

EI-619

REMO SPINOLA

BIRTHDATE: SEPTEMBER 13, 1900

INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 31, 1995

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW:

RUNNING TIME: 54:50

INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST

RECORDING ENGINEER:

INTERVIEW LOCATION:

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

ITALY, 1913

AGE: 12

SHIP:

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, May 31st, 1995. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Remo Spinola, and Remo is spelled R-E-M-O. Spinola, S-P-I-N-O-L-A. Mr. Spinola came from Italy in 1913. He was twelve years old at that time and was detained at Ellis Island for forty days.

Mr. Spinola, can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

SPINOLA: September 13, 1900.

SIGRIST: September 13th, 1900.

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And where in Italy were you born?

SPINOLA: Northern Italy.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the town?

SPINOLA: Castella Monterale.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

SPINOLA: C-A—no, wait. Because I lived there, but when I was born I was small town. This is a city. Quarti, Q-U-A-R-T-I. Pontura, P-O-N-T-U-R-A.

SIGRIST: That was the city or the town?

SPINOLA: That was the town.

SIGRIST: That was the town. Where in the north of Italy is that?

SPINOLA: It's close to where—I'll give you the big city, Torino.

SIGRIST: Oh, it's near Turin, uh-huh. Tell me a little bit—

SPINOLA: Alexandria.

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

SPINOLA: No, I don't think so. I don't remember, to tell you the truth. See, because long time.

SIGRIST: [Laughs] It was a long time. What do you remember about the town that you lived in as a child? What sticks out in your mind?

SPINOLA: Well I went to school over there. I graduated the last year in school, before you go to college.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the school building looked like?

SPINOLA: Oh, yeah, the way it would set there and everything.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that for me?

SPINOLA: Well, there were benches and we sat and I was always sat the last. I don't know why. The last chair. They thought that I was watching the other kids, because I was a little bigger for my age. I was a little bigger.

SIGRIST: Is there a teacher that sticks out in your mind from Italy?

SPINOLA: Yeah, I think there was a teacher, he was a principal at the time, and the same time he was teaching school.

SIGRIST: What kinds of subjects did they teach you in school?

SPINOLA: Well, everything. They had, what do you call, figuring? Reading. There was a lot of stuff like that.

SIGRIST: Could your parents read and write?

SPINOLA: Yup.

SIGRIST: They had had an education themselves?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How were you taught at home, if you were taught at home?

SPINOLA: Well, need the fact to be good and respect the people. They were very respectable people, my parents.

SIGRIST: Is there one job or activity that you remember being taught to you by one of your parents?

SPINOLA: No. Well, we used to go—we had a vineyard, you know, where they raised grapes, stuff like that, and we used to go there and work. They didn't know I know how to [unclear], I don't think.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the types of—the kinds of jobs that you had to do in the vineyard?

SPINOLA: Oh, yeah. They had—they had some kind of water that was spraying on, early in the season and then you just keep watching it and around September, the 13 or 14, sometime—just depends, few days more or less. That's when it's ripe enough to make wine.

SIGRIST: Right around your birthday.

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was there a specific kind of grape that you grew in the vineyard?

SPINOLA: Yeah, we got to use to black grapes and white grapes.

SIGRIST: Black grapes?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And white grapes.

SPINOLA: And white grapes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the process of making wine?

SPINOLA: Well, yes, in Italy most of the places make wine.

SIGRIST: How did they make the wine?

SPINOLA: Well, you try to pick up the grapes when it's nice and ripe—ripe, and then you have a grinder, you grind it all up. Some have to tell you that they do it on their feet. They jump in, and that's they let it ferment. You keep tasting it. Whenever you get the right taste, that's it. You stop the fermentation.

SIGRIST: Did you sell the wine that you made?

SPINOLA: Well, see, that time there, no, not much. People they didn't have the real big vineyard. They had just enough for themselves. \

SIGRIST: Can you describe the house that you lived in when you were growing up?

SPINOLA: Well, there was about five room and the kitchen. It was a pretty nice little place.

SIGRIST: And what did they build houses out of in Italy?

SPINOLA: Well, brick. All the houses, most of the houses are brick.

SIGRIST: What kind of a roof did the house have?

SPINOLA: Well, they have I think it's like this.

SIGRIST: Yes, curved. You're making a curved shape with your hand.

SPINOLA: Then about that high, and you put it on the roof with that.

SIGRIST: This is like a tiled roof.

SPINOLA: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: That you're describing. What about the floor inside the house?

SPINOLA: Well, the floor, mostly they made of cement.

SIGRIST: How many rooms did the house have?

SPINOLA: About five.

SIGRIST: Five, and how was food prepared?

SPINOLA: Oh, we had a kitchen.

SIGRIST: There was a kitchen in the house.

SPINOLA: In the house.

SIGRIST: What kind of a stove did it have?

SPINOLA: Well, to tell you the truth, I don't know exactly, but I think it was just the wood and stuff like that, you know. We didn't have the facilities they have now.

SIGRIST: What kind of furniture did you have in your house?

SPINOLA: Oh, pretty fair furniture.

SIGRIST: Is there a piece of furniture that you remember very well from your childhood?

SPINOLA: No, to me they looked all the same. [Chuckles]

SIGRIST: Did your family raise livestock?

SPINOLA: No.

SIGRIST: No, didn't have any animals?

SPINOLA: No. Maybe chickens, that's about all.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

SPINOLA: It's Edward.

SIGRIST: Edward, and what did your father do for a living?

SPINOLA: Well, he was working on a coal mine. Not coal mine, cement. Where they make cement, cement they grind. Make cement. That's what it was, a mine like that, rocks. They break, this was good enough to make cement.

SIGRIST: And that industry was right in this town?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What was your father's personality like?

SPINOLA: Oh, real good and have to tell you this, he was a great coronet player.

SIGRIST: Coronet player.

SPINOLA: Yeah, and he was real good but, you know, he used to play by ear. Didn't know much music, but he was real good. In fact, in Detroit couple few time he play in a theater.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the songs that he played on his clarinet—on his coronet?

SPINOLA: I don't know. Just offhand, I don't think so.

P You're saying 'coronet,' like a trumpet, right?

SPINOLA: Yeah, trumpet. Trumpet.

SIGRIST: Right. What did your father look like? Can you describe him in words?

SPINOLA: Oh, he was nice, clean man and everything.

SIGRIST: Is there a story about your father from your childhood that you like to tell?

SPINOLA: No, we didn't have—no, no story.

SIGRIST: Don't have a story about your dad?

SPINOLA: No.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

SPINOLA: Pauline.

SIGRIST: Pauline, and what was her maiden name?

SPINOLA: Lupairia.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

SPINOLA: L-U-P-A-I-R-I-A.

SIGRIST: And what do you know about your mother's family background?

SPINOLA: Well, I thought they were pretty beautiful people.

SIGRIST: What were some of the things that your mother had to do around the house in Italy?

SPINOLA: Well, prepare food and she was like a, making dresses, too. You know, she didn't have just complete place, but she used to do that on the side.

SIGRIST: Did she have a sewing machine?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: She did, huh? Did she make—did she make the clothes for the family?

SPINOLA: Yeah. See, even that, some they paid her.

SIGRIST: So some people would hire her to make clothing for them.

SPINOLA: Yeah, uh-huh.

SIGRIST: What did your mother look like?

SPINOLA: Oh, she was nice looking.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh, what color hair did she have?

SPINOLA: Black.

SIGRIST: Were there any other family members who lived in the house with you?

SPINOLA: Oh, yeah, we had—let's see. This is at the end there was three brothers and myself. There's four brothers and two sisters.

SIGRIST: Can you name everyone for me?

SPINOLA: Yeah. The four boys was Remo.

SIGRIST: That's you.

SPINOLA: Me, and then second one was Pete and we had Robert and the last one I just talked to him the other day, Henry.

SIGRIST: And then how many girls?

SPINOLA: Two. Pauline and Rose.

SIGRIST: So Pauline was named after your mother?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah. You're the oldest of—

SPINOLA: The oldest, yeah.

SIGRIST: Who's the youngest?

SPINOLA: Pauline.

SIGRIST: Pauline. I mean, the family?

SPINOLA: Well, who's the youngest of the brothers and sisters?

SPINOLA: Well, Pauline.

SIGRIST: Did your parents, once they came to America, have any more children?

SPINOLA: No.

SIGRIST: No.

SPINOLA: Yeah, they had Pauline.

SIGRIST: She was born here, Pauline?

SPINOLA: Yeah, she was born in Pennsylvania.

SIGRIST: I see. What kinds of activities did you enjoy doing with your brothers and sisters when you were growing up?

SPINOLA: Oh, play card, you know, stuff like that. I'm a great card player.

SIGRIST: Who taught you how to play cards?

SPINOLA: I don't even know. [Chuckles]

SIGRIST: What card games did you enjoy as children?

SPINOLA: See, we used to play Thirty-One and stuff like that, you know. Something a little easy.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. What religion were you in Italy?

SPINOLA: Catholic.

SIGRIST: Catholic, and was there a church nearby your home?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And what do you remember about going to church?

SPINOLA: Well, I remember because for a while even, you know, going in with the priest when they help them out.

SIGRIST: You mean, did you have to serve on the altar?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you had to wear when you did that?

SPINOLA: Oh, yeah, we had the regular jacket to put on. Regular uniform.

SIGRIST: Were there nuns or monks in this town?

SPINOLA: No.

SIGRIST: No.

SPINOLA: No, because it was a very small town.

SIGRIST: So the school was not run by the church then?

SPINOLA: No. No.

SIGRIST: I see. What kinds of food did you eat when you were a kid growing up?

SPINOLA: Oh, we used to eat bread.

SIGRIST: Who made the bread?

SPINOLA: Oh, we used to buy it.

SIGRIST: You used to buy it? So there was a bakery in this town?

SPINOLA: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: So your mother didn't make the bread, then?

SPINOLA: No.

SIGRIST: What other kinds of foods?

SPINOLA: Oh, them some raised pigs. You know, they kill it, make sausage, salami, stuff like that.

SIGRIST: Were there special foods for holidays that you remember?

SPINOLA: Oh, yeah, there was one holiday we have chicken. Not chicken, rooster.

SIGRIST: Do you remember which holiday that was?

SPINOLA: That was in the spring, I think. I don't remember it right now, to tell you the truth.

SIGRIST: When you were a child in Italy, what did you know about America?

SPINOLA: Not much of anything. In fact, my dad never mentioned it about coming to America. But in 1912, one day he came home from work. It was twelve o'clock and my mother was worried. Says, "What's the matter? You're not feeling good?" because he used to work at four or five o'clock every day. Said, "No." Said, "I think I'm going to go get the passports to go to America." Just like that. I remember that because I heard it and my mother seemed disappointed. Says, "You never said nothing and now you want to leave?" He said, "Well, if I leave, in one year either I'm back here or you will be in America." And in one year, less than one year, about ten months, we were here.

SIGRIST: Where did he go? When he left your town in Italy, where did he go to in America?

SPINOLA: He came to Detroit, but then the jobs in Detroit at that time, they weren't paying too much, so he left there and he came to Pennsylvania, work in a coal mine.

SIGRIST: Where in Pennsylvania?

SPINOLA: Salina.

SIGRIST: Salina, Pennsylvania?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did he have any family in America?

SPINOLA: No. We the only family.

SIGRIST: Why do you think your father wanted to go to America?

SPINOLA: Well, he wanted to improve his—you know, the things he was doing.

SIGRIST: What job did he get when he came to America?

SPINOLA: Well, he was working in Detroit, box cars. You know, when the box cars come in, cleaning them up and stuff like that, and they weren't paying very much, so he gave up and he had some friend of his that were in Pennsylvania working in a coal mine and they got in touch and told him, "Come down here. I'll help you get the job."

SIGRIST: Did your father ever tell you later any stories about his experiences working in the coal mines?

SPINOLA: Oh, I worked with him.

SIGRIST: Yeah, once you got over here.

SPINOLA: yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, good. Well, we'll wait then. We'll talk about that when we get you over to America. Tell me a little bit about what life was like without your father when he was in America. Was life different in any way when he was gone?

SPINOLA: Oh, I was trying to—I was already twelve, eleven, twelve, I'd say that, and I used to go work in the garden and help my mother to raise a little food, stuff like that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what kinds of vegetables that you were—what you were growing?

SPINOLA: Oh, we were growing tomatoes, peppers, beans. Then we have salad, to make salad. Stuff like that.

SIGRIST: How did your mother support the family during the time when your father was away?

SPINOLA: Well, there was a little bit, my dad once in awhile, he sent a little money home because, you know, he knew that we needed it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how he sent the money? How did the money arrive?

SPINOLA: By—he send it like a check and just was in an envelope. It was just like now.

SIGRIST: And then what would your mother do when she got in the mail?

SPINOLA: Well, she'd take it to the bank and cash the check.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you get a job, even though you were so young, that paid money while your father was in America?

SPINOLA: No.

SIGRIST: Because you're the oldest of the children.

SPINOLA: Yeah, but I was only twelve. But that one summer I went to work with a bricklayer, carry the bricks and stuff like that, you know. It was the last couple months that I was there.

SIGRIST: Do you remember—do you remember the point when your mother said, "Well, we're ready to go to America?" Do you remember that happening?

SPINOLA: Yeah. Oh, yeah. You know, finally my dad wrote that we could go to America and he asked us if we like to go. Sure, we all like to go.

SIGRIST: Did he stay in America, or did he come back to Italy to get you?

SPINOLA: No, he stay in America.

SIGRIST: He stayed.

SPINOLA: We go by ourselves.

SIGRIST: So he was going to meet you when you came?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What did your family pack to take with you to America?

SPINOLA: Oh, I don't know. That's pretty hard. Most of the clothes we had, but food we didn't take any because they were serving food on the boat.

SIGRIST: So you knew you wouldn't have to bring any food.

SPINOLA: No.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, was there some kind of a send off dinner in town or some kind of a celebration?

SPINOLA: Oh, yeah, my aunts and my uncles, we had a dinner all together and I was there three, four times, in Europe myself.

SIGRIST: Later on, yeah.

SPINOLA: One time I spent five and a half months.

SIGRIST: How did you feel, as a twelve year old, about leaving Italy and going to America?

SPINOLA: Well, at first thought, you know, "Gee, I don't know nobody there." There I used to play with other boys. It was different story, but once we got here, we got used to.

SIGRIST: Do you remember if while your father was in America, if he was writing letters telling you about America?

SPINOLA: Well, like when he first was there in Detroit, and the job wasn't paying very good, he was kind of disappointed, but after he was going to the coal mine, he was working hard. Then later on, they even put a store. He had a store. He had a—in the mining town. A store, a movie house. You could see a movie two, three times a week.

SIGRIST: Where did you and your mother and brothers and sisters get the ship? Where did you get on the ship?

SPINOLA: We got on the ship in France, but I forgot the name of that port there.

SIGRIST: How did you get from your town in northern Italy to France?

SPINOLA: Oh, we went by train.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about that train ride to France?

SPINOLA: No, nothing. Like now, see, we was kind of happy that we were going, but then we were kind of disappointed, too, because one of my brother had the measles. But someway or other, my mother kept that kid and the [unclear] didn't realize that he was sick until we got to America. Then when we got in America, we got caught.

SIGRIST: So he had the measles, even when you were in Italy. I mean when you were getting ready to get on the ship.

SPINOLA: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Oh, so he had had them for a long time. You're not sure where in France you were, where the ship left from?

SPINOLA: Gee, I don't know. I can't remember the name.

SIGRIST: And what was the name of the ship?

SPINOLA: Chicago.

SIGRIST: The Chicago. Do you remember what your impressions were when you looked at that ship for the first time?

SPINOLA: Oh, yeah. We were excited. All excited.

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep on the ship?

SPINOLA: Well, we had like I was sleeping with the men already. Because I was like, I said, thirteen or more. And the other ones, they were small. They were sleeping with my mother.

SIGRIST: So the ship divided the men from the women?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Were you sleeping—what kind of a room were you sleeping in?

SPINOLA: Oh, I don't know. Just ordinary room.

SIGRIST: Were there other men in that room?

SPINOLA: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: How many?

SPINOLA: Just depend because we didn't have a bed. We had bunks three high and then we all sleep there.

SIGRIST: How did you feel initially about having to be separated from your family?

SPINOLA: Not too bad because during the day I see them all day, see.

SIGRIST: What did you do during the day on the ship?

SPINOLA: Not much of anything. You know, thirteen years old, what do you expect to do?

SIGRIST: What time of the year is this? What month?

SPINOLA: It was—when we left Italy, it was in February, but then we then go to our destinations in March.

SIGRIST: Oh, so it took a long time.

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about being on the ship? For instance, do you remember where you were fed on the ship?

SPINOLA: Oh, they had a kitchen and a dining room and we go there. They give us some food.

SIGRIST: And do you remember what it was that they fed you, what kind of food?

SPINOLA: Oh, yeah. Well, ordinary food. It was soup and sometime you get a piece of meat. It was pretty fair.

SIGRIST: Did anyone in your family get sick?

SPINOLA: No, except my brother that had the measles. When we got in Detroit—I mean in New York, we got caught.

SIGRIST: How long—how long were you actually on the ship, do you think?

SPINOLA: Twelve days.

SIGRIST: Twelve days you were on the ship.

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And tell me what happened when the ship came into New York? What happened? How did they discover the fact that your brother has the measles?

SPINOLA: Well, you go through—doctors take care of you and they see.

SIGRIST: And where did that happen in New York? Where did you get looked at by the doctors?

SPINOLA: We stayed right there where we got off, like this place here.

SIGRIST: Here? Ellis Island?

SPINOLA: Yeah. We got off here, that's it.

SIGRIST: What kind of examinations did they give you?

SPINOLA: Oh, they examined pretty good.

SIGRIST: Do you remember specifically what they were looking at?

SPINOLA: No, they weren't looking for one thing only. They were looking for everything. If you were sick, they wait to tell you either you go back or you stay here until they approve. After forty days, I don't think they keep you much longer than forty days.

SIGRIST: And you were detained here for forty days because of your brother's illness?

SPINOLA: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Were you still separated from your mother and the younger children?

SPINOLA: Yeah, in the ship.

SIGRIST: But I mean once you got here to Ellis Island, did you—were you separated still?

SPINOLA: Yeah. Yeah, I was sleeping with the men.

SIGRIST: And what did that look like, where you were sleeping with the men?

SPINOLA: Well, the way we were sleeping there, it was three high, bunk.

SIGRIST: Three high bunks.

SPINOLA: And I always try to pick up the top one.

SIGRIST: Did you have a different bed every night?

SPINOLA: Oh, yeah, we different room every night, too.

SIGRIST: Why did they do that?

SPINOLA: I don't know. You know, when it's time to go to bed, they lined up. They give you a blanket and up you go.

SIGRIST: Huh.

SPINOLA: That's the time there. I don't know now

SIGRIST: And what did you do during the day while you were detained?

SPINOLA: Well, they used to ask me a lot of questions. They asked me where I went to school and being that that I was pretty good reading and stuff like that. They just about the time that they had a law that if you come to this country, you have to know how to read or write your own language. So there my times my Italian first come in, and like we used to have—for me to ask them if they could write and [unclear]. But they asked me in Italian, but some guys there, couldn't even speak Italian, you know. They speak the sister language because every place in Italy there's—I imagine every country they got little different language.

SIGRIST: Different dialects.

SPINOLA: Dialect, yeah.

SIGRIST: From town to town. We're going to pause just for a moment and Kevin's going to flip the tapes over, and then we'll get you into America.

SPINOLA: Okay.

[End of Tape One, Side A/Start of Tape One, Side B]

SIGRIST: Okay, we're now beginning Tape—ah, Side Two with Remo Spinola who came from Italy in 1913, when he was twelve and we were in the middle of talking about the forty days that you spent here at Ellis Island. Your mother has small children with her.

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What did she during the day, while she was held her all that time, especially with the little one.

SPINOLA: Not much of anything. Stayed there, watched the kid, because the food, they would give to you. You know, breakfast, lunch and dinner.

SIGRIST: Did you experience any food that you had never seen before while you were here?

SPINOLA: Well, I don't know. Probably there was some, but I don't know.

SIGRIST: Do any other people who were here at Ellis Island stick out in your mind? You talked about the other Italians trying to talk to each other, but—

SPINOLA: Well, see, being this slow, that—but reading and, you know, [unclear] something that went to school, educated. And I'm not—I forget what I was going to tell you.

SIGRIST: You were talking about the law that they put into place, that you had to prove that you could read in your own language, which you could do.

SPINOLA: Oh, the other guy, the people they have coming there. They have these fellows, you know, they can't write because they want to know something. Probably you had to write to their parents, see what they [unclear] this country, if they can't read or write in their own language. So they asked me to write for them. I was only thirteen years old, but I always wrote and some, they give me some very bad excuse. So I used to tell them, "No, I don't write that." Said, "I don't believe that they understood that for you."

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you saw other Italian people here at Ellis Island. Were there any other kinds of people that you had never seen before, that you saw for the first time?

SPINOLA: Oh, yeah, there was a lot of country. We were all sleep together and all day long we're together.

SIGRIST: Did you visit your brother while he was recuperating?

SPINOLA: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you have to go to a different part of the island to do that?

SPINOLA: No, it's right there, but just inside by themselves.

SIGRIST: Did your father—the first day that you landed, did your father come expecting to take you away?

SPINOLA: No, he knew that we were coming. I don't know he was thinking about coming to meet us because spending money, you know. He finally came, that's why when we did come, when we got to the place in Pennsylvania, Braysville, this was something about thirty, forty mile from—

SIGRIST: Salina.

SPINOLA: From Salina, and so he got on the train because everything train for to go one place or the other, like that. We got on train. We celebrate.

SIGRIST: Well, your mother must have been very happy to get off of Ellis Island after all of that.

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember—do you remember what your mother's behavior was like when she was here? How did this experience effect her while she was detained here?

SPINOLA: Really, she didn't get mad. We were disappointed, but we didn't have—never thought much about it.

SIGRIST: I see. So you took the train to go to Pennsylvania.

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And tell me about what it was like to see your father again for the first time in almost a year.

SPINOLA: It was real nice. You know, he came with couple other people that I knew from Italy. They used to live there, and they come together and that was little celebration after day we have a cookout and it was really a good one.

SIGRIST: Can you describe where your father was living? What the apartment or the house looked like that he was living in?

SPINOLA: Oh, a real nice. That wasn't, you know, just to make out of woods, the home. But it was pretty nice.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me how many rooms it had? Was it an apartment or a house?

SPINOLA: It was a house. See, most of the coal mine, they build their own home. Then if you want to buy a home, you would go out to buy it.

SIGRIST: So this was company owned, then?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: The company—oh, I see. Do you remember the name of the company, the coal company?

SPINOLA: No, I don't think so.

SIGRIST: How old were you before you started working in the mines?

SPINOLA: I started at thirteen and a half years old.

SIGRIST: Oh, so you were only here a few months then?

SPINOLA: Yeah, right away.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what the experience was like for you working in the coal mines?

SPINOLA: Well, there wasn't much experience [unclear] to get. You know, that time there they weren't too particular about right, you know, you're not allowed to. But then you work with your dad, that's all, you know. Make you look like you and tell them the age.

SIGRIST: Do you know how much you were paid when you first went to work?

SPINOLA: Oh, to load the coal, so much a ton.

SIGRIST: And is that what you did, was to shovel coal?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was it common for people of that age to work in the mines as a young man?

SPINOLA: Oh, yeah, there was a lot of young kids.

SIGRIST: Were there other nationalities, other than Italians who were working in the mines?

SPINOLA: Yeah, Polish mostly.

SIGRIST: What time—what time in the morning would your day begin?

SPINOLA: It used to begin—well, we had to get up six o'clock, and then seven o'clock they have what they call a man's trip, to take the place for your spot to work.

SIGRIST: What did they call it?

SPINOLA: A man trip.

SIGRIST: A man trip? Man? Trip?

SPINOLA: Yeah, you sit in this car and they take you there.

SIGRIST: And you go underground?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And do you have to wear special clothing?

SPINOLA: No.

SIGRIST: What about a helmet or anything like that?

SPINOLA: Oh, yeah, they have helmets with the lights on it.

SIGRIST: And then you would work from seven o'clock until?

SPINOLA: About four.

SIGRIST: Four, and did you get a break for lunch?

SPINOLA: Well, yeah. It's up to you because the company don't care. You don't produce, you don't work.

SIGRIST: I see.

SPINOLA: They pay you by the ton.

SIGRIST: So it's in your best interest to keep working during the break time.

SPINOLA: So I work in the coal mine about three years. Three years.

SIGRIST: Is it hard work?

SPINOLA: Oh, yes. Just depends on how you want to do it, see. The more tons you put out, the more money you make. [Chuckles]

SIGRIST: Did any accidents occur while you worked in the mine?

SPINOLA: Oh, yeah. Not to me, but—oh, yeah, wait a minute. I have one. I broke this shoulder.

SIGRIST: You're pointing—that's your left shoulder.

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How did that happen?

SPINOLA: Well, there was—they bring you a car. We call it a car, but they like a truck.

SIGRIST: Little truck.

SPINOLA: Where you put your coal in there. This one here, I don't know, the brake broke and my dad was working at the end, and this car, couldn't stop it. So I go on somewhat or another and tried to stop. I finally did stop it, but in that same time, the roof got low. It cut my head and down I went and I went down the road. I hurt my eye, but lucky that my eye, didn't lose no—

SIGRIST: You're pointing to the mark on your eye.

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Your right eye. You said that's the only time that you were hurt in the mine.

SPINOLA: Yeah, that's the only time.

SIGRIST: Now, did the company take care of taking, you know, the medical—

SPINOLA: Yeah, they pay for the rest because, you know, that time there they kept a long time for this broken. I was there almost six months.

SIGRIST: So it took six months for your left shoulder to heal?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Of course, you can't make money while you're out. Did your mother get a job once you came to America?

SPINOLA: No, she didn't. She didn't get no job.

SIGRIST: She just stayed—stayed home with the kids.

SPINOLA: Take care of them.

SIGRIST: Well, she had a lot of, you know, house full of kids, right? So you worked in the mines for three and a half years. Then what happened? Why did you leave working in the mines?

SPINOLA: Well, my dad had a grocery store he put on, so I went to be a butcher with him. I never killed animal, but I started killing animal and everything.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what it was like to learn how to slaughter an animal?

SPINOLA: Oh, no, it was good. I didn't have no problem. Well the thing to do, buy small animal. Calf, about all. Big cows, stuff like that we didn't buy. So you get a calf and get a hammer, hit him over the head. Right away, the knife they cut him here. You know, right inside his leg, the thing that would pull him up.

SIGRIST: How did you feel when you were just learning how to do this? How did it make you feel to do that?

SPINOLA: Oh, I didn't feel like nothing important.

SIGRIST: When did your father get his grocery store? Like, how long did he work in the mines, before he opened the store?

SPINOLA: Well, I really don't remember what month that he started working in the coal mine. In the coal mine, that's when he come from [unclear]. Then about three years after, he bought the store.

SIGRIST: How did your family's life change when he bought the grocery store?

SPINOLA: Oh, we liked it.

SIGRIST: Who worked in the store with him, other than yourself?

SPINOLA: My sister.

SIGRIST: Which sister?

SPINOLA: Pauline.

SIGRIST: Pauline, who was born in Pennsylvania.

SPINOLA: No, that was Rose that was born in Pennsylvania.

SIGRIST: Rose. She worked in the store.

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah. What kinds of things did you sell in the store?

SPINOLA: Groceries.

SIGRIST: All food?

SPINOLA: All food.

SIGRIST: And who were his customers?

SPINOLA: Oh, the coal miner were.

SIGRIST: Was the store right in the town?

SPINOLA: Yeah. That time there there wasn't much ice or freezer, dairy or stuff like that. So I used to go out in the morning, take the orders and then I deliver about two o'clock, so they could use the meat in the evening. So the meat don't spoil.

SIGRIST: How did you learn English?

SPINOLA: Well, I went to school through a young girl that was school teacher. I was working, I couldn't go to school, regular school. So in the evening I'd go there. She showed me how to. I had to pay a little bit, but that's whatever I learned.

SIGRIST: Was it just you and this young lady, or were there other immigrants learning how to speak English?

SPINOLA: Just me and her.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your first English word was? Or the early—

SPINOLA: No. No, I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a story about trying to say something in English and having it come out incorrectly?

SPINOLA: No, I don't know if I ever did that. Maybe I did. I haven't paid much attention.

SIGRIST: Did your parents attempt to learn English?

SPINOLA: Yes, they spoke a little bit, but they didn't go to school. They couldn't learn very good.

SIGRIST: Were most of your father's clients immigrants?

SPINOLA: Yeah. The majority in the mining town, they were Polish or Italian.

SIGRIST: How did the two groups of people get along?

SPINOLA: Oh, most of them get along pretty good.

SIGRIST: Did they all go to the same church in town?

SPINOLA: Yeah, mostly because they were all Catholic.

SIGRIST: They were all Catholic. But there wasn't an Italian church and a Polish church in this mining town?

SPINOLA: No, there wasn't that big population couldn't keep up with it, so they went all together.

SIGRIST: Did your parents ever want to return to Italy?

SPINOLA: No, they never mentioned it. In fact, they never go. Like me, I went about four times.

SIGRIST: How old were you the first time that you went?

SPINOLA: I was about—the first time it was about 1929.

SIGRIST: 1929, so you had been here, well, a long time.

SPINOLA: Yeah. Well, you know, I was small. Didn't make much money. I couldn't go.

SIGRIST: Why did you go in 1929?

SPINOLA: I wanted to go see my parents.

SIGRIST: Oh, your parents—

SPINOLA: No, my parents were in Detroit. No, I don't know why, but I just took a trip, that's all. Me and my wife.

SIGRIST: So you were married by 1929?

SPINOLA: I married in 1925.

SIGRIST: 1925. What was your wife's name?

SPINOLA: Josephine.

SIGRIST: Josephine, and do you know her maiden name?

SPINOLA: It was Josephine Tola.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

SPINOLA: T-O-L-A.

SIGRIST: T-O-L-A, Josephine Tola, and you married her in 1925.

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And was she born in America or born in Italy?

SPINOLA: Yeah, she was Italian but she was born in America.

SIGRIST: Where did you meet her?

SPINOLA: Well, it's a funny story. In 1925 I was working in Ohio, Pennsylvania. But I was near Pittsburgh, not very far, and I got on a train. Said, I was working the coal mine. It was Saturday morning. There was no work. I said, "I think I'm going to take a trip to Pennsylvania to see my folks." I told one guy, so he says "Go ahead." So I got on the train. Then when we came to Pennsylvania, place called Salina, we stopped and I looked out and I saw the name of an orchestra leader that was my best friend and that he was playing there in that town that night. So I grabbed my suitcase. Down I went. I checked my suitcase in the station. I got off the train and I started walking. I came to a place they were selling ice cream. I go in there, got an ice cream and I ask, I said, "When this dance hall tonight?" I used to like to dance. They told me. So I went there. I finally find it. I go out walking along to see what this hall, where it's at, so I know in the evening. Somebody yelled, "Hey, Remo. Remo." I said, "What the hell." It was the leader, this orchestra. He said, "It's me." He said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm looking for you." Said, "Come here. Come here." So I went there and somebody that he knew was standing there. I said, "I got to go get a room some place to sleep for tonight." He said, "You don't have to get a room." He said, "I got a room with two beds in it." He said, "I paid them already." Said, "You can use one bed. I'll use the other." I said, "Okay." So that night I met this girl who come to the dance. I start dancing, begin to like her and I ask her, "Do you have a boyfriend?" She said, "No." Said, "I go out with some boy sometimes, but I don't have no steady one," and she said, "Why?" I said, "Nothing, I would just like to know." So instead of going home that night, I stayed there until Monday and I went there

got a job in a steel mill. So next Saturday she asked me, said—she came to the dance again because they used to dance every Saturday night. She said, “What are you doing here? I thought you work in Ohio.” I said, “Yeah, but I like this place.” Said, “What do you mean you like this place?” Said, “I like this job, besides there’s some girl that I like her very well.” “Yeah, who’s the girl?” I said, “You.” So she take me over to the house to meet her people. Three months later we were married.

SIGRIST: How many children did you have?

SPINOLA: We only had two. That time you couldn’t have too many.

SIGRIST: [Laughs] And what are your children’s names?

SPINOLA: Raymond.

SIGRIST: He’s the son that’s with you today?

SPINOLA: My son, yeah, and the other, we call her Josephine.

SIGRIST: Josephine, like her mother?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Did you become a citizen?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What was that experience like for you?

SPINOLA: Oh, it was pretty good. I would like [unclear].

SIGRIST: What year was it that you became a citizen?

SPINOLA: I became citizen, oh, wait. Let’s see. I was young yet. It was before I married. Probably 1924 because 1925 that was the year. I think ’25.

SIGRIST: Did your parents become citizens?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember if that was a difficult process for them?

SPINOLA: No, because you know, they weren’t interested in nothing else. Just to be citizens to go vote, that’s all.

SIGRIST: When you think about yourself and who you are, do you think of yourself as being a person from Italy or a person who's American?

SPINOLA: Oh, right now I'm a person over here. Yes. And this is where I make my—my meals.

SIGRIST: Do you have any advice for people? You know, you've lived—you'll be ninety-five in September. Do you have any advice for young people nowadays about how they can lead their lives successfully, having gone through the experiences that you've gone through?

SPINOLA: Oh, I never think about other people [unclear].

SIGRIST: I see. Is there anything else you'd like to say before we—before we end?

SPINOLA: That's about it. I worked, and then after that I marry, then I put a garage up in '29. I was working in building trade. Building trade went to hell. So I put a garage in, that was worse. It was sell gasoline and fixing cars. One day the company that I'm there, they were lousy. They cut—sometimes they were selling gas two cents cheaper than what we pay for. I couldn't stay in business. So we got together, about fifty dealer and we went to the company. We told them, we said, "Either we get a guarantee wages or we close every station." So they said, "We give you five cents a gallon." Okay, so we settled that.

SIGRIST: Is that the business that you had during the Depression? Doing this?

SPINOLA: No. Yeah, I started during the Depression almost, because like I said, the building trade went to hell.

SIGRIST: Yeah, you had to do something else.

SPINOLA: So I had to do something else to get a job.

SIGRIST: When you went back to Italy for the first time in 1929, you said, you went with your wife. How did you feel? Did you go back to the town where you were born?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How did that make you feel, to see this town?

SPINOLA: Well, see, I know the people just as good because I went to school with them since I was thirteen, almost. So I liked it.

SIGRIST: Did it feel—did you feel like you had come from that place or did it seem sort of distant to you?

SPINOLA: No, I know that I come from there.

SIGRIST: Yeah, and you've been back—you've gone back four times, you said.

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, Mr. Spinola, I want to thank you very much for taking some time out from your visit here at Ellis Island. When are you going to go back to Detroit? Sometime soon?

SPINOLA: About another week or two.

SIGRIST: Going to be another week here with your son?

SPINOLA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, this is Paul Sigrist signing off with Remo Spinola on Wednesday, May 31st, 1995 at the Ellis Island Recording Studio. Thank you very much, sir.

SPINOLA: Okay, you're welcome.

[End of Interview]