

**EI-620**

**PATRICK IZZO**

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**INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 6/1998**

**TRANSCRIPT RETYPED BY: SANDRA DICKISON 8/2008**

**WPA PAINTER OF THE INTERIOR OF ELLIS ISLAND AND THE STATUE OF LIBERTY: CIRCA 1936**

SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1995. I am at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Patrick Izzo. Mr. Izzo worked for the WPA here at Ellis Island as a painter. You also did painting at the Statue of Liberty and Governor's Island, I believe.

IZZO: Well, we, yes sir.

SIGRIST: And we believe Mr. Izzo started working sometime around 1936.

IZZO: That's correct.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Can we begin, Mr. Izzo, by you giving me your birth date, please.

IZZO: My birthday is March the 27<sup>th</sup>, 1908.

SIGRIST: And can you give me a little bit about your family background.

IZZO: Well, my family background is, my father came here to America, I think it was around 19--, about 18--, 1889, some--, some--, 1890. My mother came about a year or two later. And when they came here, far as I recall, that things were very hard. So he had a little job about, as a carpenter for fifty cents or so much a day or an hour or something like that. And they he became, I found out later, that he was, he learned to be a barber. And when I was a little boy, I used to go and help, help him in the barber shop, with a little stool. And I used to lather up the, the customers and my father used to shave them. But that's about, there's a very, very long story.

SIGRIST: What country did you parents come from?

IZZO: My father came from Naples, Italy, and also my mother.

SIGRIST: And where did they settle when they came to the U.S.?

IZZO: In New York City, in, in Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

IZZO: I was born in Brooklyn, in 1908.

SIGRIST: 1908. Tell me a little about your parents' adjustment to America.

IZZO: Well, the adjustment in those days was very hard. Things were much reasonable, so they got along a little bit. My mother had to take some sewing to keep the family alive. We were eight in the family. And things were very hard in those days. And, well, we tried to help one another one way or another. But that's as far as I can remember because we never talked about old times. Our parents, parents never told us much about Europe or where they came from.

SIGRIST: For the sake of the tape, can we please have the names of everybody. What was your father's name?

IZZO: My father's name was Gennaro Izzo.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Gennaro, please.

IZZO: G-E-N-N-A-R-O. My mother's name was Anna Sasso, S-A-S-S-O. And I don't know, they got some friends of them, friends of my father, and met my mother. So they got married (he laughs) somewhere around 1901 or 1902, all right. That, I wasn't nowhere near it. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: What about your brothers and sisters. Can you name them, too, please.

IZZO: Yes. I had four brothers and four sisters. And the only one there are alive today is my older sister. She's ninety-one. My two brothers, one is in Connecticut and one is in Jersey, and the rest of them are deceased. And that's all...

SIGRSIT: Can you name them? Give me the names, please.

IZZO: Oh, my, my sister, older sister's name is Theresa Lorino (ph), my second sister's name is Rose Scapetti (ph), my third sister is Josephine Lo, Lorino (ph), these are married now, my other sister is Millie Moses (ph). My brother, one of my brother's name is Frank Izzo, my older brother is Augie,

Augustine Izzo and the other one is Augie, Augustine. And myself, and myself.

SIGRIST: Are you the youngest of all the kids?

IZZO: I'm the oldest of the, oldest of the boys.

SIGRIST: You're the oldest of the boys but, so, uh, how, how do you fall in terms of all the brothers and sisters?

IZZO: I'm the oldest. I'm the oldest and...

SIGRIST: But I mean, not now, but I mean originally. Who, who was the oldest child?

IZZO: Oh, my, my sister Theresa. She's ninety-one years old.

SIGRIST: And she's, and she's the oldest child, and she's still living now.

IZZO: Yes, yes. She's the only one living, well, three of us are still alive.

SIGRIST: And then were there children born after you were born in 1908?

IZZO: Oh, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: There were.

IZZO: Yes.

SIGRIST: And was everyone born in Brooklyn?

IZZO: Complete, yes.

SIGRIST: Okay, because your parents had already been in this country for some time.

IZZO: Oh, yes. They had been in this country a little while, about a, in those days when I was a young, youngster, I went to Public School 155 in, in Brooklyn. And we only had up to a sixth grade. Then we had to change to another school. So things were happier. You left the doors open, nobody bothered you. And today it's together different.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little but about how you became involved with the WPA later on in your life.

IZZO: Well, in 19--, I, I was working in the printing line in 1929, before, even before, a couple of years before that. And in 1929 we had a Wall Street crash. I lost my job. So I had my wife, myself, and my daughter Anne. And things were hard to get a job. So I didn't want no charity. I don't want anybody to give me charity. So I asked, as I said, this WPA was, was out, to get a job as a, but before that I had to work on the, on the roads shoveling snow, shoveling in the wintertime. And I found out from one of the fellows I worked with, he said, "Why don't you take a test to be a painter?" Which I did. I went to New York. I took a test and I passed. The following week I got a job to work the Statue of Liberty first. We worked the Statue of Liberty and then they transferred us to here. (i.e. Ellis Island). But when we came here, it was a lot of change. Everything here was not what you see today. Everything was different. There were woods, chairs. There were benches where they used to have, they'd eat meals. There were, there were, uh, where the immigrants came off the boat they had to come through here and the doctors was up, up there, if I'm not mistaken to examine him. If they pass, if they have no disease, they let them into the city. If not, they had to be shipped back.

SIGRIST: Let me back up a little bit. What did you paint at the Statue of Liberty?

IZZO: We painted the ceilings, walls, rooms. We had a lot of scraping to be done and we couldn't talk to the aliens. We couldn't give them no cigarettes. If we spoke any of their languages, "How it was, the city? How was the..."

SIGRIST: That was here at Ellis Island.

IZZO: Yeah. They asked...

SIGRIST: Go back to the Statue of Liberty where you first...

IZZO: Oh, boy.

SIGRIST: ...where you first, that was your first job out here, was the Statue of Liberty.

IZZO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me exactly what you had to do.

IZZO: Well (he laughs), we, we got into the Statue of Liberty because we had to paint the inside of the (?). The Statue of Liberty on the inside, they had bands all around the copper of the Statue of Liberty. So we had to scrape them, the bands, and paint behind the bands with a rag. So we, the inspectors used to come with a, with a mirror to see if we didn't skip

because if you skip, then he, he rejected it. So when it rained, they ad little holes in, into the ceiling. But we had to use torches first. We had to burn, burn the stuff off. But when it rains, ha!. You got a shower because you could go nowheres where we were stuck. But the stairs in the Statue of Liberty were very well worn. You had to be very, very careful. The only time you could have gone up there into the crown but that's all. But nobody could gone up to the arm. But we were working up in the, well, we sneaked up in the arm and we went up to see what was the, going on. But there was a lot of moths, a lot of moths. They had over a thousand dollars, uh, a thousand volts of lights.

SIGRIST: You're saying moths, moths, like a little butterfly thing.

IZZO: Yeah, yeah. They come to keep warm. They always come because the windows were a little open, so they came in. But we used to go up there in the arm to have our lunch because we couldn't stay in because people were coming up the stairs. But after a while, they stopped the people from coming up. The only thing they could come is after we had our lunch. But it was a very experience to do this kind of work.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what, what kind of paint or what color you were using for the inside?

IZZO: Oh, we were using, uh, first we were using a two, a two color job. The first was a primer and the second was like an ivor--, a little like an ivory, see? Just exactly I don't recall, but I'm pretty sure it was like a (moth?) color. But then we had to go down into her shoes were. We had to use what they used to call a fisholine (ph) oil. We had to pump, spray it in because nobody could have gone there in where she had her book. Because nobody could have gone, we had to use a long nozzles and shoot this, this liquid in. But boy, what an experience I had when I went into the subway. I, I smelled like a fish, yeah. And the funny part of it, people (he makes sniffing noises) kept away because there was this smell, see? Yeah.

SIGRIST: Maybe that's a good thing. You could get a seat on the subway.

IZZO: Yeah, maybe it was. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Tell me who taught you how to do this?

IZZO: Well, I, it was, as I said before I was an, when I got out of school I got a job as an errand boy in a printing, in the printing line. And after a while they asked me if I wanted to work, learn how to run the machines, a printing press. I says, "Why not." I was a young fellow. I wasn't married at all then. And I learned how to work on the presses. This boss of mine, his name was Mr. Richardson from New Jersey, he was a very wonderful

person. He sent me to school, printing school. But then the Crash came in 1929. I've lost my job because he couldn't afford to keep all of us on the job. So I was looking for a job, I couldn't. I was out of work for about a year and then my brother-in-law, his name is Joseph Lorino (ph), he, it was a painting contract. So he says, "Okay. It's time for you. Come and work with me." And that's where I learned my painting, see? But I used to be, learned how to mix colors but things were really tough then. I was working for about three dollars a day with my brother--, with my brother-in-law. Hours, forget about the hours because my, if he had to pay me for overtime he couldn't afford it. And that's how I became a painter. I, now I, I worked for, before I retired I worked for a wonderful boss. His name was Strauss (ph). He had two sons and I was a foreman. I was a foreman for eighteen years.

SIGRIST: So even after you got out of the WPA, you continued in that trade.

IZZO: Yeah, when they closed, yes, when they closed it, when they shut the WP(A) off, I got to work with a few different bosses, different jobs, as a painter.

SIGRIST: How much did you get paid while you worked for the WPA?

IZZO: Uh, jeez, I really don't know. I know they paid us three days, for three days, around thirty, thirty five, around thirty, a little over thirty dollars or something like that.

SIGRIST: So you worked three days a week.

IZZO: About three days.

SIGRIST: How many hours a day?

IZZO: Oh, we work, we work about seven, eight hours. We had, we had to put a full day in, see? We had some many days to work and so many days we were off because to give other, other fellows a chance to make a dollar. But they were very rough times.

SIGRIST: When you were still working at the Statue of Liberty, before they brought you to Ellis, were there parts of the island, Bedloes Island, that you were not allowed to go onto?

IZZO: They only way on Ellis Island, uh, on the Statue of Liberty?

SIGRIST: Yeah, Statue of Liberty.

IZZO: No, no. The only way was up to the arm.

SIGRIST: That was the only place that was restricted.

IZZO: The only think, later they changed now, they changed, I wasn't there in the Statue of Liberty yet, but they changed all the tiles. But my boss, Mr. Strauss (ph), his sons, we painted that about a few years ago. They put all the structures and they repainted the outside and, I think, inside or the outside, I really don't know.

SIGRIST: Before we talk about your experience at Ellis Island, are there any stories that you like to tell about anything that may have happened while you were working at the Statue of Liberty? Something, maybe a funny thing that happened?

IZZO: The only thing that happened over here, when I was working at Ellis Island, well, the Statue of Liberty we didn't have much. The only thing is that when it rained, we had to get in. That's about all.

SIGRIST: I see. All right, so how long did you work at the Statue before you came to Ellis?

IZZO: Well, I don't recall. The only thing is that they took us off there for a while because the Queen Mary, mother that is, had to come to the United States to see what the United States looked like. So they took her to the Statue, they took her here, to Governor's Island, at the time they called it. We had to paint the outside, all the, all, all the (trim?) had to be done and finish it in one or two days.

SIGRIST: So you were really sort of just moved around between...

IZZO: And I was a (unintelligible) project. And I tell these little stories every now and then to my daughters, to my grandsons, but a lot of people thing, "You must be nuts." (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, tell me about what it was like working at Ellis Island.

IZZO: Oh, here?

SIGRIST: Yeah, what sticks out in your mind about that?

IZZO: Oh, this here, when I walked, got off the boat today, I haven't been here in a long, long time. When I got off the boats here today, I was very shocked. I...

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what it looked like in the late 1930's.

IZZO: Oh, when I first, in, in my days when I was here, worked here, the downstairs, there were all benches. And that's where the aliens used to come in. They had them come into that room. Now, when they come into that room, they had to come to be examined. There, they had little tags when they got off the boat. Now these tags, they had to be examined by doctors. If the doctors, you had no illness or disease, you, they put a mark on, on your shoulder or something. But if you had, they put you in a separate place and ship you back to whatever country you come from.

SIGRIST: But your experience, tell me about your experience here at Ellis Island.

IZZO: Well, my experience here, when I walked in everything was wood, mostly wood. And the place was a shabby, was shabby. And that's why we had to work such different places where we didn't interfere with the immigrants. So we had to scrape, paint to make it look more presentable. As I said, when I walked in here, I really was shocked and surprised. What a beautiful job that they made here.

SIGRIST: When you worked here in the late 1930's, did you have any interaction with any of the aliens?

IZZO: No. We were told, the first thing we got before we started, don't interfere with the immigrants. If they ask you, because we were all different kinds of languages, I spoke Italian at that time, they says, "If at any time they ask you any, any questions or ask you for a cigarette, don't talk to them and don't give them anything." Just, because sometimes the, the benches right where we were working a little bit on the side, and they always talked, talked through the fence. And they'd say, "Hey, poison" in Italian or whatever language they were talking. "How is New York? How's things?" We were not allowed to say "boo."

SIGRIST: Can you tell me any specific jobs here at Ellis Island? Do you remember about painting one specific room or the job specifically?

IZZO: Yes, yes. We first started painting the, the kitc--, if I recall correctly, the kitchen because that's the most important room. And then we had to paint like rooms, different rooms at that particular time. And then we had to paint the entrance coming in because everything was all wood. We had to scale, you had to scrape it and repaint it. But while they were outside in the yard because they used to give them exercise...

SIGRIST: The aliens you're talking about.

IZZO: In the yard, and we used to come. But most of, most of our work was done mostly at, at night. The scaffold, the scaffolds were put up. We had to paint the ceilings. At that time they didn't have no tiles. They put up

the tiles later, probably later on. And we had to paint the columns. We had to paint the floors, at that time they didn't have marble, wooden floor. Everything was ninety percent wood.

SIGRIST: And so you were doing most of the work out here in the evening.

IZZO: Most, no, mostly we had to do it during the day but in the evening there were special jobs we had to do at night time.

SIGRIST: What time, how, what was your day like? Tell me from the time you woke up 'til the time you got to Ellis.

IZZO: Well, I had to get up at five o'clock in the morning. (he coughs)

SIGRIST: Were you living in Brooklyn?

IZZO: Right. My wife, and got it, I had to get a certain train to get me down to the Battery by seven o'clock, seven, half past seven, to make the boat. And most of our employees of the WPA, like electricians, carpenters, we all had to get on, be on that boat because if you missed that boat you lost, lost your day's work.

SIGRIST: Where did the boat leave from?

IZZO: From the pier at Battery Park. And we landed on, well, the boats are not like they are today. They were small boats, half of that size. And one night I got stuck here 'til about one o'clock in the morning. Everybody forgot that I was working there. So when I went to see to look around and nobody, I was here about one o'clock in the morning. So the guards called, called ashore. A tugboat came and took me ashore. It was raining like, like cats and dogs. But these experiences that I had, that I don't recall very much, is something to remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, now were talking about Ellis Island now, do you remember paint colors here, what color paints you were using here?

IZZO: Well, some of them was gray that I recall because gray, gray was the color they, wouldn't get dirty so much, or green that, see? But some of the rooms were painted off-white. I don't, I just don't recall so many times now.

SIGRIST: It was a long time ago.

IZZO: Oh, it's close to fifty years ago (sic: approximately sixty years).

SIGRIST: Did you use a primer when you painted here, also.

IZZO: Oh yes, yes, oh yeah. Because if you scraping and spackling and plastering, you had to put a, a coat of paint. At that time they didn't call, at that time they didn't call it a primer. They called it "first coat, second coat and third coat."

SIGRIST: Where was the paint stored?

IZZO: Well, they must have had a place somewhere on the outside because they didn't store it in the, in the building because it was ex--, it was ex--, in those days there was a lot of lead. Paint was made with lot of lead in those days and they had to keep it away from the immigrants, see? So they used to set out, they must have had a shack or something in those days and that's, that's how, all the ladders they had to put away.

SIGRIST: Whose job was it to mix the paints?

IZZO: Well, to mix the paint som--, we had to mix, the foreman. The foreman might have a helper (he coughs) or it came already mixed. See, Sherwin Williams, no, that was Staten Island, sorry, they got it from somewhere where they mixed the paint. They figured they lost too many, time mixing the colors because you made it one time, one shade. The next time you add a little more and it's a different shade. So they had, they had these paint manufactures, gave them a sample and made correct. A lot of them use a lot of buff, buff colors too.

SIGRIST: What did you wear when you were working here?

IZZO: We wore just our clothes, painting clothes. No mask and no, no protection at all in those days. But today they have, everything is different.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that when you were painting the Statue of Liberty, you used a sprayer for some of the tight parts.

IZZO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What kinds of tools did you use to paint here?

IZZO: Yeah, over here?

SIGRIST: At Ellis Island.

IZZO: We used a brush. We used brushes and in those days they didn't let you use a roller. There was never invented a roller. We used the regular brushes. We use a, a, knives like spackling knives and scrapers and tat's about, that's...

SIGRIST: How wide of a brush?

IZZO: Well, we, in those days they just have two or three kinds of brushes. They had an eight inch brush, calcimine, like we call a calcimine brush.

SIGRIST: Calcimine, eight inch.

IZZO: Yeah, right. And then they had a four inch brush, a five inch brush, a three inch brush, so it all depends on what kind of what kind of work you did.

SIGRIST: And did different people only use one brush, like someone was only responsible for the jobs that used a three inch brush?

IZZO: No, no, no. If they give you a job, the foreman comes in the morning and says, "Pat, you go in that room." These, they give you, this is the, this is what you have to do. So the specification is if it had to be scraped down, we scraped it down. If we had to give it a primer, we give it a primer, if it's a finish coat, we give it a finish coat. So we knew as painters, knew what kind of brushes we had to use.

SIGRIST: I see. And you said that, that the interior condition was quite run down at that time.

IZZO: Oh it was, definitely, definitely. And it was a sight, believe me.

SIGRIST: Was there a place where you were fed on the island?

IZZO: Yes, a little, it was a restaurant. A lot of us brought lunch from home, but if you wanted, let's say, a drink or something, they had a little concession here for a sandwich or ice cream or soda or something like that. Yes, they did have that.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that the other people who were employed as painters were from all different nationalities.

IZZO: That's correct, correct.

SIGRIST: Did that ever create any problems.

IZZO: No, no, it did not create a problem because each, each trade, now if we had to go before we go into a room, the carpenter had to be finished, the electrician had to be finished (he coughs) and then that painter go it. We were the last, the last ones to go into the, into the building. (he coughs) So there never was a, a friction or anything like that.

SIGRIST: Was this, was the main building here at Ellis Island, was this the only building that you painted or did you paint in...

IZZO: As far as I recall, this was the only building.

SIGRIST: Do you, do you have any stories about Ellis Island, maybe interactions with your co-workers that stick out in your mind about the experience?

IZZO: Not that I remember. We, we all done our jobs...

SIGRIST: Did you ever do anything wrong, paint something incorrectly?

IZZO: Oh, that, we all do. We all make mistakes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a specific instance where that happened?

IZZO: Well, if I recall correctly, the foreman told one of the boys he wanted that room a certain color, I mean let's say, and he probably didn't get the idea. He painted the wrong color, so he had, the only thing he wasted, he wasted the material and time. That's the only thing wasted, see? That's it. But we all had a wonderful time, let me put it that way. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: So did you work, did you work only at Ellis Island or were you brought out Governor's Island and...

IZZO: No, the only time we went to Ellis (correcting himself), uh, to Governor's Island was when Queen Mary, the mother, came to visit with her husband. And the Statue of Liberty was a different story. We had finished, probably finished here and they shipped us to Ellis Island or visa versa. I don't recall that.

SIGRIST: And you stayed here until the WPA was ended.

IZZO: Then they let us off. But my, my experience, we worked on, uh, here, when Luciani (sic: probably gangster Lucky Lunciano) was captured and sent to Italy, see? We were told, we were, I think we were painting the boat that day, that day. So we had to go, either gathered us together, I don't remember correctly now, either we, they sent us upstairs or they told us to stay on, on land 'til they got him over to, and that was the only, the only experience I recall having. (note: Mr. Izzo is probably referring to Lucky Luciano, who was arrested in Georgia in 1936 and brought to New York City prior to being incarcerated. Because Luciano was foreign born, it is possible that he was initially brought to Ellis Island in 1936 after his arrest, if only briefly, before he was relocated there. If he were indeed brought to Ellis Island in 1936, his removal from the island may be what

Mr. Izzo remembers. However, Luciano was not officially deported from Ellis Island until after World War Two, circa 1946, approximately ten years after Mr. Izzo's time at Ellis Island. It can be assumed that the highest security measures were observed when he was brought on and removed from the island. Paul Sigrist, 6/10/1998)

SIGRIST: Did you see him? You never...

IZZO: Oh, well, you could, we were here, we were, you could but not face to face. We saw, because he had a lot of body guards, I mean a lot, a lot of protection because (he laughs) there was a (?) that was trying to get him. But he was well protected.

SIGRIST: And you were also responsible for painting the boats, too, you said.

IZZO: Oh, we painted them, sure, sure we did.

SIGRIST: Were the boats taken out of the water to do that or...

IZZO: No, no, no. They go back and forth, back and forth.

SIGRIST: And were you responsible for painting the exteriors of the boats or just the interiors?

IZZO: Oh no, just the interiors.

SIGRIST: The interiors.

IZZO: We had nothing to do with the outside. It was like the interiors. You're not painting the outside because the water, the water was a lot, see, the shops had to dry off.

SIGRIST: And I think it's interesting that even after you left Ellis Island you went into the painting business and stayed, stayed into that.

IZZO: Oh, yeah. I, wait, as I said, I waited, I waited for a while. And I joined the union, I joined the union. I said, "This is not going to do." I started trying to go into business with my brother and it didn't work out. So some friends of ours said, "Why don't you join the union?" So I says, "Well, I got nothing to lose." All the dues were seventy five dollars. That was the initiation. And we got into the union and went out to Long Island. We worked out on Long Island and finally it was too far for me to go back and forth to work. And I got a call from my brother-in-law. He seen me out of work and he says, "Pat, I'm going to talk to somebody who I know, a painter boss." He got me a job with this painter boss. His name was Strauss (ph) and my brother-in-law's name was Jimmy (he cleared his

throat) Camillo (ph). And he had made it arranged for him to meet me. And that's how I been working for this boss Strauss (ph) for eighteen years as a foreman.

SIGRIST: What year did you retire?

IZZO: Pardon me?

SIGRIST: What year did you retire?

IZZO: In 197--, I was sixty---, 1974 or '75. I was sixty six years old, uh, sixty six years old when I retired.

SIGRIST: I see. Mr. Izzo, thank you very much. This has been a most unique interview. We've never interviews anyone who painted Ellis Island before.

IZZO: I done the best I could to remember. (Mr. Sigrist laughs)

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Patrick Izzo on Thursday, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1995 at Ellis Island. Thanks.