEVINE: Oh in Bari. [superposed] I see. I see.

MONTERISI: I was born there. See? We didn't have our own home there when we were there. Goin' back and forward. We stayed in his house.

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

LEVINE: I see. So you moved in with your father's mother and father?

MONTERISI: Right, right, right.

LEVINE: Okay. What were their names, your grandparents?

MONTERISI: Monterisi, right?

LEVINE: Right. And do you remember them? Do you remember doing things with them?

MONTERISI: [interposed] I remember what they – walked with them – no. Well, my grandfather used to take me for a walk when I was four years old, five years old, y'know.

LEVINE: Do you remember where you went? Do you remember [not understood]?

MONTERISI: [interposed] Well, in the town itself, yeah.

LEVINE: What kind of a man was he? What kind of a [not understood]?

MONTERISI: Oh. [laughs] You better stay on your toes. [laughs].

LEVINE: Yeah.

MONTERISI: Well, I remember going to school, right? I was in the second grade. They give ya verbs for homework. Ya stand up. All men teachers over there. I never saw a woman teacher. I stand up to see a verb. I stutter. I didn't, ya know, I didn't know a certain line. Bang! Right in the kisser.

LEVINE: Really?

MONTERISI: Do you think – you think I'd go home and tell my mother and father what he did to me? Never. Just keep quiet and take it.

LEVINE: What would happen —

MONTERISI: [interposed] 'Cause I woulda got more. [laughs] It's not like over here, they wanna sue! [laughs] Now this one incident, I'll never forget – because, oh, my face was – [laughs].

LEVINE: Yeah, go ahead.

MONTERISI: Well –

LEVINE: What did you do?

MONTERISI: What'd I do? Nothing. I just took it.

LEVINE: No, but I mean what'd you do to get it?

MONTERISI: I-I didn't know my lesson there when he told me faster in verb. Y'know. I went to recite it, didn't know it. Well. Then when I came over here, right, in South Boston – that's where my uncle lived – we lived with him for a while. And I went to school there. Second grade.

LEVINE: How – how was the school different here?

MONTERISI: [interposed] Do you really wanna know the truth?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MONTERISI: All I didn't know how to speak English, but they didn't teach me a thing until I came to the seventh grade. That's how far advanced I was. All right?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MONTERISI: They put me and my brother – second grade. He got a double promotion: the second to the fourth. I went to second, third, fourth, fifth, all the way up. 'Cause I knew addition, subtraction as good as the teacher, but I couldn't speak English, and I had to take my time and learn. So I started reading books, then I was all right.

LEVINE: Mm hm. How was the school different — the school here?

MONTERISI: It was good – the schools over here. I mean, I didn't – I didn't mind. In those days. It's not like [laughs] today [laughs]. Never had any problems. Children used to – natural. We were poor, didn't have – nothing. And they used to bring two, three cents and have a carton of milk every day at recess time.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MONTERISI: I never had any money for that! The teacher was buying it for me. [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh. Uh huh. Were there a lot of other children who didn't speak English in your, in your...

MONTERISI: No, I was the only one in school like that. I was in South Boston. That was all Irish people there, but I got along.

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

LEVINE: Mm hm. Okay, well let's go back. Tell me your mother's name.

MONTERISI: Magdalena.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

MONTERISI: Maiden name was Lucivero, L-U-C-I-V-E-R-O. Lucivero.

LEVINE: And your brothers, and sis – brother and sisters?

MONTERISI: Well, my older brother Frank – he's gone. And Mena, my younger sister – Gloria Mena, her name was, we used to call her Mena -- and she died, young. Oh, she was only nine years old when she died.

LEVINE: So when you came over you were eight. And how old was Frank?

MONTERISI: Ten.

LEVINE: And Mena?

MONTERISI: Who must have been six or seven. Around there, something.

LEVINE: So tell me anything you can remember about your father going off into World War I or anything about World War I that you can recall.

MONTERISI: [interposed] Yeah, sure. They used to bomb Bari. You know what I mean by like they did in London? We used to run down the cellars.

LEVINE: Huh. Did you – do you remember bombed out places and [not understood]?

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

MONTERISI: Sure, I remem – well, I mean, I was – alright, 1918, I was only six then.

LEVINE: Right.

MONTERISI: That's when the war was over, right? I just remember me and brother, see, we were going – my mother was taking me to see a friend. We were out on the street, and you must know [tape skips]. And you must know what a flood is.

LEVINE: Mm hm.

MONTERISI: Flood came. We were just – about to go over this bridge. Bridge was out. Turn around, went back. All right?

LEVINE: Mm.

MONTERISI: It wasn't that easy.

LEVINE: And did your father come back to --?

MONTERISI: [interposed] Well, I mean after the war was over. Yeah. Naturally he musta – they musta had, like uh, you wait for your turn, they wanted – he wanted to come to this country. And you put in for it. So in 1918, 1920 – you had to wait two years.

LEVINE: So, then when he came out from the First World War, how long was it before he came to the United States?

MONTERISI: Oh, two years. 1918, the First World War was over. 1920, he came over.

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

LEVINE: [superposed] And he came in '20 – Oh, but he – oh, I see, he came with you. He didn't come on his own.

MONTERISI: [superposed] That's right!

LEVINE: He didn't come over first.

MONTERISI: No! He took us all – the whole family came. And my mother was pregnant with my –older – oldest girl now. She's with – she still lives – she lives in Revere. She's still around. She's good – she's a great grandma now.

LEVINE: Mm hm. Okay, so do you remember preparing to come to the United States?

MONTERISI: Oh no. We went to, like uh, we had to go to Naples to get the boat, right?

LEVINE: Right.

MONTERISI: Pompeii's right near Naples. What I remember is, I had my first communion in Pompeii. Now, that's – you must know about Mount Vesuvius. [laughs]. Right there. You wouldn't believe if I told ya. The next time I went to communion [laughs], you know what there was? [laughs] Twenty-two, twenty-three, I was only ten. Now, my mother used to live in church. Well, I'm Catholic, but I'm a better Catholic than people who go to church every Sunday – believe me. But I don't.

LEVINE: Uh huh. You remember any religious celebrations when you were still in Italy?

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

MONTERISI: Yeah, they used to have a big parade every year. I forget what they call it. Oh! With, you know, these things they use – no horses carrying them down. They- they, men, graver [ph], carrying them – you ever see that – them?

LEVINE: What – you mean like the pictures of the Saints? Or statues?

MONTERISI: [interposed] Yeah. Anything. Statues. Everything. They used to do that, but never any horses carry them. Men. You wave, but you know, pushing about – probably about ten, twenty men going around the streets.

LEVINE: And then what would happen? What would people do on those days?

MONTERISI: [superposed] Nothing! We'd just look at it, and wait 'til it's over. Like you'd see a parade here.

LEVINE: Like a parade.

MONTERISI: Yeah, just like a parade.

LEVINE: Yeah. What do people do for fun? Like what do the men do? What do the women do? What do the children do [not understood]?

MONTERISI: [superposed] Movie. That's about it.

LEVINE: What?

MONTERISI: Go to a movie.

LEVINE: A movie? You had movies?

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

MONTERISI: [superposed] Oh sure, we had movie houses there in Bari – plenty of ‘em.
Oh yeah. Yeah, we went to movies.

LEVINE: Yeah. And, let’s see –

MONTERISI: I remember going to school. Your father was in the service, right?

LEVINE: Mm hm.

MONTERISI: They’d give a bun – like, at recess. ‘Bout this big.

LEVINE: ‘Cause your father was in the service?

MONTERISI: [superposed] That’s right! I didn’t like that. Because someone [laughs]
[not understood] they couldn’t get one! Get my point now?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MONTERISI: I never – I never liked that wad [ph] he had. Nothing you could do about
it.

LEVINE: Wow.

MONTERISI: Go to school once a day. Around here, twice. Eight in the morning ‘til
one. Now that’s a long session. Half-hour – eleven to eleven-thirty – we
used to go to recess. That’s when we’d get the bun. [laughs] Go home at
one and have our big meal. ‘Bout two o’clock. Eat every day. Never –
never twelve and then. And then at night, y’know, that’s the way it was.

LEVINE: [superposed] You have a little – a light in you.

MONTERISI: That’s – that’s the rule of the house.

LEVINE: Hm. Well, can you describe like a typical day? In other words, would you
get up real early?

MONTERISI: Yeah. Had to.

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

LEVINE: [superposed] Did you have chores?

MONTERISI: I had to walk to school. No – no, I was too young then.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MONTERISI: No.

LEVINE: So you'd get up around seven or something. Go to school.

MONTERISI: [superposed] Yeah, that's right. And come back. Then we'd always have homework to do. In the second grade. Homework. Believe me. We did it.

LEVINE: And where would you do it? Would you do it –

MONTERISI: [interposed] At home.

LEVINE: At home?

MONTERISI: At home all the time.

LEVINE: With your brother and sister? Were they doing theirs?

MONTERISI: Just my brother. He was older than me. My sister wasn't going anywhere. And I never went to a first grade or a kindergarten in my life. Because I had two aunts that were school teachers over there.

LEVINE: So they taught –

MONTERISI: [interposed] They taught me at home. I never went to a first grade. Believe it or not, second grade I started. [laughs]

LEVINE: So what were your aunts like?

MONTERISI: Oh, very good. Oh. Got along well with them, everybody.

LEVINE: What do you remember about them? Do you remember any—

MONTERISI: [interposed] Hey – they're all gone now. That's what – we went there – we – and I wouldn't go there on account of I wouldn't know anybody there now.

LEVINE: You [indecipherable] –

MONTERISI: Figure it out.

LEVINE: You could see your old – pals.

MONTERISI: [superposed] Yeah. Probably the house. It'd probably be standing. But, what am I gonna say? The reason I wouldn't go, I got a younger brother that went there and he says, he says to me, Peter – don't go to Italy.

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

Everybody wants to be your relative over there! [laughs] Get out of there!
He says, [laughs] Huh. Everybody is like Jones over here. [?] Forget it.
She wanted to go, but I wouldn't go. [laughs] Had a nice time, though.

LEVINE: [superposed] Mm hm.

MONTERISI: Y'know, where I went.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MONTERISI: I went up the Adriatic, and come down the Mediterranean. All over. All the big cities around.

LEVINE: So, are there any things about your aunts that you remember? Any experiences –

MONTERISI: [interposed] Well, I'll tell ya. Believe it or not, I was there. They were put y'know – they were, and they, like, I was eight. They were all schoolteachers. None of them ever got married while I was there. I don't know what happened after I left. I was young and...

LEVINE: Mm hm. What were their personalities like?

MONTERISI: Oh they were good. But, my grandmother ruled the roost. Nobody could say anything – never talk back – oh, were they strict.

LEVINE: So your grandmother was your mother's mother and [not understood] --

MONTERISI: [interposed] No, my father's mother. Noooo. That's right. My, my other grandfather on my, my mother's side was back and forth over here.

LEVINE: Really?

MONTERISI: Yeah. He was here when I was living here. And then went back. He did that about two or three times.

LEVINE: And what was he doing when he was here?

MONTERISI: Go to work. And just stay for a while because he had my mother and my uncle. Two children living here.

LEVINE: Uh huh. Oh, I see.

MONTERISI: He can bounce here.

LEVINE: Uh huh. What did your father do when he wasn't in the army?

MONTERISI: Well, he worked, like a salesman in a store. Then he learned how to play the clarinet. And he was very good at it. We came – we -- when we

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

came here after from South Boston, we went to East Boston. And he was in the Marine Band, they call it. First clarinet. He used to give lessons. Y'know, he was a very good player -- clarinet player. He tried to teach me, he says, no, I could never teach you. He was paying somebody else to try to teach me. And he's had his own people [laughs] -- he was steep, he was getting paid, and he was paying for me. I said, no, it's not for me! [laughs]

LEVINE: Right. Why did he think he couldn't teach you?

MONTERISI: If I had a son, I wouldn't listen. Then he said, maybe a stranger, y'know, I pick it up. I never picked it up. I'm the only one he tried that with -- I had an older brother -- nah. [laughs]

LEVINE: Huh. Did he play any other instruments?

MONTERISI: No, just the clarinet.

LEVINE: No, but I mean you. Did you ever pick up anything?

MONTERISI: [superposed] Me? Never. Never. Nothin'. No, I didn't -- I didn't have an ear for music.

LEVINE: I see. How about music when you were over in Italy? Do you remember any times when music was played or...?

MONTERISI: Nah. Not that much.

LEVINE: Your father was playing? Or...

MONTERISI: Yeah, well, he wasn't playing that much there because he was in the service and he had to work. When he come out, and that's it.

LEVINE: Mm hm. So did your mother work ever?

MONTERISI: Yes. When she came here. They -- they, she worked in, in Brockton when they used to have shoe factories. We lived in Quincy, take the train to Brockton, and the train home. That was rough.

LEVINE: Uh huh. But in Italy she wasn't [not understood]—

MONTERISI: [interposed] No, never. Never.

LEVINE: Well, when you think back on those first eight years what are the things you remember about the towns or about the people or...?

MONTERISI: Oh. I very seldom saw any snow there. Not where we lived. Rain, yeah, in the winter it would rain. But never cold like up -- over -- up here.
[laughs].

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember games you played?

MONTERISI: Yeah. Twenty-one they've got here. Seven-and-a-half, the whole family, y'know, with pennies. [laughs].

LEVINE: Right.

MONTERISI: If I made a dime, that was a half-a-liter, like a half-dollar. Oh! Big deal!

LEVINE: When would you do that?

MONTERISI: In our -- in the -- in our own home there, they'd have it. Y'know in the night and evening. Right, right. They'd all get together, get around, and play. So, that's about it.

LEVINE: How about stories? Did anybody tell you stories?

MONTERISI: Ah, not, no. Not like over here, no. That's all I hear, y'know, about these kids, they give 'em all stories, when they grow up, for crying out loud, they're all murderers and everything else, for crying out loud. You see what happens.

LEVINE: Okay. So what else? Do you remember packing up to leave?

MONTERISI: Not real -- I didn't do that. I was too young. No, I just --

LEVINE: Do you remember anything your mother packed? That she brought with, with her to this country?

MONTERISI: No, I don't remember.

LEVINE: How about leaving? Do you remember saying goodbye to your grandparents?

MONTERISI: Oh yeah! Remember that, yeah. [not understood] at the train station.

LEVINE: How did people feel about, about either leaving or having to leave?

MONTERISI: [superposed] Oh, they couldn't get a job there or nothing in those days. It was rough. Do you know -- you know what we had to do? You wouldn't believe this. Now, we liked macaroni, right? I had two uncles. They'd have to go down to the -- to the -- harbor there, the water. Get water from there to cook macaroni because we couldn't get any salt. We needed the

salt. They go already salt – salt water. Imagine living like that. Every time we wanted that. No running water in the house. Right across the street where we lived were a big fountain. You want water? Everybody goes over there, they get to fill up their thing there, take it up. Now that's no way to live.

LEVINE: How did your mother do the washing?

MONTERISI: Who remembers now? [laughs] By hand. That's all. You don't think a washing machine. Had the board. Y'know.

LEVINE: Mm hm. How about foods? Do you remember any meals or any particular dishes that you liked when you were little?

MONTERISI: [superposed] Oh. Oh yeah. Well, I still like it today. I've eaten macaroni trap [ph] sometimes all week. [laughs] She eats it more than I do now. [laughs].

LEVINE: I can believe that.

MONTERISI: And she's not Italian. [laughs]

LEVINE: Yeah. So, macaroni was the big, uh...

MONTERISI: Oh yeah. Yeah. The big thing. Yeah. Rice, they had one day. They had something different every day though. But always, when you finish your first meal, always something to go after with that, if they had it.

LEVINE: Mm hm. You mean like –

MONTERISI: A second, a second thing there. Like a maybe you'd have a meal, then they'd have some fish.

LEVINE: Oh.

MONTERISI: After that, y'know, they eat.

[Tape skips here.]

MONTERISI: Oh, oh yeah. There must have been plenty of homes in there. Y'know, yeah, in the department of.

LEVINE: And, uh –

MONTERISI: And then all the homes are made of brick. So.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah.

MONTERISI: It's not like – you don't see many fires out there like you do over here.

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay, well, can you think of anything else about anything that happened in the towns where you were when you were in Italy? Anything that struck you?

MONTERISI: [superposed] That's about it. What I told ya about the, about the flood and the bridge going out and every time they come and bomb during the war. I was only six.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MONTERISI: What could I do? Nothing.

LEVINE: So when you finally left, where did you leave from? Oh, you went from Naples.

MONTERISI: [superposed] From Naples. Yeah.

LEVINE: And how did you get to Naples?

MONTERISI: By train.

LEVINE: Was that the first time you'd taken a train?

MONTERISI: The fir – that's right. By train. I was never on the train before.

LEVINE: Uh huh. How did you feel? Do you remember how you felt when you were eight years old and you were coming to this country?

MONTERISI: Oh yeah. Well, I felt alright. I mean, I don't know what I was getting into, but still. Y'know, it's an adventure.

LEVINE: [superposed] Had you heard anything about the United States?

MONTERISI: No, I hadn't heard – nothing! They sent me to the store. I never saw a car in my life. Y'know, horse and carriage -- that was your cab. You want a thing like that, you go with a horse and carriage. I used to hop those things there to the store if I wouldn't walk. [laughs] Come back, but I never got in any trouble.

LEVINE: So, so, when you were in Naples were you there before you had to board the ship or [not understood]?

MONTERISI: [interposed] Naturally we had to stay there a couple of days before the ship left – yeah, like I told ya, we went to – that's like Naples, where I had my first communion.

LEVINE: Oh you had your [not understood].

MONTERISI: Yeah, Pompeii is right there. We visited it. Believe it. I thought it was a – I just know everything about it. [laughs] I was telling ya. Just they didn't do a thing to there – it's still all ruins. It's beautiful. They didn't touch it.

LEVINE: Huh. So did – was it planned? Did your mother plan to have your first communion...?

MONTERISI: Well, yeah, well, when you're that age, they have it. She'd rather have there than over here – she couldn't speak the English, you know, we'd have a lot of trouble. She didn't know that there's Italian priests over here when you go to church. She didn't know anything about that stuff. 'Cause she lived in church the last six months of her life. Ya didn't – always, every morning she'd go to church. We lived right near a church there in East Boston.

LEVINE: Uh huh. Oh. So what happened for your First Communion? Do you remember anything about it?

MONTERISI: Yeah. I get – get – they let me go, say a few "Hail Marys," whatever it was that he told me, whatever it was. And that's it. But that's twelve years, thirteen years, when I – what was it – I had done [tape skips] in first Communion, then you have your Confirmation. So. The one standing up for me for Confirmation was younger than me! [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh. [laughs] You took a while before you had yours, right?

MONTERISI: Oh yeah. The priest said he wanted to know where'd I'd been! [laughs]

LEVINE: [laughs] Okay, well, what was the name of the ship?

MONTERISI: The Ferdinando Palasciano.

LEVINE: And what was your voyage like?

MONTERISI: Oh. Was a -- we went out there quite a while. It was – you don't think we came first class. It was brutal, I'm telling ya.

LEVINE: Were you like in the dormitory – down underground?

MONTERISI: [superposed] Down. Ya, ya. Wasn't that hot. Because when we landed, oh, was wicked.

LEVINE: Do you remember when the ship came into the New York harbor?

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

MONTERISI: Yeah. The first thing I saw was Statue of Liberty. Oh hey! We're here.
[laughs].

LEVINE: There were people up on deck?

MONTERISI: Yeah, we were all looking at it. Then we landed. Then they herded us like cattle right into the pens they had. I called them pens, that's what they were. Deloused us. [laughs].

LEVINE: Oh?

MONTERISI: Everybody was treated the same. You couldn't say nothing.

LEVINE: Anything else about Ellis Island?

MONTERISI: No, that's about all I remember. I was glad I could get away from there. We were waiting for – waiting for my uncle to show up. He lived in South Boston, y' know. South Boston, New York, it's not that far.

LEVINE: Uh huh. So how long did you have to stay there?

MONTERISI: I dunno. Oh, I don't remember. Most about three, four days, that's it. Two, three days, whatever. No. First chance we had, we left New York.

LEVINE: And what do you remember about the meals there?

MONTERISI: Where? In uh –

LEVINE: Ellis Island.

MONTERISI: I don't remember. I was young. I don't even know what kind of a meal we got.

LEVINE: Do you remember where you slept?

MONTERISI: [laughs]. Cot, I guess. I dunno.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MONTERISI: That's [blows out air] – I wanted to get that outta my mind.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you – was it crowded?

MONTERISI: Yes. Oh, it was really crowded. Everybody waiting for somebody to, y'know, come and pick them up.

LEVINE: Mm hm. And so, finally did you meet up with your uncle? At Ellis Island?

MONTERISI: [superposed] Oh yeah. No. We saw him out – I don't know if he came on a boat. That's all. But then when we left there, we went, we knew, he gave us the address where he was in South Boston, we came to South

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

Station in Boston here, get in the taxi – he’s got no American money, he’s got Italian money. We went down here, we didn’t know how much to pay. Couldn’t speak English. He wouldn’t take it. I don’t know what happened after that, but everything was all right, y’know. We didn’t live far from South, South Station, though. Oh, take me about three, four minutes with the car, that’s how far. South, y’know, South Boston.

LEVINE: So did your uncle – he actually came to Ellis Island. [interposed] He picked you up.

MONTERISI: Yeah. [interposed] He didn’t pick me up. No. No. If he was with us, he’d – he’d know about the American money.

LEVINE: Oh right. So you must have left Ellis Island and come to South Boston.

MONTERISI: That’s right. That’s right.

LEVINE: By train? Do you think?

MONTERISI: Ellis Island, and come -- yeah, it was by train. We get off the train, yeah.

LEVINE: I see. And so you then went to your uncle’s address?

MONTERISI: That’s right, that’s right. That was it.

LEVINE: Hm. And what was your uncle’s name?

MONTERISI: He -- he – my uncle’s name? Y’know, he died right at the wheel of his truck. Now, what was his name? ... Frank.

LEVINE: His name was Frank.

MONTERISI: Frank. Ciccila [ph], we used to call him.

LEVINE: So he was your father’s brother or your mother’s?

MONTERISI: My mother’s.

LEVINE: Your mother’s.

MONTERISI: No, my father didn’t have any brothers there. They – none of them came. They stayed in Italy.

LEVINE: Uh huh. So, okay. Do you remember any things about the beg – the first few days or weeks when you were in South Boston – things that were new that you saw or things that struck you as different...?

MONTERISI: Yeah, well the houses were all wood, y’know. That’s all I remember. And I never – didn’t see anybody living near any brick houses where we

lived there in South Boston on C Street, right near Kulkoni [ph] Boulevard there, Ditwits [ph] today. And all I remember is going to school. I went to school right away. They put me in the second grade. But I couldn't speak a word of English.

LEVINE: Do you know what helped you to learn it?

MONTERISI: Well, over time, y'know, they teach ya. The alpha – the alphabet, I knew the alphabet. I knew all that stuff. But I mean, to speak. I hang on with the children, ya pick it up fast that way.

LEVINE: Mm hm. So was this a big Italian neighborhood, or was it all Irish?

MONTERISI: [interposed] Oh no. We were the only Italians on that neighborhood, believe it or not. No no. I didn't know any Italians on there – well, maybe there might have been one or two families, but mostly it was an Irish town. Still an Irish town, South Boston. But I mean, I got along.

LEVINE: And how did your mother and father like being here?

MONTERISI: Oh, they liked it alright. Yeah. They get along.

LEVINE: Did they want to go back?

MONTERISI: Oh no, never! No, no, no.

LEVINE: Can you think of any customs that either your mother or father tried to hang to that were Italian in this country? Were there certain ways –

MONTERISI: [interposed] Well, we're not supposed to talk back to your parents.

LEVINE: Mm hm. Yeah.

MONTERISI: Which I see that everybody does it today. [laughs]

LEVINE: So, did they – was their idea that you should become American? That you should become Americanized, or –

MONTERISI: [interposed] Now, do—do you -- if I tell you something, you won't believe it. See, my father died young, he was only forty- three. He didn't even have a chance to take out citizen papers. Now, I'm going up there, I'm not a citizen either, right? Come before the Second World War, couple years before. What year? I got my picture there, with that thing there. [to wife] Now you can't talk. Mussolini sent me a letter to join the army over there! I'm not kidding ya, and I'm over here! I think I was twenty-eight

years old. I says, what are they, crazy? I ran up there bo, bo, bo and get my citizenship. Y'know, I was a citizen, all right? That's okay. Alright. Come the war, naturally. They put me there – they were doing a now – a year, if you're under twenty-eight, right? In the service. Before the war breaks out. I was over twenty-eight. I was twenty-nine. No year for me. So they let me go. Then the war broke out. They got me to go to – y'know, they got me. I went in. Done everything. Went to Camp Devens. Right away, boom! Back to East Boston. What's the matter? I'm a citizen. Back to East Boston – had to show 'em – all right. Back to – Camp Devens. Now. This is what goes on in the Army. Turn around. They want to make sure I don't go to Italy. I wind up in the Philippines – I'm going to the Philippines. In the, y'know, Guadalcanal, all that stuff. Before we got to Philippines. And I spent four years in the service. I got hurt, come out. Still getting disability, I got a thirty percent disability. I'm supposed to have – this--this leg is shorter than this one. All right?

LEVINE: Well, how, what did you have to do to get the citizenship at that point?

MONTERISI: Nothing. Just like what they do today. You learn, you go up [not understood], then they ask you questions. Then okay, they get up. They give you the – I get the paper. I got in over there. [to his wife] Don't say nothing, go get the citizenship papers -- don't – I don't want you to talk. Go get it. I wanna show her.

LEVINE: Your wife can, uh...

MONTERISI: I want to show it – I mean it. Quiet.

LEVINE: Did you feel – how did you feel when you became a citizen?

MONTERISI: Good. I mean, no different. I didn't – y'know, I wasn't even thinking about that. Because I was working all the time. I was --

LEVINE: [interposed] What were you working in?

MONTERISI: Look, listen, when I was in South Boston – I sold newspapers in the morning. Two cents a piece they were. It isn't like today, just to get a few pennies to go to school. Alright. I'd be half asleep in school. This is –

this was when I was my seventh grade. We had an Italian teacher that wanted to give you foreign language, Italian they wanted to give me.

LEVINE: [laughs]

MONTERISI: I said, well...[laughs]. She was mad because I was born in Italy, she wasn't. Ms. Bartholomew she was. And I'd get an A. Everything I'd done in class, E for homework. I wouldn't do my homework. I didn't have time! I had to sell papers in the morning. And, you don't know if you remember the navigauge [ph] train, you don't remember that, in – goes to Winthrop and Revere from Rosewath [ph] down in East Boston.

LEVINE: [superposed] [not understood]

MONTERISI: No, no. The train. At night.

LEVINE: The train.

MONTERISI: In the train. In the morning, I'd sell papers there. At night, three cents for every that goes to Rosewath [ph], sold the advertising. Because they go there in the summer time. They go there – Revere Beach – all the people there. And then go to school in the day time. My – I was like that because I don't like to be broke. I like to have something in my pocket, even when I was young. I've been like that ever since.

LEVINE: And what was your father doing in the meantime?

MONTERISI: He was working. He was working in town. He – press man there? – Taylor.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MONTERISI: He was working.

LEVINE: And your mother was working as –

MONTERISI: Yeah, well, not then. She worked at first. She wasn't working then, later, because she had all the children to take care of. She had four children here when, when we came here.

LEVINE: When did she work?

MONTERISI: Before. Right after she had the fir – the baby here. The first one she was pregnant. She had to go to work because the two of them – they didn't

know nothing here. She worked in a shoe shop in Brockton. That was a big place for shoe factory – they always get a job there.

LEVINE: Uh huh. And how did she feel about that?

MONTERISI: She didn't mind it. She never worked in her life, but she got accustomed to it. Going back and forth.

LEVINE: So was Frank working too?

MONTERISI: My brother? He's the reason why I had to leave school. He's gone now, what [not understood]. Like, my father died, right? And they wanted him to get a job to help out the family. Y'know, welfare the way they wanted, you want to go to work, you had to go to work. Alright. So, he couldn't keep a job. He wouldn't work. So they come after me. I was in my ninth grade then. In East Boston. I wanted an education. So. [laughs].

LEVINE: So, you mean, he was finished with school [not understood]?

MONTERISI: No, well, just grammar school. I mean, he didn't even want to go to school or nothing. He just – he was working – he had a few jobs, but he couldn't hold one.

LEVINE: I see. And your mother needed to be at home with the children [not understood]

MONTERISI: That's right. So they wanted me to get out and go to work, right? So. They were after me. Instead of going out to look for a job, I'd go to school. They found me, [not understood]. And I went to work after that. I've been working ever since.

LEVINE: What did you do at first for work?

MONTERISI: I worked for the Postal Telegraph Commercial Cable Company. They're out of business today – Western Union took it over in Boston. I learned all the streets in Boston. [laughs].

LEVINE: You were delivering telegraphs?

MONTERISI: Telegrams.

LEVINE: Telegrams, I mean?

MONTERISI: See, postal telegram. I don't know if you remember them. They used to be –

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

LEVINE: Yeah, I remember –

MONTERISI: They're gone now. It's Western Union now. They're gone. But. I worked -- I worked there for a while. I enjoyed it. After that, over here, what else did I do? Oh yeah. Remember, the Depression when Roosevelt was in? Sending boys out for a year? What do they call that? [laughs]. So, they didn't – I didn't go – I coulda went – I didn't go because somebody had to, y'know, go to work. Whatever I could get. I'd go to work. Turns around. And, I don't know. What else did I do? Phew. All kinds of work.

LEVINE: [superposed] Were there – was there anywhere—Roosevelt was sending –

MONTERISI: Do it for a year. What do they call that – he used to send the boys that were younger year all over different places to work – they'd get so much to send home, y'know. And they wanted to send me like that. I didn't want to go. I got some other job, I do it. Then naturally, y'know, the war broke out, right?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MONTERISI: So, they call me, they put me in class 1-A because I couldn't do the year, y'know? And they were taking people in. I went around and I worked in Camp Devens. Do you know where Camp Devens over here? Big army post.

LEVINE: Oh.

MONTERISI: They were building it up for the soldiers. What were they doing? They would go in one gate, punch in, go out the other gate. Oh. [laughs] I ain't getting no [not understood]. They all know that. They got a bunch of them. I turned around, I says, let me get the hell out of here. And I quit, didn't go into war anymore. But Camp Devens is a good distance from here to go by car. Didn't have no car. This fellow had a car, but they wouldn't trust him driving. I'd have to drive him up and down, in wintertime. You'd be surprised. You'd see trailers rolled over, [not understood], on the highways. [not understood] I was doing that. I said, aw, the heck with this. And I went to work in -- over here. That's where I met her. In shoe

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

factory. She worked over here in Wakefield. So, the reason I went to work, Uncle Sam is looking for boys, if you're working, maybe he wouldn't bother ya. Turn around. Boom, I got called again. 1-A, they put me in. They gave me the bum rush. I done four years in the service.

LEVINE: So, so, how did you – do you remember meeting your wife?

MONTERISI: Yeah, in the shoe factory. [laughs].

LEVINE: Do you remember how it happened, or how you --?

MONTERISI: Well, she – we happened to be working there. Talking. You know.

LEVINE: Huh. So, did you see each other for a long time before you got married? Or?

MONTERISI: No, I didn't know her from a hole in the wall! [laughs] I was coming from East Boston back and forth. A friend of mine worked there, he says, come on, Pete, get your job in the factory. And he got me a job in the shoe factory. I didn't like it, but, oh, I stayed there. 'Til Uncle Sam called me again.

LEVINE: You went together six months?

MONTERISI: Yeah.

LEVINE: And say your wife's name for the tape.

MONTERISI: My wife's name? Elizabeth – [laughs] she don't like – Elizabeth Cheatham, her maiden name was.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

MONTERISI: Cheatham? C-H-E-A-T-H-A-M. Just like ya say it.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MONTERISI: Yeah.

LEVINE: And did you have children?

MONTERISI: Did I? [laughs] There's my two grandchildren, there. One of 'ems last year in college, he'll be all done here. He's all through college. My daughter, the one that's aerobic dancing, she's the one that put him through. Because she – her husband died – he was a state trooper. He was a sergeant in the state tour, he was going to be a lieutenant for

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

crying out loud, he took the exam and everything else. He had a heart attack.

LEVINE: So what are your children's names?

MONTERISI: Which one?

LEVINE: Well, either one.

MONTERISI: Either one.

LEVINE: Both of them.

MONTERISI: Well, the one here is Lila. After her father. And the other one. [laughs] Calla. She's in Baltimore. She's teaching college. English, advanced English. And my son-in-law's a professor of economics on the John Hopkins University.

LEVINE: Oh.

MONTERISI: They're bo – better off than I ever thought of being.

LEVINE: And they're the ones who picked, the, the [not understood]

MONTERISI: That's right! The one from Baltimore picked it up. [laughs] And she wants me to take her down there to see the place. I don't know what for, what's there to see down there? I know it's [not understood].

LEVINE: It's wonderful. It's the old museum there.

MONTERISI: Yeah? Maybe I'll – maybe I'll take a trip one of these days.

LEVINE: Yeah, I think you'd like it. Okay, so, let's see, so you worked in the shoe factory six months, and then what did you do?

MONTERISI: Well, then I got called.

LEVINE: Then you went in the service. For how long?

MONTERISI: [superposed] Service. Four years.

LEVINE: Four years.

MONTERISI: Well, about two weeks less than four years. But I got out on disability.

LEVINE: Right. So.

MONTERISI: But they wouldn't let me out. They wouldn't let me work for six months when I got out.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MONTERISI: I had to sign the slip. 'Cause if something happened, oh, they'd get after me. See, they fix up my leg. And, then they were going to close Camp Devins, or something. I don't know what happened. The hospital. The lady says, look – they wouldn't let me out. They says, you got to go to Florida, they're gonna break your leg and reset it. I says, no ya don't. It feels good, leave it alone. Okay, on one condition we'll let you out. You don't work for six months, and I had to sign a slip of paper, I won't work for six months. And they gave me a disability when I got out.

LEVINE: How did you feel serving in the Armed Forces?

MONTERISI: Hey — like anybody else, what are you gonna do? Hm? I'm not the only one – they're all – we're all in the same boat, right?

LEVINE: Mm hm.

MONTERISI: You're a soldier. Guadalcanal, from there, Tulagi [ph], Eniro, all islands. We then New Guinea, from there to the Philippines, that's it.

LEVINE: And then after that did you work at all after the service?

MONTERISI: After – when I got home? Yeah, I waited six months, and I went to work right away. I worked in the Post Office almost thirty years. I'm retired. I'm retired twenty-two years from the Post Office. Heck, I'm going to let Uncle Sam pay me.

LEVINE: I see.

MONTERISI: Right?

LEVINE: Mm hm. Huh.

MONTERISI: See, it's not good now at the Post Office now. They haven't got retirement like we had it. They're paying Social Security. They're all mad. Hey!

LEVINE: Uh huh. Okay, let's see, is there anything you can think of that the fact that you came here from another country when you were eight years old – do you think that influenced your life in some way? Can you say how it made a difference?

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

MONTERISI: Well, I don't know. The only thing is – y'know, I couldn't speak English. Let that -- get along with – y'know, get along with everybody, that's all that counts.

LEVINE: Mm hm. Do you think you hold onto any kinds of Italian customs or ways yourself?

MONTERISI: Well, I mean, phew, I do, yes. But, what can you do? [laughs] It's different in this country.

LEVINE: Well, what did you say what they are?

MONTERISI: Well, I have a feeling – when I see some of these people, the way they act. Some of these children – you see dope, and stuff like that. I never even heard of that stuff growing up. I smoked for thirty years. The joke is going around saying about go see a doctor, and get rid of this, ya pay so much in this. I stopped like this – cold turkey. Without doing anything. She'll tell ya. I never gained any weight, and I never done anything. And I haven't smoked since. Now, I smoked for thirty years, and I haven't touched a cigarette for twenty-two years now. Twenty-three years, whatever it is. Alright, and I used to smoke everything. I even smoke Stogies – cigars -- everything. I don't touch 'em no more. And it isn't because I had to quit, there was nothing wrong with my trainers [not understood], nothing. [not understood] smoking on television. I go cra – it's nuts.

LEVINE: So you got world power?

MONTERISI: That's what it is. I keep telling the people that's still smoking, mind over matter, they won't listen to ya. We here – one fellow just, he's got something wrong with him too, he quit smoking, for two years now, he's back smoking. Oh.

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

MONTERISI: Yeah. Quit smoking. That's right. By my own, didn't pay a nickel. Nobody had to tell me to. That was two months before I quit I retired from

the post office. I couldn't have a cup of coffee in the morning without a cigarette. [laughs]

LEVINE: Hm. So you have grandchildren?

MONTERISI: There's two of them there.

LEVINE: Two?

MONTERISI: No, I got more than two. No, yeah. How many has T-zek [ph], no just the two. And two is four. Yeah, I got four. Yeah, the one from Baltimore's got two. One's going to school in Rhode Island – college – the other is getting a college education at home. Now – now he's going to school now, but I mean he was sick for three or four years, he had leukemia.

LEVINE: Oh uh huh.

MONTERISI: That's bad.

LEVINE: So how is this phase of your life, your retirement phase?

MONTERISI: I don't mind, I love it. I don't [not understood]. Do what I've been doing, enjoy myself. I go and see the boys, talk, that's all. We go out and eat a couple times a week, why shouldn't it? Only her and I to cook. We go out and eat.

LEVINE: Is there anything else you can think of that you would want to say about coming to this country or anything about this country or your life that we haven't really covered? Anything more that you can think of?

MONTERISI: Nothing I can think of. That's about it. I'm eight-two years – I'll be eighty-three next March. It's only a couple – a few months away. [laughs]

LEVINE: And how do you feel?

MONTERISI: Three mo – feel good! I got a new knee put on, now this isn't from the service, this knee. Right now. I had this done, what was it, two years ago [not understood]. Two hernia operations. And, good as new.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I think maybe we could close here.

MONTERISI: Yeah.

LEVINE: I want to thank you very much.

MONTERISI: You're welcome.

EI-575, PETER MONTERISI

LEVINE: And I've been speaking with Peter Monterisi in Wakefield, MA on December 4, 1994. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.