

EI-651

GUERRINA FORNARI RET

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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ALBANY, NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

ITALY, 1928

AGE 20

PASSAGE ON "THE ROMA"

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, 8/14/1997.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Monday, August 21, 1995. I'm in Albany, New York, at the Good Samaritan Lutheran Home with Guerrina Ret.

RET: Ret.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Ret came from Italy, from the north of Italy, in 1928, when she was twenty years old.

RET: Right.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Ret, thank you for letting me come out.

RET: You're welcome.

SIGRIST: Can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

RET: April 14, 1908.

SIGRIST: And where in the north of Italy were you born.

RET: Remene.

SIGRIST: Remene.

RET: Remene.

SIGRIST: Whereabouts in the north is that?

RET: I just give you the, I just give you the, the name of
the city.

SIGRIST: Yes.

RET: That's all I can give you.

SIGRIST: Do you know where it is in terms of where the, in the
country, is it on . . .

RET: It's a small, a small place.

SIGRIST: A small place.

RET: It's a, they have a beautiful seashore.

SIGRIST: Oh, so it's on the coast.

RET: Yes, on the coast, yes.

SIGRIST: What is the nearest big city?

RET: Uh, Forli? Forli. F-O-R-L-I.

SIGRIST: Forli is the next biggest. And how do you spell
Remene?

RET: See, I'm no good on the spelling. Remene. R-E-M-E-N-
E.

SIGRIST: When you were a child, when you were a small
girl . . .

RET: Yes?

SIGRIST: What was your favorite part of the town?

RET: Well, you know, I really don't recall that. I only
remember that I wished I had a big doll. (she
laughs) That's all.

SIGRIST: Why did you want a doll?

RET: Oh, because I loved dolls, and I was a little girl
myself. I was only four years old when my mother left

me there.

SIGRIST: Where did your mother go?

RET: My mother, she came in the United States to reach my father. She also had two other sisters younger than I. She took them with her, and leave me with the grandparents, with an understanding that she would come back and get me later. Being that she figured there was too many, three, to take care of, and if, you know, on the ship.

SIGRIST: So she took the two younger children . . .

RET: She left me with the grandparents.

SIGRIST: Tell me why your father came to America.

RET: Looking for work.

SIGRIST: Do you know what year he came?

RET: Yeah, the 1911. My mother, she came the 1913. And she left me there, as I was four years old.

SIGRIST: Had there not been any communication between your mother and your father?

RET: Well, yes. But not that many, because then it was

wartime, war, first one. With an understanding they will come and get me, but then the war broke out, and they couldn't cross the Atlantic. And I was there until the 1928.

SIGRIST: Did you, and you were living with your grandparents all this time?

RET: I was living with my grandparents, and my grandparents die, and I was living with uncle and aunts.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about when you were young and living with your grandparents. Um, let's start with, do you remember when your mother left?

RET: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

RET: I remember that I kicked like nobody's business, because I didn't want my mother to leave. That was a tender age to be left without a mother.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

RET: Adeline.

SIGRIST: Adeline.

RET: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And do you know what her maiden name was?

RET: Yes, Masene.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

RET: M-A-S-E-N-E.

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

RET: Not much. I mean, I don't recall too much. You know, I know that I didn't like her to be there.

SIGRIST: What, um, whose parents were they that you were left with?

RET: With my, uh, mother's parents.

SIGRIST: Your mother's parents.

RET: Yes.

SIGRIST: Um, tell me about your mother's parents. Tell me about what they were like as people.

RET: Well, they were nice people, old folks. You know, my grandfather died, he wasn't that old, because he was

sixty-four, he fell from the trees and he got hurt and he lived a little longer, then he passed away. So then my grandmother, she was living with my uncle and aunt, and I was there with them on the farm. There was a farm. And then she died, she was about, uh, ninety-two.

SIGRIST: So she lived a long time.

RET: Yeah. A long.

SIGRIST: What was your grandmother's name?

RET: Shanta.

SIGRIST: Shanta.

RET: Shanta.

SIGRIST: S-H-A-N-T-A.

RET: T, I'm sorry. See, I told you I'm no good on the spelling.

SIGRIST: Well, that's okay. What sticks out in your mind about your grandmother's personality?

RET: Well, she was a nice old lady, but she didn't care much for me. The reason why, I don't know. I only

know, as I told you before, I grew up on a farm and, with my uncle in hand, and I had to work very hard in order to please them.

SIGRIST: What kinds of work were you responsible for on the farm?

RET: Oh, gee, cutting grass, feed the cow, and the pigs, and all those things. And the chickens. And I grew up, I didn't grow up among any children. There was no children besides me, except one that she was born five years later. We were too far apart.

SIGRIST: And that would have been your cousin, right?

RET: Yes, my cousin, yeah. It would be my cousin.

SIGRIST: You said, you're living in a house with your uncle and your aunt. These are your mother's, is this your mother's brother or sister?

RET: Yeah. My mother's brother.

SIGRIST: Right. But is it her brother, or her sister?

RET: Her brother.

SIGRIST: It was her brother.

RET: Brother. No sister, yeah, the brother.

SIGRIST: I see. Um, I want you to talk about living on the farm.

RET: Well . . .

SIGRIST: And doing the chores. For instance, how did you feed the cow?

RET: Well, we used to carry a big bale of hay in the winter, and through, whatever they call, found themselves with the fork, with the pitchfork.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what color the cow was?

RET: Oh, they were white, of course. (she laughs) And with short horns.

SIGRIST: Did they have names?

RET: No, not really. Not really.

SIGRIST: What other kinds of animals were on the farm?

RET: The animal, where they come from?

SIGRIST: What other kinds of animals were there on the farm?

RET: Oh, pigs, chicken, a rooster. (she laughs) A cat,

and a dog. (she laughs) Yeah, they were all there.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the layout of the farm, how many buildings there were?

RET: Oh, just one building, you know. Each farmer had their own separate building. And it was out in the open, you know, and had the side road that was going all over the land that you can go around to it, you know. A dirt road.

SIGRIST: And how would you go around to the different parts of the farm?

RET: Walking, of course. Yes.

SIGRIST: Did you have any kind of vehicle at all?

RET: Oh, we had the, yes, we had some kind of vehicle to carry the stuff home. I don't know, like a wagon. And we used to put everything on top there and bring it home.

SIGRIST: And how did the wagon go?

RET: The cow pulled it. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: You didn't realize you were going to be asked all

these kinds of questions, I bet.

RET: (she laughs) That's all right.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause just for a moment. (break in tape) Okay. We're now going to continue with Guerrina Ret, and I just want to say, for the sake of the tape, there's a nurse's aide in the room also making noise with coat hangers and things, which will be picked up on the recording. We were talking about working on the farm. And, uh . . .

RET: Well, when I work on the farm, my dear, almost anything is possible.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

RET: I also, we had a, oh, I have to talk a little louder?

SIGRIST: No, no, it's fine.

RET: A big vineyard.

SIGRIST: A vineyard you had on the farm?

RET: Where we raised grapes, and we used to make our own wine.

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

how you did that?

RET: Well, you pick the grapes first, and then you put them on a big wet, a big top, like.

SIGRIST: A big top.

RET: And then you mash it up.

SIGRIST: And you're making stomping gestures.

RET: Did you ever them on TV?

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

RET: (she laughs) Well, I did that a lot, which now they don't. They have other machines to do it. And then you make a ferment. And after a while you draw it, and the skin, it will be all on top. And you take the juice, of course, and you put them in a big barrel, and let her sit there until it age enough that you can drink it or sell it, whatever you want to do it. And that was good. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Was there a certain type of grape that you grew that you remember, or . . .

RET: No. We had, I remember, just black and white. But

the name, really, I, uh, you know, I don't recall it.

It was a long time ago.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

RET: You know.

SIGRIST: What time of the year did you pick the grapes?

RET: Uh, in September.

SIGRIST: And then how long did it take until the wine was ready?

RET: Oh, until November or December.

SIGRIST: And then who would drink the wine that you made?

RET: We all drink a little bit. For breakfast, lunch and dinner. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: What about, was any of the wine sold?

RET: Oh, yes. We had a lot of it. We sold it. We sold the wine with the person that owned the farm. See, we didn't own the farm. Somebody else, some rich people owned it, and we just to split it half and half. Of course, we got a little bit more. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: That's interesting. Can you describe for me with the house that you lived in on the farm? Yeah, the house itself, what it was made out of, and how many rooms it had?

RET: Well, it was made of brick, and it had a site, like we say, a garage, where you could put all your tools, and it was just an ordinary home, and some of them, they were one floor, and some there were two of them. You lived, the living quarters where you eat and drink was downstairs, and sleeping was upstairs. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Can you describe the kitchen for me?

RET: Oh, the kitchen was a wooden stove, of course, a table. A fireplace, where we used to hang all the sausage, the pork sausage we used to make, and we used to slaughter our own pigs.

SIGRIST: Oh, can you describe for me how you slaughtered a pig?

RET: (she laughs) That's, well, yes, I can, I suppose, in brief. Well, we used to get a pig and tie the four leg, laying down, and stab him on the neck. And then with the blood, we used to use that to, we used to make some kind of a torte, or whatever they call, like

some kind of mush. So we didn't waste anything, but it took a long time to make it, because it had to get tight gradually, and keep on stirring. And the rest of the pig we used to make prosciutto ham, and bacon, and sausage, salami, fatback.

SIGRIST: Who would make that?

RET: Well, we had a man, he used to go around from house to house, and he had all the tools that he needed to do that. Ours was a relative that does it, you know? And then when the stuff, it was all done, we used to hang them on the basement where the wine used to be, because that was, it was cool, and they kept there always. So, uh, anyway . . .

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me, I'm intrigued by all this making of food.

RET: Oh, that's all right.

SIGRIST: Describe for me how you make sausage. What was the process that . . .

RET: Well, you just, see, you take some part of the pig, not all of it. Some part of the pig was good for sausage, some was for salami, and some for something

else. You just cut it, and divide it, all different bunches. This is for the sausage, this is for the salami, this is for something else. Then you put pepper and salt, a little wine, a little garlic, if you like, and grind it, like if you would make hamburger, only it was coarse. And then we stuff it with the same casing that a pig had in the stomach.

SIGRIST: The intestines.

RET: Yeah, the intestine, yes.

SIGRIST: And then, um, when you ate the sausage, how would you prepare it?

RET: Well, we used to cook like, uh, on the open fire we used to cook, on the fireplace, like you would here, like barbeque. But not in a, that was set, you know, to eat like that.

SIGRIST: Is sausage, was sausage something that you would eat on a daily basis, or . . .

RET: Yes, most, in the wintertime, because, you know, you can make the summer sausage, and then the finessa[ph]. But the ham, it used to last a long time, because they took the ham, the bottom, you know, the big part,

and they used to rub it with salt (she gestures) all over, very hard. So it preserve. And then, like I say, they let her drip for a while, and then we hang him in the cellar, and that kept all year long. And the bacon, the same way. And the salami, we used to hang him by the, around the fireplace, so it drained, and then we gonna hang, we hang that, too, there. And we kept it from one years to another. Some time we used to get a little rancy. I don't know if I'm, if you know what I'm talking about, but it was good.

SIGRIST: If it got rancid, what would you do with it?

RET: Well, you could either eat it or throw it away, one or the other. Do what you like.

SIGRIST: I was wondering if there was, like, a special way to prepare rancid meat so it didn't taste . . .

RET: Not really, not really, and I didn't like it, either.
(they laugh)

SIGRIST: Who did the cooking in the house when you were growing up?

RET: Oh, it was, it's supposed to be a lady, the lady of the house. They call them a boss, you know. And all

the rest, we go and work on the farm. And the lady, of course, she cook, she watch, and raise a family, if she got any children, you know?

SIGRIST: So would this have been your aunt who was sort of the lady of the house?

RET: That would be my aunt, yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Because your grandmother wouldn't have (?) that way.

RET: Because she was older, then she died, you know. She, the young woman was the lady of the house, and she was married to my uncle, of course. Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me food that you would eat for a special occasion, for a holiday, maybe?

RET: Well, not really. We had a pretty good meal almost every time. On special occasions, sometimes we used to make a homemade pasta from the, from scratch.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me how you did that?

RET: Oh, yeah. She used to use flour and eggs, and then you use, uh, which I still have it here, look, a rolling pin, you see? That . . .

SIGRIST: Yes, there's a long, I'm looking at a long wooden pin.

RET: Yeah. And I used to make it from scratch, eggs and flour. And I used to make it very, very thin. It depends what you're making. It's noodles, or lasagna, or whatever. And then we'll let it dry a little bit and cut it very fine. It depends what you want. If you want noodles, or lasagna. And sometimes we used to make corn mush.

SIGRIST: Corn mush.

RET: Mush, yeah. With a big black kettle hanging on the chain of the, on the fireplace, put water and corn mush and keep on stirring for about, oh, forty minutes. Then we used to take the kettle, dump them on the, on a big sheet of wood, and stretch it, make it about this thick. (she gestures)

SIGRIST: About an inch.

RET: Yeah. And then we used to have a sauce made, with sausage and tomato and so on, and we used to spread them all over. That was in the winter, more or less, you know. And it was good.

SIGRIST: This black kettle that you're talking about, did it always hang in the fireplace?

RET: Yes.

SIGRIST: And that's where you did a lot of the cooking.

RET: Yeah, it was a lot of cooking. I mean, it's the only way we could cook, unless you made stew, or something else. Anything, you had to boil water. We used to, you know, use the kettle on.

SIGRIST: What kind of vegetables did you grow on the farm?

RET: Oh, almost anything. Cabbage, and radishes and, uh, lettuce and eggplant. Pepper, tomatoes, you name it, it was there. And then we used to go in the fields sometimes, when you want something, we want something to boil. We used to pick, we used to, no, all kind of, what you call them? Dandelion, that you could mix it together.

SIGRIST: Different kinds of greens.

RET: Yeah, different kind of green altogether. We used to parboil them, chop it up fine, and then saute them with olive oil and garlic and pepper and salt, and it

was good.

SIGRIST: I'm getting hungry.

RET: I do, too. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your religious life in Italy. What religion were you?

RET: Catholic.

SIGRIST: And how did you practice your religion at that time?

RET: Well, we used to go, when we were kids, a couple of times a week to the church, when we were children. And the priest there, he used to teach us whatever, you know . . .

SIGRIST: Catechism? Is that the word you're looking for?

RET: Something like that, yes.

SIGRIST: Something like that.

RET: But, you know, I wasn't too fond of religion. (she laughs) When I grew older, I didn't care for going to church. I don't know if you're going to like that or not. But I used to go, you know why? Because if I went to church I didn't have to work on the farm. And

then I used to flirt around with the boys. (she
laughs)

SIGRIST: You had your own reasons.

RET: Yeah. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Is there a prayer that you remember in Italian?

RET: No, it isn't. I let go of everything. (they laugh)
I'm sorry.

SIGRIST: That's quite all right. Were there any ways that you
practiced your religion at home?

RET: You mean in Italy?

SIGRIST: In Italy.

RET: Not really, no, no. Because, you know, I was a kid,
and work all day on the farm. When I got home, I just
want to sleep, and nothing else. You know, we used to
get up seven o'clock in the morning and we didn't go
to bed, we didn't come home from the farm until it was
dark, that you could see no more what you were doing.

SIGRIST: All right. So you got up at seven in the morning.

RET: Yes.

SIGRIST: Then what would you eat for breakfast? What was a typical breakfast?

RET: Oh, you don't want to know that one. (she laughs)
Well, in the summer when the days were longer and the nights were shorter, we used to eat four times a day.

SIGRIST: Four times a day.

RET: Four times. First it was seven o'clock. It was bread, wine and raw garlic.

SIGRIST: Raw garlic. Uh-huh. A great way to start your morning. (they laugh)

RET: Then we used to have breakfast, a regular breakfast, about nine o'clock. That was something that was fish or bacon and eggs or different little things, you know. And then we ate at noon time. There was, there was always soup at noon time, some kind of soup, you know, noodle soup, chicken soup, or whatever. And some, and some meat, they use it to make soup with. And then at night time, around four o'clock, we used to eat again, and there was some stew. It depends, you know. Liver, or different little things that I can't recall all.

SIGRIST: It's interesting that you would eat three times in the morning basically.

RET: Yes.

SIGRIST: Early on, and then, of course, not again until much later.

RET: Yeah, well, I don't know why myself. It was kind of early, four o'clock in the afternoon, and we used to eat in the field.

SIGRIST: So you'd bring your food out there.

RET: Yeah, they brought up in a big basket, like, you know? And they used to carry on top of the head. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: And so you would be out there until dark doing field work, and then what would happen? When you were done with your field work, what would happen for the rest of the evening?

RET: The rest of the, when we get through with the field work it was night, it was time to go into bed, and we go home, watch yourself. I used to remember we lived near a creek, I used to go down in the creek and wash

myself there and go to bed, and get up the next morning when it was time to go out again. I didn't have much of a childhood life. I was the only one, until the other one came along five years later. And then somehow we didn't get along.

SIGRIST: Well, and you're that much older, too.

RET: Well, yeah. But, uh, it was too much different to play it with one another, you know?

SIGRIST: What about schooling in Italy? Did you have any schooling?

RET: Well, I went to school. I went to school in second grade, believe it or not. And when I told them that I didn't want to go, most of the kids, sometimes they resent school, even over here. Nobody pushed me. "Well, if you don't want to go, go work in the field." That was it. I went as far as the second grade.

SIGRIST: Could your grandparents read and write?

RET: Uh, no. Not even my mother.

SIGRIST: What about your uncle and aunt?

RET: None of them.

SIGRIST: Would you say that this was typical for that area, or not typical?

RET: Well, not really. I know some people their age, they did go to school. My father could read and write, but my mother, she couldn't. You see what I mean? They were almost the same age.

SIGRIST: Were there differences in Italy between the kind of education that a man got as opposed to the type of education that a woman got?

RET: No. To me it was the same, because I don't remember that much, because I was young and, when I say I don't want to go in the school, nobody say, "Well, you've got to go." Nobody pushed me.

SIGRIST: It wasn't important to them.

RET: To them. It was important to them for me to work on the farm. They got more benefit for doing that than going to school. You see?

SIGRIST: That's right.

RET: Yes.

SIGRIST: Let's kind of go back to your parents. We sort of got sidetracked here.

RET: Okay, that's all right.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

RET: Fornari, Rafaelli.

SIGRIST: And Fornari is your maiden name.

RET: Yes.

SIGRIST: So his first name was Rafael.

RET: Rafael, yes.

SIGRIST: Fornari.

RET: Yes, Fornari.

SIGRIST: And, uh, tell me what you know about his background?

RET: Well, you know, I don't know much about his background. I never knew my grandparents on this side. And, uh, I only know one sister where's my father, and she had a big family, and we never got together much. Just hello, goodbye, every now and then. You know, I never been to their house, or they

never been to mine.

SIGRIST: Well, of course, then you had never seen your father basically. I mean, he had been gone from the beginning.

RET: Oh, yes, yes. Well, I . . .

SIGRIST: Was he going back and forth?

RET: No, he wasn't. He come here in 1913, my father. And my mother come here, my mother came the 1913, and my father come the '11.

SIGRIST: Right, 1911.

RET: Yes.

SIGRIST: And he wasn't, he didn't come back or . . .

RET: No.

SIGRIST: What about your mother? Did she go back to visit you?

RET: No. She went back, she was supposed to come back and get me but, like I said, the war broke out, First World War, and they couldn't cross the Atlantic. So I got to the point that my father got his citizenship card, anybody that year, if they had any relative,

they want to bring it over to America, that was it. If I skip that year, I could never come here becoming a citizen under his name. That's all I could remember. And when I got here, I didn't like it.

SIGRIST: Well, when you got here, tell me about your relationship with your father when you first got here. I mean, you hadn't ever seen him.

RET: Well, it was just like any father, you know. It was nothing too close, because we went apart too long. They don't know me, I didn't know them. And then I come here, I couldn't speak the language, of course, at all. It wasn't a big deal.

SIGRIST: Tell me, you've brought up the First World War a couple of times. Was your life affected while you were living with your uncle and aunt by the First World War?

RET: Yes, I was affected, because if it wasn't for the World War, they would have come and get me. I wouldn't be separated from my parents and my family so long. I was separated from four years to, till I was twenty.

SIGRIST: What about your, your immediate life on the farm? Did the First World War have any affect on life on the farm at all?

RET: No, because I was too young. I was young at that time, you know, very young. I was about five or six, whatever, you know. That's a long time ago, yes.

SIGRIST: But you don't remember there being fighting or anything like that?

RET: No, no, no, no. No. I remember the first airplane that I saw when I was four years old, and we got it, "Oh, oh, oh." You know. It was fun. Now it's just nothing. There's too many up there. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: What were your grandparents and your uncle and aunt telling you about your parents in America? And what did you know about your parents' life in America?

RET: I didn't know nothing until I got here. As I say, for a long time I didn't receive no news, or, because the mail, I think, it didn't come through, or whatever. You know, then when the mail did come through, you know, and then my father used to write. He also sent a little money, which my uncle and aunt benefited from

it, and he also sent me sometimes some material, like to make a dress. He was working for the railroad, my father. Anyway . . .

SIGRIST: That brings up a question. What kind of clothes did you wear in Italy? What do you remember about what you wore?

RET: Well, I remember, well, just a dress. It wasn't a skirt or a blouse, you know. A dress, a simple, and we used to wear some kind of a hat when we were going to church.

SIGRIST: And how did you wear your hair?

RET: They were long. And I just comb it and make a bun there like an old lady. (she laughs) Anyway, so my father, being that my family was here, every now and then I said they send a little money, my people there got a hold of it, anyway, and he also sent some material to make dresses for me. This when the trouble come in with my cousin, the five years younger than me. Her parents, they were jealous because I was dressing a little bit better than her daughter, see? (disturbance to the microphone) Oh, no.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause just for a . . . (break in
tape)

RET: They want you someplace else?

SIGRIST: Yes. After I see you, I go to another . . .

RET: It takes too long in here, doesn't it?

SIGRIST: Did you make the dresses yourself?

RET: No. We had a dressmaker. I didn't, I did want to
come a dressmaker when I was a child, but my relative,
they won't let me, because if I went to learn it to be
a dressmaker, I couldn't work on the farm. So I'm
still angry about that.

SIGRIST: They were determined to get that work out of you.

RET: Yeah. They want to have a gun, and me helping them.

SIGRIST: When you were, when you were growing up, how did you
think about America? What ideas did you have about
America?

RET: Oh, of course, over there they say, "Oh, you're going
America? It's beautiful over there." They says,
"They make, they make chocolate coffee over there."

It must have been chocolate . . .

SIGRIST: HOT chocolate or something.

RET: Hot chocolate. Oh, my gosh, I said, you know, it's good. But, in the meantime, I got in, no entangle, I had a friend, a boyfriend. I could have get married. And the reason why I didn't is because my father, he already sent me a ticket, it was paid, to come to this country. I didn't want to disappoint him. So I left everything there.

SIGRIST: Did you want to come to America?

RET: I did want, at the beginning. But then I came and, you know, changed my mind. I . . .

SIGRIST: Oh, we're going to pause just for a moment. (break in tape) We're now resuming. So you, at first you wanted to come, and then you decided maybe you didn't . . .

RET: I didn't, you know? As I said, the reason why I really got here, because the ticket was already paid. I didn't want to disappoint my father.

SIGRIST: Did your parents ask you if you wanted to come?

RET: Yes, I guess they did, yes. Of course, I said yes, you know. And so my father got me the ticket. But it took quite some time before all the paper got together, and I kind of changed my mind, but then I didn't want to back out. Of course, when I got here, I didn't like it. I wanted to go back. And my father said to you, "I pay your ticket over." He says, "If you want to go back, go to work and pay your own ticket." And I sure did go to work.

SIGRIST: Well, wait, don't tell me yet. Let's get you to America before we get you into the workforce here.

RET: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Where were your parents living in America?

RET: Oh, down in the south end in Albany here.

SIGRIST: Down in the where?

RET: In the south end.

SIGRIST: Oh, the south end of Albany.

RET: In Albany, yeah.

SIGRIST: And you said your father was working in the railroad.

RET: On the railroad. He was working at night, from four to twelve.

SIGRIST: And what was he doing?

RET: He was a boilermaker.

SIGRIST: A boilermaker?

RET: Yes.

SIGRIST: And what does that mean exactly?

RET: I mean, he was fixing the engine, the train engines.

SIGRIST: Do you know which railroad it was that he worked on?

RET: Not really.

SIGRIST: But it was in Albany.

RET: Oh, yeah. It was in Albany, yes.

SIGRIST: And did your mother work?

RET: No, my mother, she raised a lot of children.

SIGRIST: That was going to be my next question, did they have . . .

RET: Six, seven girls and one boy.

SIGRIST: Oh, my goodness, by the time you got here in 1928 there were all those children?

RET: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: My goodness. Huh. All right. Well, let's, let's get you over here.

RET: Well, that's okay.

SIGRIST: What, tell me a little bit about what you had to go through to get your papers, to leave.

RET: Well, I had to go through a lot of things, a lot of counseling, a lot of, to go here and there, I had to go to Genoa a couple of times from where I lived, which was quite a distance. I had to take a train, and have somebody with me.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: So who went with you?

RET: One of my cousins, which doesn't live any more.

SIGRIST: Was that the first time you had ever been in a big city like Genoa?

RET: Uh, yes. I was there a couple of times. I had to go see some counselor or whatever, and they measured me and they weighed me and they test me and they examine me. You know, all those things, it went on. And then go back home. And when I come back, when I came to Genoa to leave, to go to the ship, my, the same cousin took me to the ship. And I remember I got in about ten o'clock, July 10th, and we left the port about twelve o'clock, and we didn't even know we were going. It was very smooth.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause here. (break in tape) So you got into Genoa at ten, and the ship was leaving at twelve.

RET: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And you said you didn't even know . . .

RET: Even know it was going, (?).

SIGRIST: How did you feel about, about getting on a big ship?

RET: Oh, I felt good. It was a beautiful ship.

SIGRIST: Before you got on it, though. I mean, what were you thinking before you got on the ship?

RET: Well, I was anxious to get here after a while, you know? I didn't have no way out unless I back out.

SIGRIST: You had a lot of mixed feelings. You wanted to come, you didn't want to come, you did want to come.

RET: When I start making the paper, I want to come. I didn't think it took so long to get ready, you know? And I kind of changed, not changed my mind, but if I could I would. But the reason why, I told you, because the ticket was already paid. I didn't want to disappoint my family. If I miss that, that time, I could never come here again, because then I would be over twenty. If I was over twenty, I couldn't get here. See?

SIGRIST: You wouldn't have been able to become a citizen?

RET: Yeah, I wouldn't be able to become a citizen under my father's name?

SIGRIST: What did you pack? When you left Italy, what did you take with you?

RET: Very little, very little.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what you took?

RET: A little suitcase like that.

SIGRIST: That's what? About two (?).

RET: Just about, it was very little.

SIGRIST: (?) small.

RET: I didn't have that much to pack. And I had just few thing enough to come across.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things?

RET: Underwear, clothes, you know, skirts, dress, whatever, shoes. And, uh, and also my father, he met me on the island there, what's her name?

SIGRIST: On Ellis Island.

RET: Yeah, on Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Right. Well, don't tell me that yet. Let's get you there first.

RET: Okay.

SIGRIST: Um, so you got on the ship. Your cousin went with you to Genoa.

RET: He accompany me as far as the ship, and then I went up by myself.

SIGRIST: Did your family give you any kind of sendoff of any sort before you left?

RET: No, no.

SIGRIST: Um, so the ship left at midnight, you said.

RET: No, midday.

SIGRIST: Oh, midday. Twelve o'clock. Midday. You were, and the name of the ship was?

RET: Roma.

SIGRIST: The Roma.

RET: Right. It was a beautiful ship.

SIGRIST: Tell me, describe for me where you slept on the ship.

RET: I slept, it was a bunk bed. It was me, another young lady with the baby, with a young baby. And he cry all night, every night. (she laughs) That's the truth. And, uh, on the fourth day we hit the Strait of Gibraltar. From then on I got seasick, and I was sick for about, oh, four days. I mean, I had to stay in

bed. If I ate anything, it just don't stay down.
After that I got better, and we had a little trouble
with the ship. It was going . . .

SIGRIST: Up and down. You were feeling . . .

RET: But nothing serious, you know. Anyway, when I got to
the, after that we got to port.

SIGRIST: How long was the trip from Genoa to New York?

RET: Oh, it was from 10 to, uh, 21st.

SIGRIST: Okay. So, 11 days.

RET: You mean the time, yeah. Yes.

SIGRIST: And did you stop anywhere along the way?

RET: We stop on the Strait of Gibraltar. Not really
stopped, but go very slow. Because on the bottom
there in the ocean, there was people from Gibraltar,
they were selling fruit. If you want, they send up a
basket, you tell them what you want, and send the
money down, and they put the fruit in the basket and
you pull them up. But it didn't stop completely, it
just slowed down. That was nice. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Did you see anything on the ship that you had never seen before?

RET: Well, I saw the big fish, the whales, whatever, they were going . . .

SIGRIST: The whales? Yeah.

RET: And other ship, on a distance, on a distance you can barely see them. That's all. And the rest was all water. And the water and the sky, they used to match.
(she laughs) If I stop and think, I get sick.

SIGRIST: Did you have any safety drills on the ship, that you can remember?

RET: No. No, no.

SIGRIST: Nothing that you remember.

RET: We had, I mean, we were comfortable there. They had everything. They had theater, church, a saloon where you could sit, you could sit on the deck. It was nice.

SIGRIST: What class were you traveling?

RET: Second.

SIGRIST: Second class.

RET: Second class, yeah.

SIGRIST: Um, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you came to New York?

RET: Oh, yeah, sure.

SIGRIST: Did you know what that was?

RET: Yes, I knew what it was, sure. And we went all around with a little boat in order to go ashore. The ship, it stop on a distance, then they got a little boat that they take you ashore. Yeah, I remember the Statue of Liberty, sure.

SIGRIST: So the Roma docks, and then how did you get to Ellis Island?

RET: With the boat.

SIGRIST: With the little boat.

RET: With the little boat, yeah.

SIGRIST: The little boat went to Ellis Island. And tell me what happened at Ellis Island.

RET: Well, nothing happened. We just got ashore. And then my father took me, which he was there, and he took me to the Central Station from there. And he, he brought me there, and he said to me, "Guerrina, you sit there. I'll be right back." That's what he said to me. I said, "All right." I said to myself, "Well, now I'm sitting here." I said, "While my father is gone, I'll read the paper." But, you know, I didn't stop and think that I couldn't read the American paper. (she laughs) I thought it was funny. (she laughs) So, anyway, to make a long story short, when he come back, he took me back to Albany, and I got to Albany about four o'clock in the afternoon.

SIGRIST: What time did the boat initially dock in New York?

RET: Oh, I'd say about eleven o'clock.

SIGRIST: Eleven o'clock. And then how long were you at Ellis Island, do you know?

RET: Oh, not too long, not too long. My father came to the ship, and he was yelling, no, it was just somebody else was yelling, they said, "Guerrina, your father is here." They were yelling, you know. And I was up on the deck, and he was down below. And the island, we

just went around and go ashore.

SIGRIST: So you just went out there, and your father came back and . . .

RET: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what it was like to meet your father? I mean, for instance, what did he look like to you when you saw him?

RET: Well, you know, I didn't see, the last time I saw him he was three years old, I was three years old. Somehow I, I cannot picture him. He had a, my mother had a picture of him, you know.

SIGRIST: A photograph.

RET: Yeah, a photograph, you know. But, uh, when I saw him, I, I thought he was a smaller man. He was a tall, he was six foot tall, dark complexion, curly hair. He was a nice man, not because he was my father, you know. That was all right.

SIGRIST: And how did he greet you?

RET: Oh, he just, he says, "Are you my daughter?" "Well, I hope so," I said. (she laughs) He told me, he

says, "I'm your father." "Well, good," I said.

SIGRIST: Now, why didn't your mother come down?

RET: Because she had a family to take care of. She had the other girls, you know. And one was enough. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything about being on the train?

RET: Yes, I remember. I remember that I sit down, and my skirt were very short, and my father was disappointed. My skirt was up here, you know, and he was telling, before he come down and get me, as I said, I had sisters, and they wear the skirt very short. He said, "Wait until you see your sister." He says, "She's gonna teach you how to dress." She told, he told my sister, my father. When I got home, when I got here to Albany, my skirt, it was shorter than theirs, because the style, it gets there before it gets here, you know?

SIGRIST: In the late 1920's the skirts, the hemlines were very short.

RET: Yeah, and they were short like they are now. But I was young, I was twenty, you know? (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me how you greeted your mother when you saw her.

RET: It wasn't a big (?) there. Just, "Hello, Ma," you know, and so on and so forth. And the minute I got home, I just didn't like it.

SIGRIST: Tell me where they lived. Can you describe the house?

RET: Oh, they lived on (?) and the name, the street was Rensallear Street.

SIGRIST: Rensallear Street.

RET: Which it is not there any more. And the number of the houses was 37-1/2. I remember that. And we had . . .

SIGRIST: What kind of a house was it?

RET: It was just an ordinary brick house. And the lights, it didn't have electricity. We had a mantle. I don't know if you know . . .

SIGRIST: A gas light.

RET: Yeah, a gas light. If you touch that mantle, you go poof, and you're left without a light. Oh, boy. (she laughs) Am I doing okay? (interruption on the tape) Come on, keep going. You interrupt me. (she

laughs) I'm sorry. I'll see you tomorrow. (she
laughs) Oh, gosh.

SIGRIST: Did they own the house, or was it . . .

RET: No, they were rented.

SIGRIST: They rented. Let me just shut the door.

RET: A Jewish person was, uh . . .

SIGRIST: And what floor did they live on?

RET: First and top, the whole house.

SIGRIST: And, uh . . .

RET: No bathroom. Outside.

SIGRIST: The bathroom was outside, like an outhouse, outside?

RET: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What about running water?

RET: We had running water. But the stove, we had to use
coal or, rather, wood. It was a black stove.

SIGRIST: Tell me all the reasons that you didn't like the
United States?

RET: Well, first of all, I was a stranger to my family, and I was a stranger to them. Then when you can't speak, it makes it tough. I was used to very different. I was more in the open, more on my own, like. And, uh, I just didn't care. And then my sisters, they didn't treat me the way I thought they would. I tell you why. One of my sister was working for the packing company, the one that make sausage, baloney, First Prize. You know that?

SIGRIST: First Prize packing. Yes, I know the company.

RET: And my, uh, mother, she said to my sister, her name was Enes, "Enes, why don't you ask the boss if they could use somebody there, your sister?" And my sister said, "Who the hell," excuse me, "who the hell wants a dummy there?" Because I couldn't speak English. You see what I mean? That got me ticked off.

SIGRIST: Did you feel, not being able to speak English, I mean, did you feel cut off in some ways.

RET: Yes, I did, I did. I did.

SIGRIST: How do you spell Enes?

RET: Enes? Ene. Enes.

SIGRIST: Enes. E-N-E-S.

RET: If I have a . . .

SIGRIST: That's okay. We'll do it later.

RET: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me how you went about learning English.

RET: Oh, I went to work, to Armour packing.

SIGRIST: To Armour packing.

RET: Yeah. I worked there for twelve years, and I learned little by little, with the help of the girl that was working there. They were very nice. But the boys, they were naughty. You know, they have a lot of fun with me. They ask me question, I couldn't answer, and I could feel my face getting red. But, you know, I worked there for twelve years, and I did learn quite a bit there, and then I was fighting with the boys, and the boss, he called me down. He says to me, "Guerrina," he was Hungarian. "Guerrina," he says, "you're getting too fresh with the boys." "Well," I said, "they tease me an awful lot when I begin here." I said, "Now I tease them." No teasing just, you

know, if they talk to me, I sass them back. And . . .
(she laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the first English word was that
you learned?

RET: No. But it was a naughty one. I mean, I
remember . . . (Mr. Sigrist laughs) Well, somebody
told me that.

SIGRIST: It always is. (they laugh)

RET: I mean, I said, no, I remember, it was a word that, I
don't like to repeat it.

SIGRIST: Did your parents speak English?

RET: My father did, my mother pretty good. But, you know,
like parents that come from the old country, it takes
a little time. My mother didn't read, she couldn't
read and write. My father, he was even before my
mother, you know, and he was doing pretty good.

SIGRIST: What language did you speak at home?

RET: (she sighs) A dialect, an Italian dialect, which is
not, you know, you don't understand unless you come
from the same place.

SIGRIST: But what about your American-born brothers and sisters . . .

RET: Oh . . .

SIGRIST: Of course, speak English.

RET: Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, my parents did understand English, they did understand it.

SIGRIST: Did your brothers and sisters speak Italian also?

RET: No, very few words, and it wasn't good ones. And my, since we were eight, seven girls and one boy, well, the boy, he never lived. He died at birth, so I never saw them.

SIGRIST: I see. So they were all girls.

RET: Yeah, we were all girls, seven girls. I still have three living, and I'm the oldest of all.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Tell me a little bit about how you got the job at Armour Packing? How did you go about getting that job?

RET: Well, the job, see, my, uh, mother had a relative that was working in there, in this packing, Armour packing.

So she asked Louie, his name was Louie, Louie, she said, would you ask the boss if he needs anybody there? So we did, and I got the job.

SIGRIST: But tell me, tell me, did you have to go meet the boss first?

RET: No, just somebody that, a girl that would be near the house, she took me down, and she present me to the boss, and he put me to work.

SIGRIST: And describe for me what you did on that first day of work.

RET: Uh, hot dogs. We used to stuff it from the machine, and then we used to twist and tie them together. And then little by little I learned to do everything, making baloney. (she laughs) Isn't it awful? And liverwurst, sausage, salami. It took a long time. I mean, I used to work on a machine after a while. I used to pick up pretty quick. I was young, you know.

SIGRIST: When you first started working there, how much did you get paid?

RET: A quarter an hour, my dear. When we used to work in the summertime, we used to work a lot of hours. It

was work, go home and eat and go in the bed, and get up and go to work. That was it.

SIGRIST: Not that much different from Italy.

RET: No, it wasn't muc different. Only, you know, I worked in the baloney factory.

SIGRIST: A different kind of work.

RET: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Um, were there other immigrants that worked at the Armour Packing Company.

RET: Yes, it was a lot of German immigrants. And the boys, they was teasing me. Yes.

SIGRIST: And did you ever, did you ever find that there was any tension between the different groups of immigrants?

RET: Not really. We were all young, you know. I don't remember that there was any tension. Of course, the people, they were working there longer, they knew things better than I did, you know. But I learned, with the help of the people that worked there, the girls. There was a lot of Polish girls, and they were very nice. And, uh, and they teach me, like, if I

said something that it was wrong, they kind of correct me. That's what helped me to learn what I'm talking now.

SIGRIST: Do you ever remember making a mistake, trying to say something and having something else comes out that sticks out in your mind?

RET: Oh, yeah, a lot of times. I still do. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: But is there a story that you can relate to me from back then that you remember when that sort of thing happened?

RET: Well, I said a lot of words that I didn't pronounce it right, like I do now. So what am I going to say, you know?

SIGRIST: But it happens.

RET: It happens, sure. It happens.

SIGRIST: What did you do with the money that you made?

RET: I bank it. And after three years, 'cause I was making a quarter an hour, I pay my board, and I already saved five hundred dollars. That was a lot of money in those days. I also got married in the meantime. And

after six months I was married, my husband died. And we didn't have no, uh, you know, insurance or anything. So I used that five hundred dollars to bury my husband. And in the meantime I went back with my family because I didn't have nothing, no husband, no money, no job.

SIGRIST: How long were you here before you got married?

RET: Uh, five years. I came here in 1928, and I got married in 1933.

SIGRIST: And what was his name?

RET: Ennio[ph] Viviani[ph].

SIGRIST: Ano. And . . .

RET: Ernie, Ernie Viviani[ph].

SIGRIST: Viviani[ph].

RET: Viviani[ph], Viviani[ph], yeah.

SIGRIST: Viviani[ph]. And, um, may I ask how he died?

RET: Double pneumonia. He died in six days. He burned out like a candle. You know, the 1933, they didn't have as much medication as they have today. Today you

could live, yes.

SIGRIST: That's a terrible tragedy to have happen to you.

RET: Yes. We got married April the 20th, and he died September the 20th, the same year.

SIGRIST: Of 1933.

RET: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Huh. Uh, so you moved back in with your parents after that happened.

RET: Yes. And then I went back to work in the same place.

SIGRIST: Oh, did you stop working once you had gotten married?

RET: Yeah, because I didn't feel so good, and I went back, after I went back with my parents, I went back to work. And four years later I got married again.

SIGRIST: And what was his name?

RET: Uh, Victor Ret.

SIGRIST: Victor Ret.

RET: Yeah. But that name was been changed, after we got married, because he came here as an alien, and the

federal was after him. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Was he from Italy, Mr. Ret?

RET: Yeah. That, his name, before Ret it was
Boocalone[ph].

SIGRIST: Boocalone[ph].

RET: Boocalone[ph]. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Boocalone[ph]. B-U-C-C-A-L . . .

RET: And you know what? It's B, it's B-O-O, L-O-N,
whatever. Boocalone[ph]. And you know what it means
in Italian? Big mouth. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: And, um, did you have children?

RET: Yes, three.

SIGRIST: Yes? Would you name them?

RET: With the second husband.

SIGRIST: With the second husband.

RET: Dana, Chester and Leo.

SIGRIST: Dana, Chester and Leo.

RET: Yeah. Well, Dana was the youngest, you know, yeah.
She's the youngest.

SIGRIST: And what did Mr. Ret do for a living?

RET: What do you mean?

SIGRIST: What did your husband do for a living?

RET: Oh, he was a, first he, he worked as a tile seller,
you know, the tile in the bath? And then he, he was
also a bricklayer, a mason. That was (?). He done,
he done almost anything, as long as he was working, he
was a good provider, but he was a (?).

SIGRIST: What year did he come to this country?

RET: I think he came there 1925.

SIGRIST: 1925.

RET: He was five years older than I, yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you ever have a serious desire to go back
to Italy to live?

RET: No. No, I'll tell you why. We never had the means to
do that. I didn't even care to go back. There was
nobody there, just two cousins.

SIGRIST: Did you keep in contact with your cousins?

RET: For a little while, until the second, World War Two. The reason why I stop writing, because I used to send them some clothes, some, they were usable, and in good shape. And they write back to me, they say they didn't want it. They wanted new stuff. And maybe in time I was married, raising the three children, and I couldn't do that. One, two, three, you know. Between the three of them, they were six years apart.

SIGRIST: Did you and your husband, how shall I put this, did you and your husband, the friends that you and your husband had, were they Italians?

RET: Most of them, most of them.

SIGRIST: Was it the same situation with your parents? Did they pretty much keep together with other Italians?

RET: Yeah, in a way, in a way. But we didn't have that many, well, we did have some, now that I step back, he belonged to an Italian club, and that they were, most of them, they were Italian, and that was nice, because they didn't, on weekends they used to have dances, dinners, and we used to go to them, you know. I enjoy

it.

SIGRIST: So that the Italian organization really provided a social outlet for everybody.

RET: Yeah, it was a club. The market club, they used to call them.

SIGRIST: Were you and your husband or your parents ever responsible for bringing any other relatives to America?

RET: No, no.

SIGRIST: Did any of your other relatives ever come to visit?

RET: No. My husband did have a brother and a sister here in Detroit but, I mean, they were here when I was here. He didn't bring them. They come on their own, yeah.

SIGRIST: What, what part of you inside of you is truly Italian. What is it about your personality that's truly Italian?

RET: Well, gee, that, I can't really, I can't explain it. I'm Italian. I feel proud that I'm Italian, and I come from the north, which I consider myself a little

better than the others. Isn't that awful? (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Now, when you look back on your life, you're eighty-seven.

RET: Seven.

SIGRIST: That's right. Your birthday was in April.

RET: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Eighty-seven. If you had to, to tell a young person nowadays, to suggest to them things they could do to lead a successful, happy life, what would you tell them? What have you done in your life that, that you feel has made it a successful life?

RET: That makes me healthy, successful?

SIGRIST: What do you feel good about in your life?

RET: I understand that, yeah. Well, the only thing I could say that as poor as we were, we all have had something decent to eat and the right stuff. But if I had to live my life over again . . . (knock on door) Oh, Jesus.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause again. That's all right, go ahead. Just, uh, we won't even both pausing.

RET: I'll see you tomorrow. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: That's all right.

RET: All right, dear, that's all right. Okay. Bye-bye.

SIGRIST: Don't worry about it. Okay. So you had plenty to eat.

RET: Yes, and plenty fresh air. That means a lot. And a good night's sleep. That helps to live longer, I believe, because if I come to work, I work hard all my life and it didn't kill me so far. What else could I say? Did I put it right? I don't know.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Ret, that was great. I think that's probably a good place for us to end. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Guerrina Ret.

RET: Guerrina Ret, yes.

SIGRIST: On, uh, Monday, August 21, 1995, here in Albany. Thank you very much.

RET: Well, thank you! I wish we weren't interrupted so

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many times. There's probably a lot of mistake there.