EI-604
VIRGIL CHARLES (VIRGINIO PAOLO) CRISAFULLI
BIRTH DATE: APRIL 22, 1912
INTERVIEW DATE: APRIL 28, 1995
RUNNING TIME: 1:24:04
INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME
INTERVIEW LOCATION: UTICA, NEW YORK
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 3/1999
TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

SICILY (BORN U.S.), 1922
AGE 10
PASSAGE ON "THE GIUSEPPE VERDI"

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Funding for this transcript, one of many interviews conducted with Italian and Sicilian women, was generously provided by interviewee Elda Del Bino Willitts, EI-8. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 1/28/1999.

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Friday, April 28, 1995. I'm at the Oneida County Historical Society, and I will spell Oneida, capital O-N-E-I-D-A, and that's located in Utica, New York, and I'm here with Virgil C. Crisafulli. Mr. Crisafulli was born in West Virginia, United States, and at age two, in 1914, was taken with his family to Sicily. They returned from Sicily in July of 1922, and at that time Mr. Crisafulli was ten years old. I might

also say for the sake of the tape that the Historical Society is in a very lovely restored Christian Science church, and it's very echo-y in here, and this may be picked up on the recording, and I also want to say that we're pretty much on the floor of the museum, so there may be extraneous noise that is picked up on the tape. Anyway, thank you very much for doing this. Can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

CRISAFULLI: April 22, 1912.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me why your parents were in America to begin with?

CRISAFULLI: Well, there were four brothers originally who decided that they should come to America to seek their fortunate, as every other immigrant did, at least from poor countries. Um, my father had been a career carabinieri in the Italian Army. That's a royal mounted police special force officer.

SIGRIST: Spell that name for us, please?

CRISAFULLI: C-A-R-A-B-I-N-I-E-R-I. Carabinieri. Uh, and they did call them Royal Mounted Police, serving in Rome

or elsewhere. Um . . .

SIGRIST: Did your father ever talk about his experiences?

CRISAFULLI: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember him telling you about?

CRISAFULLI: Well, this is, you know, the village we came, that they came from, Antillo, the province of Mycena . . .

SIGRIST: How do you spell the name of the village?

CRISAFULLI: Antillo. A-N-T-I-L-L-O.

SIGRIST: And that was in Mycena, the province . . .

CRISAFULLI: The province of Mycena, in the hills of the Piloritani[ph] Mountains. We were about probably halfway up the mountain, and there was a small village. They had only, in his time, I think, two grades in school. When we went back they had four grades by then. But he went to the army illiterate, because he was from a farm family, and, uh, they taught him to read and write in the army. Well, I should say, my father was a very bright man, and he just ate it up, and we got the effects

of that later on when he insisted that we go to school, school, school, school, right up through college, you know, except for my sister, because in the Italian culture the girls are supposed to grow up and get married. (he laughs) Um, he wasn't planning to go, but his three brothers talked him into it, and they said, "Let's all go to the United States." And so, um, off they went, apparently, about 1903 or '04, we're not sure. My brother is writing a family history, and this is one he hasn't pinned down of the many things. Um, they were met at Ellis Island and, uh, there was what you will recognize, a padroni system operating. The padroni was simply an Italian term for a representative of a company looking for labor, laborers. And so they were met by such a person, and, uh, were given two alternatives. This shows you something about the fate, as it will be brought out later, of, um, in this life. One was that they could go to San Francisco, uh, but they would have to pay their own way, and it turned out they didn't have that much money. The alternative was that they could go to West Virginia to work in the coal mines, and for that trip the employer would pay their train fare

and then take it out of their, of their, uh, pay. So off they went to West Virginia. It was, uh, a disastrous decision. They entered the coal mines, one coal mine town after another, and within probably three or four years the youngest of the four brothers, my Uncle Santi, S-A-N-T-I, was killed in a coal mine, uh, disaster. Um, about 1912, when I was born, my Uncle Paul, the second of the two, was killed in another coal mine in an explosion. So it was a disastrous decision to go to West Virginia instead of San Francisco. Um . . .

SIGRIST: Can you explain to me a little bit about the hazards of coal mining at that time, and what, what these disasters actually entailed?

CRISAFULLI: Well, um, uh, coal mines, to this day, are among the most dangerous lines of work you can have, and this is a day when well over forty, fifty, sixty years after John L. Lewis[ph] and the United Mine Workers negotiated safety provisions in their contract. When my parents were there, yes. But, um, I doubt that there were any such things. You lived in a coal, housing owned by the coal mine

people, so you lived in company housing. You went to work at dawn, got home at dark, and they took out of your pay the rent, and then they operated a grocery store, which was a company store, and they took the cost of your groceries out of your pay, and so on, until you virtually had, you know, there was a sort of self-contained world. In fact, this I know because I'm a labor economist, and from the study of labor history, um, the, they had what they called script instead of United States money. And this was company money. You could only spend it within the company enterprises. You couldn't go out into the United States as a free man and buy. Now, I suppose you could convert it, but it's an interesting aspect of company towns.

SIGRIST: Oh, they're imposing complete control and dependency on . . .

CRISAFULLI: Absolutely, absolutely. So the, the decision, well, these two fatalities forced the family to make a more serious decision about, you know, where do we go from here. And it happened that, uh, there was a small enclave of paisani Antillese, in Wadsworth, Ohio, which is a small . . .

SIGRIST: Spell paisano Antillese, please.

CRISAFULLI: Spell, paisani, P-A-I-S-A-N-I. That's the plural for paisano or paisana. And, and what was the other word?

SIGRIST: Antillese, people from . . .

CRISAFULLI: Antillese, from Antillo. A-N-T-I-L-L-E-S-E. Antillese.

SIGRIST: Antillese.

CRISAFULLI: And some of whom were actually relatives, first cousins of ours. And, so my Uncle Joe, who was the eldest of the four, and, of the two remaining, um, was a half brother, incidentally. His name was Muscolino, which means little muscle.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

CRISAFULLI: M-U-S-C-O-L-I-N-O.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

CRISAFULLI: Joseph Muscolino. And, uh, his wife went in, up north to Ohio to, uh, joint our paisani in Wadsworth. It's 12 miles outside of Akron. Um, my

father, for some reason that we don't fully understand because you get several stories in a family and, uh, oral history (he laughs) is not always as good as this one, went back. One story was that the family wanted to see the children, and another story was that my father's mother, who was by then widowed a second time, uh, needed some guiding hand, some help, you know? And so to settle family affairs, my father took the family back. In any case, there we were in 1914. It is also possible that he intended, he and my mother intended to stay, because they had all kinds of, he had tools. He was a man of all trades, and carpentry was one of them. He had tools, he, my mother had a Singer sewing machine. They had brought packets of things from the United States including a Sears Roebuck catalog that I used to play my childhood days turning the pages and looking at the pretty pictures. So we don't know, but what they might well have meant to go back. Well, the war broke out, and my father was only what we then called, they called half citizens. He had filed intentions to, he had first papers, the intention to become a citizen. And I guess, and

the rules then, you waited five years, and then you took your final papers. By that time, we were back in Sicily, and he was, since he had been a regular army person in the carabinieri, they grabbed him. Italy was at war, and so in he went. And so there we were in Antillo with our grandparents. And so it happened that, uh, he got hurt in the, uh, military service. He was, you know, the mounted police, they were riding horses all over the place, and I believe he was not, he was not wounded in action. I believe that there was an accident with his horse. In any case, he was discharged because apparently the injury to his leg was, was, uh, serious enough that he was not able to serve further. And on his own, by himself, went back to the United States to take a job and provide for us and, uh, whether the war, the main reason there was that submarines were sinking ships all over the Atlantic, and he didn't want to take a chance on the whole family being on a ship and being sunk, so he went back by himself. Um, he, he then returned about . . .

SIGRIST: What year was that?

CRISAFULLI: I would say he went back by 1916.

SIGRIST: So still during the war, obviously.

CRISAFULLI: Oh, sure, in full, in full. Um, he visited us after the armistice, and again to get, continue to make plans. And then they had, finally he and my mother apparently decided, all right, we're going back to the United States. Um, but first, uh, we went Santi, who was my brother, to finish technical school in Mycena, in the city.

SIGRIST: Was Santi named after the uncle that died in the mines?

CRISAFULLI: Yes, yes. And, and, we had an uncle and an aunt in the city, and he boarded with them and went to this technical school. My father was just insistent that he finish up, and that delayed our return. In the meantime, my sister had finished the four grades and continued to repeat the fourth grade to stay current, you might say. And I was in the third grade, and I got to finish my fourth grade. Um, by that time it was 1921, '22. And so, uh, we got together and, uh, left. Now, you know, this story can become as personal or as detailed as all

get out. I have memories, vivid memories. It's up to you.

SIGRIST: We're going to pull you back. We're actually going to pull back the story to before the family left for Sicily.

CRISAFULLI: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: One thing I want to do is get your father's name.

CRISAFULLI: Mario.

SIGRIST: And what do you know about his family background?

CRISAFULLI: Well, he was, Crisafulli is a Sicilian name, not uncommon, in fact, fairly common, of Greek extraction. So that we were part of the ancient colonization of Sicily by the Greeks.

SIGRIST: What does the name mean?

CRISAFULLI: Crisafulli, it means gold leaf. Cris is gold, and the fulli is the, uh, Greek for leaf. Gold leaf. And Mycena, I think, was colonized by people from Sinai, the Greek city, M-Y-C-E-N-A, but I'm not certain. I think that's the story. You know, they colonized all over the place from Naples on south.

I don't know, you probably have to listen to stories from every country and, uh, I'm not, I think you're very knowledgeable about all of it, but, as you know, the Greeks, the ancient Greeks, settled everything from Naples south. Naples is a Greek city that used to be called Naoplis, new city.

SIGRIST: But in your own lineage, you can't necessarily trace it to . . .

CRISAFULLI: No, no, no.

SIGRIST: . . . the Greek.

CRISAFULLI: Oh, no, no, no.

SIGRIST: This is ancient . . .

CRISAFULLI: My brother, who's writing the family story for his grandchildren, has traced us in the village back to 1700 and something. It's amazing what records they kept in a village that, where the illiteracy had to be close to zero, uh, I mean, a hundred percent. Church records, as well as the records in the municipalities, are quite firm. So he's, uh, he has a contact back in the village and, uh, he keeps

feeding him information. So we go back to about the 18th century, um . . .

SIGRIST: Tell me about your father's parents, and what you know about his immediate family there.

CRISAFULLI: They were, they were, it's a rural village, Antillo, and they were farmers. And they were, um, named, they had, I won't get into names, because I'll get them wrong, but they were common names on both sides, the female and the male side. Crisafulli, an interesting thing that my brother discovered, uh, is that, uh, I, we think to avoid the problem of, uh, junior and senior, I noticed your name is Sigrist, Jr., well, they, they repeated the names every other generation. So Mario Crisafulli goes back, way back, to the 18th century, every other generation.

SIGRIST: Right. So your father's grandfather was named Mario.

CRISAFULLI: Was Mario, yeah.

SIGRIST: What did your father's parents do for a living?

CRISAFULLI: Farm, they were farmers.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your father's parents when you lived in Sicily?

CRISAFULLI: I remember his mother, my grandmother, Maria.

SIGRIST: Tell me what sticks out in your mind about your father's mother?

CRISAFULLI: Oh, well, she was a fussbudget, especially with me, the youngest of the three, because at age two somebody had to look after me while my mother was in the fields working, and, of course, grandchildren and grandparents, I think, have a unique endearing relationship, and, uh, so although my memory is that she was always lecturing me, I think she loved me as much as my other grandma, grandparents.

SIGRIST: Which grandparent did you . . .

CRISAFULLI: This is the, well, we lived, she lived with us, then, when we got . . .

SIGRIST: When you first got . . .

CRISAFULLI: Yeah, uh, our grandmother Crisafulli. My grandparents, whose name was Bongiorno, and my

grandfather there was a miller, and they lived on the outskirts of the village in a little section called Staiti. To call it a suburb would be a misnomer.

SIGRIST: How is that spelled, please?

CRISAFULLI: S-T-A-I-T-I. Yeah. Staiti.

SIGRIST: And Bongiorno would be . . .

CRISAFULLI: Bongiorno, good day.

SIGRIST: That's right, good day.

CRISAFULLI: You'll get two spellings of that. B-U-O-N, and B-O. Our is B-O-N-G-I-O-R-N-O. Bongiorno, good day. And so, and the whole family of Bongiornos were either younger, or they just happened to be more intact than my father's family. My grandmother was the, the only one plus a sister, Dominica, who had married and, uh, stayed in the village. Um . . .

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your mother's parents, the Bongiorno side?

CRISAFULLI: Oh, they were wonderful.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me, uh, let's say, what your mother's mother looked like, in words?

CRISAFULLI: My mother's mother was, to me, remember how little I was, a tall woman of great stature. Actually I think she was not all that tall. And, uh, my brother's going to get me on this, because I will not remember all that he knows. I believe my grandmother's name was Palella[ph], but, no, wait a minute, wait a minute, Lo Giudice. Lo Giudice is the judge. You'll see that name a lot, I think. L-O, capital G-I-U-D-I-C-E.

SIGRIST: And that was your grandmother's maiden name?

CRISAFULLI: Yes. Then she married Giuseppe Bongiorno who, as far as we can tell, was an orphan boy. And, uh, but he became not just a miller, which got him to a section where he was, you know, in the woods half the time, he was the outstanding hunter of the village and the guide for hunting expeditions by the, if you read The Leopard, there's a scene in there where the landowner visits Sicily, and then they get with a guide who tells them where the game is, and, so my grandfather was a great hunter.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me, um, an instance or a story that you remember firsthand about your grandfather's line of work?

CRISAFULLI: Well, I used to, you know, baby-sitting is a modern term for what was happening to us children, especially my sister and myself, but often my grandfather would just take me to the mill with him for the day. And I'd be there playing with the resident cat, and, uh, watching him, if he had any work to do, this was wartime, and there wasn't always a whole lot of corn or wheat to mill.

SIGRIST: For the sake of future generations, can you explain what a miller is, and what a miller does.

CRISAFULLI: Well, this is a typically 19th, 20th, early 20th century, mill, great wheels of stone grinding against each other, and a big funnel in which you pour the corn or the wheat, and then it comes down and gets pulverized, literally, into flour. Uh, run by water power so that it was down the hill at the end of a small little canal from the river up above and that made it certain that it would always be water powered, because the creek would go dry

and would go, uh, in the rainy season, which would be the fall and winter, it would fill up, and in the summer it would go dry.

SIGRIST: And whose grain was being ground?

CRISAFULLI: Anybody that wanted, that had wheat. This was a rural village, therefore most everybody except the municipal people that lived in the village, and the school people, what have you, they were all farmers, so they grew wheat, and they grew corn, and they would bring it down, some of it, at least, to be ground into flour, to make bread. And in the years that I was there my memory has to do with the, waiting for the shipment from the United States, you know, literally the United States fed Europe during World War One. And so we would go to, go with my mother to the piazza, and, uh, there would be a man up there who would say, you know, the shipment of wheat is in, everybody come down and get yours. And they would call the names, I supposed alphabetically, and then when Bongiorno, or Crisafulli, as the name would come up, you'd go up and you'd get your sack of, uh, of, uh, wheat.

SIGRIST: And then that would . . .

CRISAFULLI: Then you'd take it to my grandfather to mill it into flour.

SIGRIST: How was your grandfather paid?

CRISAFULLI: Sometimes by grain and, instead of money. Because, uh, typically in a poor rural, we had that in the United States in the 1930's, when people were so low on cash that they paid the doctor in eggs or some other farm product, and he often was paid that way, but I suppose in money, cash.

SIGRIST: Did your grandparents, where did your grandparents live?

CRISAFULLI: They lived in Staiti.

SIGRIST: But, I mean, what, was it inside the mill, or did they have a separate house?

CRISAFULLI: Oh, they had a separate house. The mill was down the mountain a ways. Uh, I don't know how far. Possibly, certainly several miles. Um, and I doubt that my grandfather was the one that built it. And the house in Staiti, which was at the end of a road

from the village, far enough that it was a, it had its own name. And they lived there with, as you know, houses were abutted on each other, so there would be a common wall between houses, unlike the United States where houses are freestanding. In Europe, more than likely, they just keep adding and adding and adding against the next wall. Anyway, our cousins lived there with them in that little section, and we often went out there. It was not a long walk, probably two miles, maybe even a mile, and, uh, we'd spend the day with the grandparents.

SIGRIST: Describe what the house looked like, what it was made out of, that sort of thing.

SIGRIST: Well, the houses were typically made out of stone and cement. To my knowledge, they were not, they were, you know, uh, what, more like the Spanish houses that you'll see in California.

SIGRIST: Stucco.

CRISAFULLI: Stucco kind of thing. Uh, because lumbar, by that time, thanks to the Romans, was scarce. Italy was at one time the source of lumber for the Roman Empire, with which they built their ships for their

navy. And, as a result, they denuded.

SIGRIST: There weren't any trees left.

CRISAFULLI: Yeah, not many. Especially oak and chestnut was most plentiful, and wonderful trees, from what I read. Um . . .

SIGRIST: What kind of roof did the house have on it?

CRISAFULLI: A tile roof. Those were typical.

SIGRIST: Where did the tiles come from?

CRISAFULLI: My uncle made them. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me about that. That's interesting.

CRISAFULLI: Well, this, uh, hillside, where the village was located, had a source of clay. And, in fact, we often, that's what we played, we played in clay. We'd make things, and then cook them over the fireplace. I have a great humorous experience in connectin with that.

SIGRIST: When you were a child.

CRISAFULLI: Yeah. We were there eight years, okay? It only snowed two days that I can remember. Of course,

just twenty-five miles south was Mt. Aetna, always snowcapped, but that was eleven thousand feet. We were at about three thousand feet. Um, so we played in the snow, and we children were having a great time. We made snowballs, and as I would do the clay thing, I took it and put it on the fireplace to preserve the snowball, and it melted, and my heart melted with it. (he laughs) I, you know, what an experience, to learn the difference between snow and clay. Well, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about this . . .

CRISAFULLI: My uncle, an uncle of mine happened to be the one who made the tiles for the roofs, right out in the open, sun-baked tiles, you know, they're just half, half a circle.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

SIGRIST: Was the clay treated in any way, or was it just . . .

CRISAFULLI: Not that I know of, no. It was just refined a bit so as to make a smooth, uh, composition.

SIGRIST: Was your house similar to your grandparents'?

CRISAFULLI: Well, we first, when we first went back we lived behind the village in a rural house, and later on my father relocated us in the village, right in the heart of the village across the street from the church and the piazza there. And that house, I'm not sure if he built it. I know that he did alter it, and built a balcony onto it. I remember his doing that.

SIGRIST: What are some of the features of your own house, say, the village house, that stick out in your mind from your childhood?

CRISAFULLI: Well, you know, you have a narrow street, and the steps are right there on the street. There's no such thing as a sidewalk. And there were two steps, and you went in, and then there was one great, big room, at the end of which was the fireplace, because the fireplace is also the oven, furno. Um . . .

SIGRIST: How do you spell furno?

CRISAFULLI: Furnace. Furno is, uh, F-U-R-N-O. It's the same

word that gives us the word furnace. And you baked bread there, and on the bottom part, as in rural America, you had a fire to keep warm. And then there was a table, and that seemed to be the biggest room in the house on the first floor, and then farther in a certain direction that ended up on, across the street from the church, was the bedroom, one great, big bedroom. And, uh, then the little balcony that my father built, and then we were looking right at the roof of the church. Down below there was a place for the donkey and the goats.

SIGRIST: This is under the first floor?

CRISAFULLI: Yeah, yeah. But since we were on a slope, I think you could actually enter, I know you could, from the down side of the street and the donkey would be, we had a donkey, and we had some goats. And, uh, normally if you, I don't know if there were pigs, but we, I don't recall that we had any down in the village. Uh, I think up in the rural residence we did have them. Um, and, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Did you name your pets? Did the donkey have a

name . . .

CRISAFULLI: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: . . . that you remember.

CRISAFULLI: Well, um, I do not, but I'm sure there was a name. It's funny I don't remember because that was my, it was my donkey.

SIGRIST: Is there a story that you associate with that donkey that you could tell us?

CRISAFULLI: Well, there are a lot of stories. I mean, this could go on. I happen to have a luncheon engagement. We can carry it on at another time. I don't know.

SIGRIST: Maybe one story you could tell us about the donkey?

CRISAFULLI: Well, the donkey, when my father visited us in 1918, he needed a donkey to work the land, and he heard of a woman who was widowed, a young woman recently widowed, who had a donkey for sale. And the story is a funny one because in her grief this young woman joined a splinter group of a, see, everybody is a Roman Catholic, but there's a

splinter group, like, that we used to call Holy Rollers in this country, and they sort of prayed and wailed, and I guess maybe they sang, but the story was that she forgot all about feeding the donkey, and while she was singing and wailing upstairs, the donkey was braying downstairs out of hunger. So when my father got the donkey, he happened to be a big one, a tall one, almost the size of a mule, but he was all bones, and he led him home and gradually we fed him, and then this little, since I was the youngest at home, he became my pet. We would go to the field and we could not get this donkey to just go straight on. He ate his way along. He just would graze and graze and graze and graze on the edge of the road. I suppose it took us twice as, three times as long, to go five miles or four miles or three miles, as it would normally if the donkey were already well-fed. And that's one story there with this crazy thing. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: We'll just pause for a second. (break in tape) Okay, we're now resuming.

CRISAFULLI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Um, Mr. Crisafulli, you just told us the donkey story. The donkey put on some weight walking along.

CRISAFULLI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Let me sort of reroute the questioning here to your mother. What was your mother's name?

CRISAFULLI: Maria.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

CRISAFULLI: Bongiorno.

SIGRIST: Oh, Bongiorno, of course. And, uh, I'd like you to tell me a little bit about your mother's personality.

CRISAFULLI: Well, I would judge that she was a beautiful woman, actually, by seeing pictures that give me a, kind of a lead onto what she must have looked like when she was twenty or twenty-one, you know? She was the eldest of five, I believe, five children of my grandparents on her side, and a cute story is that my grandfather very much wanted a boy, and he didn't get a boy until number five, so he trained

my mother, the eldest, to be his lookout on a hunting. He'd take her hunting with him, and she would stand in some place, and he'd try to scare the rabbits, or whatever the game was, and she would tell him where the game was and help him hunt. So she was a hunter's daughter, and I suppose she knew everything except maybe shooting the gun. And the grandfather was terrific at that. He lost, there's a story about him, he lost the sight of one eye in his older age, and he learned to shoot with his other eye. And my brother has a poem. My brother is a linguist and a literature person, and he's written a poem about the time that he went quail hunting with my grandfather. (he laughs) I won't get into that because, you know, it's just, there are so many things that we could talk about, you'd better guide me.

SIGRIST: Let's keep talking about your mother for a little bit. But, you know, this brings up an interesting point. Can you, can you talk to me more in depth about your mother's relationship with her father?

CRISAFULLI: Oh, absolutely close. Total, you know. But her younger sisters were more playful. They would

take, my sister and me, you see, I remind you that my brother, after he completed the four grades, was sent to Mycena to be in school, so he wasn't home much. Um, and my sister and I were the ones at home, and my mother's younger sisters would take us along and play with us, you know, how teenagers do with children of two, three, four, five, six years of age.

SIGRIST: Did your parents marry in Sicily before they went to America?

CRISAFULLI: No. He, my father came over, I cleared that up with my brother, around 1903 and '04, with his brothers, and he went back in 1907 to marry my mother, so there must have been, I think, probably the spark of a romance that he left behind. And, uh, they married in 1907, and right off got on a ship and came, came back.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you in later years how she felt about coming to America that first time?

CRISAFULLI: Well, she would refer to it, yeah. She was plenty scared. Um, you're leaving a wonderful family behind, all her sisters, and her little brother,

and her wonderful parents, in her village. And, of course, the pluses on the other side were her husband, and my brother was born probably by the end of that year, you know? And, uh, in West Virginia. And she had some scary times. One she told about, you know, you're in the coal mines, you do, literally, in 1905 and '06, around that time, you go to work at dawn and don't get home until dark. The wife and the children are home alone. And, uh, a drifter came to the door, and he looked in there, and she didn't quite know what to do, but she was getting ready to, you know, to defend herself. And he just pushed on and didn't go in. Those were dangerous times in America, because the men were working in the shops, and in the mines, dawn to dark, and the family was, virtually the mother was the backbone of everything.

SIGRIST: And I should say for the sake of the tape that I'm interpreting your word drifter to mean a vagrant adult male . . .

CRISAFULLI: Right, right.

SIGRIST: Of age that should be working somewhere but wasn't.

CRISAFULLI: Yeah, that's right, that's right. Right. He might or might not have been dangerous, but he looked at her, and something, he was in the doorway, passed between them, that made him go on, you know.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you any stories about your own birth?

CRISAFULLI: Yes. You see this birthmark?

SIGRIST: You're pointing to a mark on your neck.

CRISAFULLI: It goes all the way down to here.

SIGRIST: To the end of your . . .

CRISAFULLI: My left arm. And, uh, she said that these are stories that you make up, I think, that she had a dream when she was pregnant with me and, uh, before the birth, that in the dream she wanted some wine, you know? You coming from a culture where wine is part of the dinner, uh, the daily diet, really. Because, for one thing, the water is not very good. And so she dreamt that she was having a glass of wine, and she says when I woke up this arm was stiff, and I went like this . . .

SIGRIST: You're rubbing your left arm.

CRISAFULLI: She said, yeah, and, of course, when I was born, there was the wine. (he laughs) Scary.

SIGRIST: It manifested itself in your dark . . .

CRISAFULLI: Quite a story, yeah. I had another thought, but I forgot what it is now.

SIGRIST: Now, what was your official name when you were born?

CRISAFULLI: Virginio Paolo Crisafulli. That's in the, it's in the birth certificate.

SIGRIST: And, um, were you named after somebody in the family?

CRISAFULLI: No. My father got, all of a sudden, very patriotic, and he named me for West Virginia, and then he named me Wilson temporarily for my President. Then my Uncle Paul was killed, and they substituted Paul, and that must have happened all sort of together because it's in the birth certificate Virginio Paolo Crisafulli.

SIGRIST: But now your name is Virgil C. How did that

happen?

CRISAFULLI: Well, my brother and I both had problems with our names in school. Uh, Virginio is not a, if you're going to take the masculine for Virginia, in the United States, in English, you've got to go to Virginius, I-U-S ending. Well, that is even worse than Virginio, and the children, uh, you know, it's bad enough to be an immigrant, thought I didn't, I knew I was an American, but I was a total Sicilian boy. And, uh, you, it's hard. You have an adjustment to make, and the kids really go after you. And one way is to make fun of your name, and they would call me Virginia, and I would have to say, "But I'm not a girl," you know? So I'd go home crying. And, uh, funny, my father, who said, "Let's get a dictionary," and my brother, who has always been the scholar for the family, as well as the eldest, brought home a dictionary of proper names. And we went through the dictionary, and next to Virginia was Virgil, so I took that one.

SIGRIST: And that happened when you came back here.

CRISAFULLI: Yes. In Wadsworth, Ohio, in 1923, around in there.

My brother's name being Santi, the teachers put down Sandy, and they went through all grade school, high school, college, until he got to, um, taking his Master's degree at Ohio State where we all, we both went to school. And the dean said, "Crisafulli, you're going to be a professor of romance languages, and you've got this Scotch nickname." You know, "What about it?" And he had to explain, "My real name is Santi, but they pronounced it, it sounded like Sandy, so they put down Sandy." "Well," he says, "I suggest that you go down, you know, find a lawyer and make a legal change." (he laughs) So now his name, since then, 1933, I guess, is Alessandro Santi Crisafulli. (disturbance to the microphone)

SIGRIST: I see. I just want to ask you not to play with the mike, because you may interrupt the flow. Tell me about, okay. So, so there were these accidents. Santi was killed, Paolo was killed. Do you know anything more specific about those particular incidents, something your parents might have told you?

CRISAFULLI: Well, my Uncle Santi was just a 19-year-old kid,

and he was the youngest of the four brothers, and all we know is that he, and this has been brought back through our oldest cousin, who died only two years ago at ninety-two years of age, and he was actually born in Antillo and came at age six with his father. His name was Muscolino. And he said that Uncle Santi, there had been currently, something happened down in the mine, and it flooded, or it was flooding, and the little train, you know, that they used, he was running, trying to save himself, and he happened to touch a wire, an overhead electric wire, and then his feet grounded, and he electrocuted himself. So that was that story. And in the case of my Uncle Paul a few years later, there was an explosion in the mine, and he actually was still breathing when they brought him up in the elevator, but he died right there on the ground in Clarksburg.

SIGRIST: And these accidents precipitated your parents going back to . . .

CRISAFULLI: Yeah, that's, well, my parents went back, and my other uncle went up to Wadsworth, Ohio, and eventually we all ended up in Wadsworth where all

this name business was happening, you see?

SIGRIST: It's a family hard to keep track of. (they laugh)

CRISAFULLI: You're amazing the way you're doing it.

SIGRIST: Well, I'm just trying to make it clear for whomever will be reading this and listening to it. All right. So you're two years old, 1914, everyone goes back. We've already talked about your grandparents and all, some of the social fabric of that life.

CRISAFULLI: Yeah, uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Tell me about school in Sicily. How old were you when you started, and what kinds of things . . .

CRISAFULLI: Well, you're six years of age, just as in the United States. There's no kindergarten. And by the time we came along, they had four grades. When my mother was alive, they had two grades. And, as I said, my father didn't even go to those two grades because it was voluntary.

SIGRIST: Well, and your father learned, as educated . . .

CRISAFULLI: In the Army, yeah.

SIGRIST: Could your mother read and write?

CRISAFULLI: Yeah. She had had the two grades. Um, it was a little room right on the piazza there and, uh, there was obviously no kindergarten or anything like that. You started at age six in the first grade, we all did. I was completing the fourth grade, which I didn't finish. Um, as we got prepared to come back, my sister did four grades and, as I said, kept repeating the fourth grade because my mother didn't want her to forget what she had learned, and Santi was in Mycena. Um . . .

SIGRIST: Is there a teacher that you remember from Sicily that sticks out in your mind?

CRISAFULLI: Yeah. Yes, yes. Uh, I'll give you an experience. I was born left-handed, and there's lots of experiences, in fact. And so my mother sent me down to the school, which was probably four hundred feet from our house because we lived right close to the Piazza. And, uh, in I go with a penny pencil and a tablet. Um, like that. This was an old-fashioned penny pencil made in the United States.

My mother and father had brought a bunch of them back with them, you know, that had a little conical eraser on one end. They were typically this color, the wood, and they were pencils, and I went to school with them.

SIGRIST: I'll just say for the sake of the tape that you're pointing to sort of an ochre-colored notebook.

CRISAFULLI: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Sort of a goldenrod brown.

CRISAFULLI: Yeah. Uh, well, nowadays pencils are painted, actually.

SIGRIST: They're yellow.

CRISAFULLI: But these, these penny pencils were just in the original wood. Um, and the teacher looked at it and she said, "What are you doing with that?" And I said, um, "My mother gave it to me." You know? She said, "You're supposed to be using a pen. Go home and get a pen, or come back tomorrow with a pen and ink." They started right off with pen and ink. And so that was experience number one. Experience number two I began to write left-handed,

and she says, "You can't write left handed. The left hand belongs to the devil. Put that pen in your right hand." And I couldn't do it. It was just awkward for me. And I would try it, and when she turned her back, back I'd go with my left hand. And then she, in order to really train me, she would take a pin out of her ample bosom and draw blood right on the back of my left hand until I cried, and then I wrote. But I continued to do things left-handed outside of the class, so I'd use a knife left-handed, and I'd do other things left-handed. I later sort of reasoned that when I was out of her reach I reverted to my natural self and did things with my left hand. So I became . . .

SIGRIST: Was the school run by the church, or was it run by the state?

CRISAFULLI: No, no, it was a municipal school.

SIGRIST: A municipal school.

CRISAFULLI: A little, it was fifty feet from the church but, um, Italy, you know, had only been united about thirty or forty years, if you count 1970 as the year of unification. This was 1914, '15, '16, and

Sicilians were still Sicilians. And, in fact, to this day the spirit of Sicily is one of independence and, uh, so that their culture was quite different than the northern Italian culture, um, was more ancient, more classic, and we literally had, I think, an older civilized history, though it went back to Greece, you see? Esculus[ph] was Sicilian, and a number of great Greek scholars were Sicilians. Well . . .

SIGRIST: In the name of time, let me ask you about your religion. What . . .

CRISAFULLI: Roman Catholic.

SIGRIST: Roman Catholic.

CRISAFULLI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me, you said the church was right across from your house. Tell me a little bit about . . .

CRISAFULLI: One wall of this piazza was the church and, in other words, the church, the piazza was like the front yard of the church, only it was, uh, in our day it was dirt. When I went back in 1965 with my American wife, who was not at all Italian, she was

a, you know, Welsh-Irish, whatever, her name was Bair, B-A-I-R, and, uh, we went back to the village for a one-day visit. It was paved, and it looked just like a postage stamp in size. I thought it was big. So here is the church, and then the other wall is some municipal buildings. One room was the school room. Um, now that was not the only location of the school, because on occasion they were located off the piazza in another building further down in the village. But, um . . .

SIGRIST: Is there something about the church that sticks out in your mind as a child . . .

CRISAFULLI: Well, the church was the big central structure of the village. For a village of maybe two thousand people, at the most three thousand, we had a church with five altars. And, uh, we went from the secular school right over about fifty feet, literally, into church for Catechism. And there I have good memories as distinguished from, uh, the other kind of memories about the church. The, the mountains were also the location for monasteries and nunneries, and so our catechism teachers were these young women and young men who were monks and

nuns, and they were warm and exciting and just, I loved them, you know? I was, I liked catechism. In this country, when I came back, I didn't like catechism. (he laughs) But, uh, that's a very vivid memory. In the year before we left they had a drawing, which I surmised later on was a put-up job, of my sister and I both won, because I think they made it so, they pulled names out of a hat, and I think they just had our two names tagged in such a way that they would pull those names. We were going away, back to the United States, and mine was a, my sister just gave it to me about six months ago, a little Christ, um, kind of, in a creche arrangement. And I brought it back to Ohio to me, and when I was altar boy I would keep it decorated and all that. And then, of course, as I went off to college I left all those things at home, and last year my sister said, "You know, I was in the attic back in Ohio, and I found this and some other things." So I have it again. (he laughs) But, I don't know, there was an endearing relationship between those young brothers and the sisters for little children, at least, that made catechism something you didn't run away from, but

we weren't there long enough to be confirmed. I was confirmed in Wadsworth, Ohio.

SIGRIST: How did you practice your religion at home?

CRISAFULLI: Oh, we just said prayers when it was called for, but not a whole lot of that. No, they, the typical church in a rural village of pre-World War One, um, it had this great tower with a clock. Uh, and the clock had a function. No, not many people owned a watch or a clock, and this was the big clock, in the tower of the church, and it rang a deep bong, bong, and then you would have a little ring, ding, ding, when it rang once, ding, it was a quarter after. When it rang twice, it was half after. When it rang three times it was forty-five minutes after, and then, in the next fifteen minutes then it was bong again, the deep, the real deep one. And you could hear it a long, long way. And, of course, the church, in a sense, rang the bell, to call the people to church for, whether it was novena, or whatever it was. Because there was evening prayer. And most of the praying was in church. There was praying at home on special occasions.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a prayer in Italian to this day?

CRISAFULLI: No. We, we learned the Father, you know, the Our Father, in Italian, Padre Nostre.

SIGRIST: Can you still say that in Italian?

CRISAFULLI: No. My brother can, but I, it pays to become a linguist . . . (Mr. Sigrist laughs) because you don't forget your Italian so fast as I did.

SIGRIST: Who was more religious in your family, your mother or your father?

CRISAFULLI: My mother. My father didn't go to church until he was older.

SIGRIST: Was there a conflict between them because of this?

CRISAFULLI: No. There's a misunderstanding about Italian men Catholics, which is that they're not good Catholics. It's true that a lot of them do not go to church. The wife and the children go to church, but the history of that is rather more classical than the average person knows, and if I only learned it when I was in college and I was studying political science as my outside field.

SIGRIST: But your mother never forced your father . . .

CRISAFULLI: Never.

SIGRIST: . . . to go to church.

CRISAFULLI: Oh, no, no, no, no, no. If that's what you mean, no. The story there is Macchiavello, no less a man than that, in his history of Rome, complained that the church was keeping Italy divided into city-states, whereas France and England and Spain were rolling along, discovering America, and Macchiavello was quite sensitive about that. In other words, it's a political position that the men just don't participate. They want to show their independence. But I think when my father got into his forties he went to church again and he told me and my brother and my sister, "You've got to go to church."

SIGRIST: Okay. We're going to pause now, and I'm going to pop another tape in, and in our remaining minutes we'll get you to America.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay. This is Paul Sigrist. We're beginning Tape Two with Virgil Crisafulli, who was born here in America, went back to Sicily when he was two, and then the family came back in 1922 when he was ten years old. It is Friday, April 28th. We're going to get you to America.

CRISAFULLI: Right.

SIGRIST: Um, tell me, your father is in America, and he's going back and forth.

CRISAFULLI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: During the war.

CRISAFULLI: That's right. Then he went back after the last time and waited for the next two years for us, for my brother to complete school.

SIGRIST: Can you just explain a little bit briefly about your brother having to complete school?

CRISAFULLI: Well, my father was preoccupied, I think, with his children being educated. Now, that has to be clarified because my sister wasn't required to go so long. And he, I guess, had a natural

inclination to think that a technical education from Mycena in Sicily would stand my brother in very good stead when he came to the United States. It's just a chapter that he wanted completed, and he was willing to give up a year or two in our return. Besides which really I think it was not too easy to get right back, get on a ship and, after the Armistice, and come to America. You took your turn. Though they couldn't, we were American citizens, my mother wasn't but we were, and it was easier for us to get on, that manifested. We left . . .

SIGRIST: Did your father come back to Sicily to get you, or was he still in America?

CRISAFULLI: No, he was in America waiting, and he wasn't even at Ellis to meet us because he couldn't get to Ellis. He was in Ohio. That's the story.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you knew about America when you were a child in Sicily. I mean, you knew you had been born here, but what did you, how did you really perceive . . .

CRISAFULLI: I just had the usual imagination of a very great

country, a really great, great country. And, uh, I, as of now, I think it was correct. It is a really great country, but there's been a struggle (he laughs) to get to this point.

SIGRIST: Let me just . . .

CRISAFULLI: No, I, I dreamed. Actually, I practically flunked the fourth grade because I began to dream about coming to America, and I began to dream about my father. I was the youngest, and I missed my father, and I just worshipped him. So I just, in that last year I just did nothing but sort of dream about being in America, and didn't do my schoolwork.

SIGRIST: Do you remember packing?

CRISAFULLI: Yeah. Oh, all that, yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

CRISAFULLI: Well, I remember that my mother got a trunk together and, uh, bought, my father would send us clothes. He'd send me a little corduroy suit and sandals and . . .

SIGRIST: You're making a motion that the corduroy suit had short pants.

CRISAFULLI: Yeah. To the knee. And, uh, then you had your stockings and sandals.

SIGRIST: Was this different than what you usually wore?

CRISAFULLI: Well, it was an American suit for a little boy. In Sicily clothes, everything was made. You had your shoes made by a shoemaker. A shoemaker wasn't a repairman. He literally made the shoe. Uh, and you, your clothes were woven right there. You, people in the city maybe bought them, but we were in the rural village. And so the clothes my father sent over to us were mainly, I suppose, what we wore, but we had also clothing made by the tailor there. And . . .

SIGRIST: What did your mother pack? What did you take with you?

CRISAFULLI: Well, she, she brought back mainly linen, things that she wanted that were personal, bedding and shawls and clothing, dressing material. And, uh, I don't remember much of anything else except, you

know, getting on a donkey or, and then leaving the village to go down. You had to go down the mountain and over to this dry river. Um, torrente, the grove was the name of it, and you get down there . . .

SIGRIST: Can you spell that for us, please?

CRISAFULLI: Well, T-O-R-R-E-N-T-E means torrent. Uh, and they call (?) d'Agro, D apostrophe, capital A-G-R-O. That was the name of our little river. And it went to the sea when it was flowing, and you went down there to the, I don't know how many miles it was, to the train station, and then you took a train to Mycena. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Had you been on a train before?

CRISAFULLI: Never, and I was both fascinated and scared. Then in Mycena, I don't know if we spent a day or two or what, but I was just wide-eyed at this city, the buildings, the beautiful carriages with the donkeys, they decorated them all up, and I just got so fascinated I got lost. That was something I did three times. I got lost in Mycena, I got lost in Naples, I got lost on the ship. My brother and my

mother were going crazy trying to find me because I would be taken by whatever I was seeing, never having seen it before, and I'd forget where I was, or I'd forget where my family was, you know? And I can just see my brother (?) and say, "Come on," you know? And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Of course, it was anxiety-ridden only for them. You were probably enjoying it. (he laughs)

CRISAFULLI: Oh, I was enjoying it. I was, I saw, you know, we used to, uh, as children we're cutups, you know? They did so-called wrong things, like smoking. We didn't smoke. I didn't, at least. But, uh, everybody I knew in the village (?) cigarettes seemed to be a prize item, and here in Mycena I saw all kinds of cigarette butts on the street, and to pick them up. And I didn't know what I was going to do with them. I wasn't going to smoke. But I'd see all of these fascinating things, and I really literally got lost. And then . . .

SIGRIST: What happened in Mycena? Did you have to undergo any kind of examinations, or . . .

CRISAFULLI: Not that I know of. We, I don't know what

paperwork my mother had to do. Um, but we got on the train. Immediately the train goes on a ferry to cross the street in Mycena over into the other, the boot, uh, what is it? The tip of the . . .

SIGRIST: I'm trying to think what that . . .

CRISAFULLI: Well . . .

SIGRIST: I know exactly what you mean.

CRISAFULLI: Yeah, yeah, right, right. Yeah, I'll think of it in a minute.

SIGRIST: Well, that must, I mean . . .

CRISAFULLI: And then the train, when the ferryboat touched land, the tracks matched, and the train just chugged right off, and off we went to Naples. And I'd never been on a train, and I was, a nice lady gave me a banana. I'd never seen a banana in my life. I tasted it, and I thought it was, well, pretty good, you know? It was a strange fruit. I knew lemons and oranges, things like that. Calabria is what I'm trying to think of. And, uh, so we, the train was very fascinating. We got to Naples, and we got off, and there I got lost

because I got very, very attracted to a side stand. As you're approaching the ship, there's all kinds of people selling right on the street. Um, there's probably a good name for these little side stands, and they're, you know, selling all kinds of things, and I was just looking, and the ship was about to take off when my brother was frantic. He really shook me up. And he said, you know, "Quit drifting away." And, uh, we got on the ship, and . . .

SIGRIST: How long in Naples? Overnight, or . . .

CRISAFULLI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

CRISAFULLI: Pretty much that's about all.

SIGRIST: I should clarify for the sake of the tape, the people traveling in your family are your mother, and then your brother, and my sister . . .

SIGRIST: Santi.

CRISAFULLI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Your brother Santi.

CRISAFULLI: Santi, Josephine.

SIGRIST: Josephine.

CRISAFULLI: Giuseppina, and myself.

SIGRIST: And yourself.

CRISAFULLI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Um, nobody else from the village?

CRISAFULLI: No, they didn't, they, we left everybody back in the village, and we were on our own. And, uh, then as soon as they found me and got on the ship . . .

SIGRIST: Tell me about, do you remember seeing the ship for the first time, or . . .

CRISAFULLI: Yeah, I was astounded. I was astounded. It was the biggest thing I'd ever seen in my life. And we got on there, that was the third time I got lost, I got lost on the ship.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship?

CRISAFULLI: Giuseppe Verdi.

SIGRIST: Tell me about getting lost on it.

CRISAFULLI: Well, I, you know, I drifted. I was just, everything was so new to me. I was discovering the world. And I would lose track of where I was, and the ship is a big, big affair, and you can get lost by going down one flight of stairs, or you can get lost by going along the deck into another department, and not be able to find your way back to where you were, which was steerage, you know. I didn't know steerage meant cattle. I thought it had to do with steering.

SIGRIST: Oh, there are a variety of possible origins . . .

CRISAFULLI: Well, I think you probably are correct. Um . . .

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me that, where it was that you actually slept?

CRISAFULLI: Oh, it was miserable. We slept under the stern, the deck. In the meantime, we were allowed to go up top-side, I'll say that. But it seemed like everywhere I turned there were sailors painting, and that's what you do with a ship. I was a Navy man in World War Two, and you've got to keep the ship shipshape. But the smell of the paint plus the swaying of the ship made me sick, and I threw

up all over the place. Um, and, uh, we, when we, down below decks we, we were hardly, young children like me stayed with the women, so I was with my sister and my mother, and so were other children below the age of ten or twelve or whatever. And then my brother, who was fourteen, had to go with the men somewhere, but we just slept right on the floor on some kind of a blanket, I guess. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Was this a single room for your family?

CRISAFULLI: No. Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no. Oh . . .

SIGRIST: Describe what it looked like.

CRISAFULLI: A whole area for a number of families. I remember there was a little girl, a woman and her little daughter next to us. And here's where I would, you know, play with this young girl. Incidentally, we were all shaved, our heads, my sister's hair was bobbed, and my brother and I were bald.

SIGRIST: Why did they do that?

CRISAFULLI: They did that because of the danger of lice.

SIGRIST: Where did they do that? On the ship, or before you got on?

CRISAFULLI: I think in Naples somewhere. Um, yes, it had to be there. I don't remember doing that on the ship. Maybe even in Mycena. I don't know . . .

SIGRIST: Somewhere in the process.

CRISAFULLI: Somewhere before I got on. And this little girl had a mouth organ, and I fell in love with that mouth organ and stole it when we got off. Well, I don't know that she cared. (he laughs) But, uh, she was practically bald for the same reasons. It was a makeshift, twelve days, the ocean was a big, big, big place.

SIGRIST: What time of the year is this?

CRISAFULLI: July.

SIGRIST: July.

CRISAFULLI: And so the weather was nice. Uh, they served us a rice soup of some sort, possibly with seafood. I don't know. But it wasn't anything I was used to eating, and I threw up again and again, right on

the deck. And . . .

SIGRIST: A miserable trip.

CRISAFULLI: No, twelve days, maybe I had two miserable days, and ten you know what you're doing. And my brother either discovered or was discovered by a teacher and his wife, who had no children. They were coming to America to join a sister. And Benny Amino[ph], something, Guilliermo[ph], I can't remember, but they were second class, and they took my brother in there with them, and visited with him. And he'd come back to the steerage level, you know, which was really the stern of the ship, with cookies. I got introduced to beer. I didn't like it. Bitter, you know, I just never tasted anything like it. And never again in the United States until practically I was in college. Well, anyway, those are experiences on the ship.

SIGRIST: So you're on the ship for twelve days.

CRISAFULLI: Twelve days.

SIGRIST: Then what happens when it comes into New York, in five minutes? (he laughs)

CRISAFULLI: In five minutes, when it comes to New York, it's bedlam. Really, you're just waiting, hurry up and wait, as they say in the military, standing in line with all of your worldly goods, you know, in your arms, or under, you know . . .

SIGRIST: Where were you waiting? Where . . .

CRISAFULLI: Well, at first you're waiting on the ship to get off. Then I don't remember how we got into Ellis Island. I just remember Ellis Island then. But I, as you were describing the other night, I think it had to be a ferry, because the Giuseppe Verdi was a big ship. And then we come into this big barn of a room. It was big! And it's the one you were showing in the pictures. And, uh, there we were processed, physically processed. We were taken into a room and made to undress, you know, and the doctors or inspectors looked us over. And my mother, my poor mother, she must have gone crazy trying to keep track of three children, one elsewhere from, and herself being subjected to examination. Uh, and then there was waiting, and waiting and waiting, and I recall just, just falling asleep on my mother's lap. And, uh, my

brother just said the other day he, too, fell asleep. You just waited, I don't know if it was a day, or two days, or what. Um, since my father lived in Ohio, he couldn't come to meet us. He gave us directions. We were to take a train from Ellis Island to Akron, and how we got on it, I don't know, but it was an interminable trip. The, our car kept, it started out a passenger train, I think, and then at some point, which we think was Pittsburgh, we got sidetracked, literally sidetracked. That is, our car was left on a track by itself and the train went on elsewhere. There must have been a change of direction for the main train, and there we were. And I remember the dark, and I'd see these lamps going like this. Uh, these were the train people.

SIGRIST: You're swinging your arm.

CRISAFULLI: Yeah. And then, then at some point we, we, we were attached to a freight train. So there we were, the last car, by the caboose of this freight train from Pittsburgh to Akron. Now, my father was in Akron at the appointed time when the train, the passenger train was supposed to get there with my Uncle Joe

and his son, Joe, who by then was eighteen years old and owned an Overland car. He was a, they trained him as a mechanic, and he did that for a little while, but he didn't like it. Here was this automobile.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what kind of car it was?

CRISAFULLI: Overland.

SIGRIST: Oh, it was Overland, you said.

CRISAFULLI: And, a sedan. And we, this is a crazy story. They had given up for the night, and when we were going back to Wadsworth, twelve miles, something had gone wrong. And just as they were leaving the depot, someone looked and they said, "There's another train coming." And then somebody said, "Oh, well, that's just a freight train." And, uh, well, as they waited, there we were, the last car on the freight train, and that was a real surprise. And then, uh, then after all the kissing and the embracing, we were, got into my cousin's car and drove to Wadsworth, twelve miles. I fell asleep, and I didn't want to sleep because I was so fascinated by that car. And then we finally got to

Wadsworth, to my uncle's house, and the girls, my Aunt Santa was waiting, and the young girls, who were the orphans of my Uncle Paul. Uh, and they had baked cake and things like that, and while I was asleep the cake just was so good, and I thought there was so much of it. I never saw so much food in my life. And, you know, surely this has got to be America.

SIGRIST: Well, I'm afraid that's probably a good note to end on. I know you have to go to your lunch soon. Is there anything else you want to say before we close?

CRISAFULLI: Well, I want to say it's a pleasure to be with you. You're so knowledgeable and so easy to have an interview with.

SIGRIST: Well, this has been a wonderful interview. I'm sorry we can't do another hour.

CRISAFULLI: Yeah, I wish we could . . .

SIGRIST: Can you just tell me really quickly about learning English.

CRISAFULLI: I had a hell of a time. Literally I had a hell of

a time. English is the most irregular language in the world. I don't know anything about Chinese.

SIGRIST: Is there one quick story you can tell me about that experience.

CRISAFULLI: Well, well, experience is, they have words like, air, A-I-R, A-E-R, H-E-I-R. I think there's some more. And these were confusing things. And, uh, they put us all in second grade. My brother only stayed there a week, and he was off, practically junior high school by the end of the semester.

SIGRIST: He's much older.

CRISAFULLI: Oh, yeah. And my sister went and got promoted, and then I was left in the second grade because I just couldn't get the hang of things. And I had an education that was equal to sixth grade, but I could not translate what it was that these wonderful teachers, they were wonderful, I'll never, some of the greatest people on earth are public school teachers in the United States. I suppose, in other countries, too, but my experience is with public schools in the United States. They were just wonderful to us. But they would try to

tell us what to say, and I recall one thing, the teacher would hold up cards. They were nothing more than subtraction and addition, you know, eight plus seventeen, that kind of thing. But I didn't understand what it was, and I would give the wrong answer all the time. And I knew, I just didn't know arithmetic. I knew long division, in Italian. I had quite a time. I couldn't pronounce, my brother, my father would say, "Teach him," you know, "Teach him." And he would come there, and my brother went hard on me, really hard. And he come to the word O-F, you'd say "of," I would say "off." Because there was no, in Italian, F is F. He says, "No, of, of." And I would say, "Off." And I would lose patience, and I'd cry. English was tough.

SIGRIST: What about your parents? Did they . . .

CRISAFULLI: I learned, incidentally, I learned slang a lot sooner than the book language.

SIGRIST: Oh, yeah? Do you remember what your first word that you really knew in English?

CRISAFULLI: Oh, words like "ain't," you know? I couldn't say

"first" so I'd say "frust," playing marbles. This is a game from my childhood. I don't think they play marbles any more in this country. But at recess children played marbles, boys. And you got to shoot first if you say first, a play of marbles, "first" and I'd say, "frust." Oh, there's a lot I could tell you.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) Well, you're going to be late if we don't stop now.

CRISAFULLI: Listen, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Let me just sign off here. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Virgil Crisafulli on Friday, April 28, 1995, at the Oneida County Historical Society. Thank you very much.

CRISAFULLI: Thank you.