

EI-605

SISTER CARMELETTA (MARY) SARDONIA

BIRTH DATE: APRIL 6, 1905

INTERVIEW DATE: APRIL 28, 1995

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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AGE 4

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SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Friday, April 28, 1995. I am at Provincial House in Latham, New York, with Sister Carmeledda Sardonio. Sister Carmeledda came from Italy in 1909. She was four years old at that time. Present also in the room is Sister Mary Florence, who is a staff member here at Provincial House, and who has been my contact person. May I ask, first of all, before we start, the name of the order.

SARDONIA: This order?

SIGRIST: This order.

SARDONIA: St. Joseph's. Sisters of St. Joseph.

FLORENCE: Of Carondelet.

SARDONIA: Of Carondelet.

SIGRIST: Carondelet. Okay. Sister Carmeletta, can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

SARDONIA: April 6, 1905.

SIGRIST: Happy birthday. (they laugh) It wasn't that long ago. Okay, let me just get the wire . . . (referring to the microphone wire) There you go. And, um, where in Italy were you born?

SARDONIA: Um, well, I'll have to spell it. A-C-H . . . Acerenza. A-C-E-R-E-N-Z-A.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

SARDONIA: That's the best I can do.

SIGRIST: We can look it up on the atlas.

SARDONIA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Where in the . . .

SARDONIA: That would be, like, Italy, you know, is like a boot, around near the ankle. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: I see. And, um . . .

SARDONIA: You know, southern part there.

SIGRIST: Was your, both your mother's side of the family and your father's side of the family from that town?

SARDONIA: I suppose so.

SIGRIST: Did your parents talk a lot about their life in Italy before they came to America?

SARDONIA: No.

SIGRIST: No? Did either of them ever tell, maybe, stories about their growing up.

SARDONIA: No.

SIGRIST: No? No? Tell me if, um, did you have other family members in that town that you know of, grandparents in the house?

SARDONIA: Yeah, but I don't remember them or anything. They were there.

SIGRIST: But they were there. Tell me why your family came to America in the first place.

SARDONIA: Uh, I have no idea, except that for, to better themselves or, I have no idea really how it happened.

SIGRIST: Who came to America first?

SARDONIA: My father.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

SARDONIA: Gerardo[ph].

SIGRIST: Gerardo[ph]. And do you know what he did in Italy for a living?

SARDONIA: No.

SIGRIST: No. What did he do when he came to America?

SARDONIA: He worked in the slate quarries of Vermont.

SIGRIST: Where in Vermont?

SARDONIA: Poultney. P-O-U-L-T-N-E-Y.

SIGRIST: Did your father come first . . .

SARDONIA: Yes, he came first. And then a couple of years after, he sent for us.

SIGRIST: Why do you suppose your father got work in the slate quarries?

SARDONIA: I have no idea, except maybe relatives were here, and he landed here. I mean, I have no idea. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me about what your father's personality was like.

SARDONIA: Oh, he was as perfect man.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what he looked like, in words?

SARDONIA: No, not really.

SIGRIST: No. (they laugh) Is there a story about your father that you like to tell about when you were a little girl in this country, a story that sticks out in your mind about your father?

SARDONIA: No. All that I know of is he was a wonderful man, and he worked in the slate quarries, and sometimes he'd have to work during the night. And he would, my sister and I would be with him, and we'd sleep on a bench or something. But, you know, he had to go down the pit, you know, the quarries, you know, way down in the pit, and I don't know. (she laughs) I'm sorry I can't be

any better.

SIGRIST: That's quite all right. You're doing a great job. Tell me what your mom's name was.

SARDONIA: Angela.

SIGRIST: Do you know what her maiden name was?

SARDONIA: No.

SIGRIST: Okay. And . . .

SARDONIA: Well, I mean, that was her maiden name.

SIGRIST: Well, I mean, her last name.

SARDONIA: Oh.

SIGRIST: The name before she was married.

SARDONIA: No, no, I don't know that.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about your mother's personality?

SARDONIA: Beautiful woman. (she laughs) She had ten children. I was the oldest.

SIGRIST: Can you name your brothers and sisters?

SARDONIA: Yes, certainly.

SIGRIST: Please.

SARDONIA: Let me see now. Hmm. All of a sudden I go blank. Hmm.

SIGRIST: Well, how many brothers did you have?

SARDONIA: I had three brothers. I had James and, uh, hmm, Anthony.
They're still living. John.

SIGRIST: That's three.

SARDONIA: Yeah, that's three.

SIGRIST: Yeah. What about the sisters?

SARDONIA: I had a sister Catherine, I had a sister Rose. She died,
Rose. Catherine, Rose, Anna, Donata. D-O-N-A-T-A.

SIGRIST: So that's four, and yourself is five.

SARDONIA: I'm five, that's right.

SIGRIST: Um, were they all born in America, or were any of them
born in Italy, other than yourself?

SARDONIA: Only myself and my sister Catherine. The two of us were
born in Italy. The rest were born in Poultney, Vermont.

SIGRIST: When you were a little girl in Vermont, do you remember the birth of one of your brothers and sisters?

SARDONIA: No.

SIGRIST: I was just wondering how that sort of thing was handled at that time.

SARDONIA: Yeah. No, uh, my brother, we were in Amsterdam when my youngest brother was born.

SIGRIST: In Amsterdam, in Europe.

SARDONIA: No, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. Um . . .

SARDONIA: Did I tell you I went to a two-room schoolhouse?

SIGRIST: Well, we haven't gotten you to Vermont yet, but you will tell me when we get there. Um, did your mother, did your mother ever seek employment here in America?

SARDONIA: No, no. She was the mother of the family. No, she never went to work.

SIGRIST: She had plenty more to at home, I guess. Do you know any stories about the actual voyage to America that your parents may have told you?

SARDONIA: No.

SIGRIST: Do you have any firsthand recollections of being on the ship or anything like that? No. Did, um, what is your earliest memory, when you think back, what is the thing you remember the earliest in your life? (Sister Carmeletta laughs) Well, it would be in Vermont, probably, yes?

SARDONIA: Uh, no, I have no idea. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: I know. Can you describe for me the house that you lived in in Poultney?

SARDONIA: Mmm, like any other house. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Did you all live in one house?

SARDONIA: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Yes? Were there other Italians families in Poultney?

SARDONIA: Not that I know of, no.

SIGRIST: I always think of it as being a Welsh area because of the slate mines.

SARDONIA: No, we lived in the country.

SIGRIST: So you were actually outside of the town?

SARDONIA: Oh, yes, in the country.

SIGRIST: And, um, what language did you speak at home?

SARDONIA: Well, I suppose Italian, from my mother. I mean, from them. And later when we had our brothers and sisters we used to talk English, I suppose. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember going to school in Poultney?

SARDONIA: Oh, yes. A two-room schoolhouse.

SIGRIST: And what kinds of things were you taught then?

SARDONIA: Um, well, arithmetic, spelling, English. I suppose geography. The regular curriculum.

SIGRIST: When you were, when you were a girl, say, ten years old or so, could you speak both Italian and English?

SARDONIA: Oh, yes. Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Um, what about your brothers and sisters? Same situation where they could speak both languages? Did your parents ever attempt to learn English?

SARDONIA: No.

SIGRIST: No? Not any language?

SARDONIA: No. Well, my father had to get his citizenship papers, and so he, uh, had to learn how to write his name, and I suppose the things that they would ask him.

SIGRIST: Could your parents read and write in Italian?

SARDONIA: No.

SIGRIST: I see. When, um, do you know anything about the other kinds of people your father worked with.

SARDONIA: It was a Welsh colony, like a Welsh people, and he had to work in the slate quarry.

SIGRIST: And, uh, what did your parents do for entertainment in those days?

SARDONIA: Not much entertainment. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, if they wanted to relax a little bit, how would they do that?

SARDONIA: I have no memory about it.

SIGRIST: No relaxing, huh?

SARDONIA: No. I have no recollection of any of that.

SIGRIST: Talk to me about the food that you ate as a child in Vermont?

SARDONIA: Oh, I suppose macaroni. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, I'm wondering, because it's not a, it's not a large Italian area, what kinds of food did your mother cook for this big family up in the wilds of Vermont?

SARDONIA: Well, I suppose . . . (she laughs) I suppose, I have no, I have no idea.

SIGRIST: Um, you were Catholic.

SARDONIA: Yes.

SIGRIST: Was there a church in town?

SARDONIA: No, about four miles away.

SIGRIST: How did you get there when you went to church?

SARDONIA: We'd have to walk.

SIGRIST: And, um, how often did you go to church?

SARDONIA: Mmm, well, I don't think we went every week. I don't remember that. We went occasionally.

SIGRIST: Was there a priest that sticks out in your mind?

SARDONIA: No.

SIGRIST: No? How did you practice your religion at home?

SARDONIA: I suppose we said our night prayers.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a prayer in Italian?

SARDONIA: No.

SIGRIST: No. Who was more religious, your mother or your father?

SARDONIA: My mother.

SIGRIST: And, um, amongst the brothers and sisters, uh, was there a brother or sister who was particularly more religious than the others?

SARDONIA: Oh, my sister Rose, I think.

SIGRIST: And what makes you say that? Why does that stick out in your mind?

SARDONIA: I have no idea.

SIGRIST: But you think that she was more, more involved in the religious aspect of life. Is there a piece of furniture in your childhood home that sticks out in your mind?

SARDONIA: (she laughs) Oh, dear, no. I don't know.

SIGRIST: Did you live in the same house for a long time, or did you move away from Poultney, or . . .

SARDONIA: Well, I don't know how many years we were there. Then we moved to Amsterdam.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you moved to Amsterdam?

SARDONIA: Maybe I was fourteen, maybe.

SIGRIST: And why did you move to Amsterdam?

SARDONIA: Because it was easier for my father to get out of the slate quarries, you know, and work at other work, as the gas company.

SIGRIST: The gas company? What did he do for the gas company?

SARDONIA: I have no idea.

SIGRIST: Did you go to school in Amsterdam?

SARDONIA: No, I was finished with school. I was finished with school there.

SIGRIST: Did you get a job when you were finished with school?

SARDONIA: Mmm, well, I think I got a job when I left. Amsterdam, let's see. Yeah, I worked in the rug mills.

SIGRIST: And what did you do in the rug mills? Can you describe the kind of . . .

SARDONIA: Like the bobbins. I can't explain it.

SIGRIST: The bobbins are the big spools?

SARDONIA: Yeah, spools, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: And do you remember how many hours you worked a day?

SARDONIA: It could have been eight.

SIGRIST: Do you know what you were paid?

SARDONIA: No, I have no idea. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: What about your brothers and sisters? Did they go to work?

SARDONIA: Oh, when they grew up.

SIGRIST: When they were out of school.

SARDONIA: Yeah, when they grew up. I don't know what. I really don't know what they did when they got out of school.

SIGRIST: Were you expected to contribute money to the family?

SARDONIA: Oh, I handed it all in. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: And who was the bookkeeper in the family?

SARDONIA: Oh, I suppose my mother.

SIGRIST: Um, what kind of expenses would she have had at that time?
What kinds of things did you have to pay for in the family?

SARDONIA: Well, your food and your clothing. What else?

SIGRIST: Well, did you buy a house in Amsterdam, or did you rent an apartment?

SARDONIA: No, we had to rent. We had to rent . . .

SIGRIST: Oh, so there was another. What about clothing? Where did you get clothing?

SARDONIA: Later we bought the house, I think, later.

SIGRIST: The same house, or a different house?

SARDONIA: Well, in Amsterdam, you mean? No, the same house. We bought, we bought that house.

SIGRIST: Was it a two-family house?

SARDONIA: It was a two-family house, upstairs and downstairs.

SIGRIST: Who lived where in the house?

SARDONIA: We lived downstairs, and I have no idea who lived upstairs.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. That's still a lot of people to live in one house. Tell me about clothing when you were growing up. What kind of clothes did you wear when you lived either in Vermont, or even in Amsterdam?

SARDONIA: I don't know, the regular, I don't know. I don't know.

SIGRIST: Um, did your mother make clothes?

SARDONIA: No.

SIGRIST: Did your mother, um, how did your mother do the laundry when you were younger?

SARDONIA: Oh, by hand.

SIGRIST: How did she do that?

SARDONIA: I mean, she scrubbed on the washboard, and later she bought herself a machine so that, you know, she could put the clothes in the machine, washing machine.

SIGRIST: Did you have running water?

SARDONIA: Yes, we had running water, yeah, in our home, yes.

SIGRIST: In the home in Amsterdam there was running water. What do you remember about the period of World War One? You would have been, roughly, ten years old, twelve years old. What do you remember about how the war affected your life?

SARDONIA: All I know is we were delighted when we heard that peace, that peace was, that's all I remember.

SIGRIST: I was just wondering if any of your family members were called to serve?

SARDONIA: Oh, no.

SIGRIST: Nothing like that.

SARDONIA: Not that, not that war. They served in, what was it, the World War?

SIGRIST: Second World War?

SARDONIA: Second World War?

SIGRIST: Yeah? But the first World War . . .

SARDONIA: Yeah. I had brothers in the second World War. Thanks be to God, none of them were, they came back, you know.

SIGRIST: How many years were there between you being the oldest

and the youngest of the, of the brothers and sisters?

SARDONIA: Oh, how do I figure that out?

SIGRIST: Well, you said there were ten children, correct?

SARDONIA: Yeah, and I was the oldest.

SIGRIST: You were the oldest in 1904.

SARDONIA: And then, almost, every fourteen months or so there was another child born. And then my sister, Donata, was the last one. She was the tenth child. I was the first.

SIGRIST: Did your mother lose any children as infants that you know of?

SARDONIA: No.

SIGRIST: Do you know when you were a little bit older, do you know about your father's political affiliations, if he had any.

SARDONIA: No, he didn't have any.

SIGRIST: Did, when you worked in the mill, did you have to join a union?

SARDONIA: No.

SIGRIST: Nothing like that?

SARDONIA: No.

SIGRIST: Did you work with immigrants in the mill?

SARDONIA: Not exactly, no.

SIGRIST: And, of course, you spoke English anyway, so that wasn't a concern. How did you become a citizen?

SARDONIA: I had to get my naturalization papers, go through that process.

SIGRIST: How old were you when that happened?

SARDONIA: I have no idea. (she laughs) I have no idea. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Um, tell me, um, just to sort of round out your life, tell me a little bit about becoming a citizen. How old were you when . . .

SARDONIA: Nineteen.

SIGRIST: Nineteen.

SARDONIA: When I came.

SIGRIST: And when did, where did that happen? Were you still in

Amsterdam at that point, Amsterdam, New York?

SARDONIA: Yes, but I, we had the old seminary. We didn't have this house. The seminary, I entered there, and I don't remember when we came here.

SIGRIST: The seminary in Troy.

SARDONIA: Yeah. St. Joseph's Seminary.

SIGRIST: Was there a certain person in your life that was instrumental in this happening for you, someone who inspired you?

SARDONIA: Oh, yes, one of the sisters of St. Joseph, one, we had a convent of our sisters in Amsterdam, and Father would send me to get the host, to get the Communion host, you know? And then I kept going there to see her, I mean, to get them. And then one, there's two sisters taught in our church, religion, and I would sit behind them, and one of these days she turned around and she said, "Did you ever think you'd like to become a nun?" I'd given no idea at all. I think it was the farthest thing, I didn't just, no. So that's how it happened.

SIGRIST: How did your parents feel about this decision?

SARDONIA: Oh, they didn't stop me. They didn't make it hard for

me or anything. They were willing.

SIGRIST: What about, um, did any of your other brothers and sisters follow a similar course?

SARDONIA: No, no.

SIGRIST: And, um, let's see. So you said you were nineteen, so what is this, the mid-1920's, roughly, when this happened. And then, um, and then what did you do once you became a sister? How did you devote your life?

SARDONIA: Teaching.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit how many years did you teach?

SARDONIA: Well, how do I figure that out? (she laughs) About fifty. (she laughs) Could be.

SIGRIST: About fifty years. And where did you teach those fifty years?

SARDONIA: Well, I taught in, um, let's see. Hudson, Glens Falls, Troy, St. Anthony's, Troy. I think that's about it.

SIGRIST: Masterson?

SARDONIA: Oh, the Masterson Day Nursery. We had a Masterson Day Nursery. We had children coming in by the day. I didn't

teach them, but that's where I lived.

SIGRIST: What age, what age child do you particularly enjoy teaching? What's your favorite age to work with?

SARDONIA: Oh, I like to work by the seventh and eighth grade people. I love teaching. I love teaching, regardless what it was, you know.

SIGRIST: What was the subject that you taught, or did you teach many . . .

SARDONIA: Everything.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go back to Italy to visit?

SARDONIA: No.

SIGRIST: What about your parents?

SARDONIA: No, no.

SIGRIST: Did they ever talk about wanting to go back?

SARDONIA: No, no, no.

SIGRIST: Um, and then tell me about when you came here to Provincial House? When did you come?

SARDONIA: Oh, when did I come? About ten years ago.

FLORENCE: I'm not sure. Were you still teaching?

SARDONIA: Hmm?

FLORENCE: Were you still teaching?

SARDONIA: No, when I was finished teaching.

SIGRIST: You had retired.

SARDONIA: I had, you know, yeah.

FLORENCE: Maybe about twelve years.

SARDONIA: Maybe ten or twelve years.

SIGRIST: When you think about, when you think about your past,
do you think of yourself as being more Italian or more
American?

SARDONIA: Oh, American! (she laughs)

SIGRIST: If you had some advice to give a young person listening
to this tape a hundred years from now, what kind of advice
would you give that person, um, so that they could live
their life better?

SARDONIA: Be faithful to your prayers. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Could you say a prayer for us on tape? Could you, um,

uh, maybe something in Latin, or . . .

SARDONIA: No, not Latin.

SIGRIST: Latin? Not Latin. Um . . .

SARDONIA: Well, I could say the Our Father or the Hail Mary or anything. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Would you say the Our Father for us, please, on tape?

SARDONIA: Sure.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

SARDONIA: Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is
in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive
us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass
against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver
us from evil. Amen.

SIGRIST: Thank you. Well, I want to thank you very much for
letting me ask you. See how easy that was?

SARDONIA: Thank you very much.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist, signing off, with Sister Carmeledda
Sardonia, on April 28, 1995, in the presence of Sister

EI-605/SARDONIA

Mary Florence, here at Provincial House in Latham, New
York. Thanks.