EI-652
HECTOR TONETTI
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ITALY, 1909 AND 1920
AGE 14 (SECOND TRIP)
PASSAGE ON "LA LORRAINE" (1909)
PASSAGE ON "THE DANTE ALIGHIERI" (1920)

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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, and I'm here with Hector Tonetti. Mr. Tonetti came from Italy, from the north of Italy, and he came to America twice. The first time was in 1909, when he was three-and-a-half, and then he came back in 1920, when he was fourteen. Mr. Tonetti, can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

TONETTI: July 9, 1905.

SIGRIST: And where in Italy were you born?

TONETTI: You want the address?

SIGRIST: Well, if you can give it to me, sure.

TONETTI: A very small town. I was born in Piemonte, I pronounce it in Italian now. (?), Piemonte, North of Italy. Uh, a very small town named Brusnengo.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

TONETTI: Yeah. B, B-R-U-S-N-E-N-G-0. Brusnengo. It's, it's some subtle German tone in there. Nengo, nengo, like Bergemot, for example, that town that part, that build German and Italian. Well, anyway, I was born there, yeah, and the province at that time, province of Vercelli.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

TONETTI: Oh, yeah. That's the address. Province of Vercelli. Still is. P-R-O-V, you know, period. Vercelli, V-E-R-C-E-L-L-I.

SIGRIST: What can you tell me about this small town that you were born in?

TONETTI: I tell you, I was born there. And then we had a little bit of a farm, a family farm, very small, very difficult to make a living. So my father and his, one of his brothers and so on, they started to emigrate, because we couldn't make a living there, you see? That's before I was born. And the immigration was very big, and from the north of Italy, in our area there, the immigration was divided up, North America, United States, and then Africa, South Africa at that time, mostly, and South America, and North America, the United States mostly, yeah. Canada not much. And, uh, and some more would also emigrate for a few months and so on, within Europe. Switzerland, France, they'd actually go to work for a season, like, you know? Or for, for emigrate, because the living was better in this country, I just mentioned, than Italy, because Italy is comprised north of Italy, central Italy and south of Italy. The geography as being different, and the culture is a little bit different.

SIGRIST: Why did your family choose to come to the United States?

TONETTI: Because, first of all, somebody was over here. My father's, not brother, but, yeah, I guess so, his brother, and cousins. Because somebody that they knew was already here. And from the north of Italy, from our area, from our village of our town, most of them, or most of us, landed in New York city to work in the finest hotels New York had at that time, and included Waldorf Astoria, the Plaza, a very old hotel, you know, been there already, and they made a career in that. And when I came after 1920, I was just, as I said, fourteen, but I lied, I said I was sixteen, you know, to get the working paper, uh, to the head waiter. And the head waiter asked me, uh, bring me the birth certificate. Before one day my brother who had been here before, three years before. He said, "Just tell him that the next day, or that you forgot to bring the paper." I forgot, the head waiter forgot at that time. I wasn't quite fifteen. I was supposed to be sixteen. The law already was in effect then. But it wasn't enforced like now, you know? Now you couldn't do a thing like that. And I worked in the Hotel Biltmore, just built and, right there in the Grand Central Station area. And I worked a couple of years. Now you want me to tell my personal story?

SIGRIST: Yes. Actually, I want to go back.

TONETTI: Right, right.

SIGRIST: I want to go back to, um . . .

TONETTI: I, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Why you came.

TONETTI: Why, yes, because we were very poor. The farm won't provide enough for extended family, because there were three brothers, you see, out of father and mother, three brothers divide the living quarters and divide the property, the land to cultivate, and so on. And the cattle, for example, there was only one cow, and it was, it couldn't live, so somebody had to, and the immigration was very strong at that time.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

TONETTI: Giuseppe, Joseph, Giuseppe.

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

TONETTI: Oh, yeah. He was born where I was born, the same house. Already we got two, three brothers. And, uh, was there a sister? Yeah, one sister. Yeah. And the background was farmer, but he didn't like to work on the farm. So he immigrated, before he married, to South America and Argentina, Buenos Aires, he immigrated there. And then he got tired of working there. He went with his father, my grandfather, one day, and somehow my grandfather was a little bit, uh, tired of staying in the same place. He moved, he moved to the United States, Los Angeles, in Los Angeles, where he died. And my father left Los Angeles, I confused his name now. Los Angeles and, uh, and, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Buenos Aires?

TONETTI: And Buenos Aires. So, he moved to . . .

SIGRIST: Your father's in Buenos Aires.

TONETTI: Yeah. And, yeah, my father was still in Buenos Aires, but he only stayed a very short time after his father came here and went to Los Angeles. His father wanted him to go back home and work on the farm and so on, he said he didn't want to go. My father was only in his early twenties. He went to, uh, South Africa instead, in Capetown, South Africa. But at that time it was just during the Boer War. You heard of the Boer War, B-O-E-R, the Dutch against the English?

SIGRIST: This is around 1901.

TONETTI: Right, you got it right, and they were fighting for control, the English and the Dutch, the Europeans, you know, were fighting. And so there was a war, a local war, and my father was timid, a small man physically, like me, so he went back home. But still, the farm was too much work, so he went and landed in New York city. That's how we happened to get over.

SIGRIST: This is the 1909 trip?

TONETTI: Right, because I was born already. I was three-and-a-half years old. I was born in 1905.

SIGRIST: So the whole family went to New York in 1909.

TONETTI: Right, right. The whole family consisted of, who was the second? It's two, two children. Two boys, father and mother, that's it. And, uh, so . . .

SIGRIST: How long did you stay in this country?

TONETTI: . . . and then we arrived in New York for hotel work. My father was not a very ambitious man, and he never made much of a grade in the kitchen. He, in fact, he was never a cook, a great cook. Just a kitchen worker. And my mother had to go to work in the sweatshops, probably the famous sweatshops in New York city, however they are, uh, what you call it? Manufacture clothes. And, uh, the Jewish were in control, the Jews were in control, all those, the famous sweatshops, the famous sweatshop in New York. So he, he didn't like that much, but my mother couldn't stand it. She had babies to take care. And she became pregnant, so she told my father. I was born already. She became pregnant with my younger brother. That, uh, she wanted to have the baby in the place where she was born. She knew that the, uh, the, what do you call the maid that takes care of the little babies?

SIGRIST: The midwife?

TONETTI: The midwife. And there, she knew the midwife was safe, she already had two children, and she wanted to have the baby there. "Oh," she said, "I have to." And her husband was here alone. She went there, she had the baby there. And we stayed, this was in 1909. In 1911 we went back. Oh, and then the, the war arrived. It was a Libyan war against Italy at that time, before the First World War, which started in 1914, in 1914, but Italy didn't enter until 1915. And we got stuck with the war and, to make it short, we reentered here in 1920.

SIGRIST: So the whole family came back in 1920?

TONETTI: Yeah, the whole family, but my father was always here.

SIGRIST: Huh. Everyone but your father.

TONETTI: It was my mother and, uh, no, no, no. No girls. My, uh, and three, no, well, almost three. Three boys, but the oldest boy came first, 1917 instead of 1920, when the war was raging, 1917. And he came over accompanied by a local responsible man, and he went, joined the hotel. And then two of us, older, I was, at that time, how old was I? 1920.

SIGRIST: Fourteen?

TONETTI: My gosh, I was fourteen, yeah, fourteen years old. Oh, that is the first time I'm thinking about. I arrived here, I was three-and-a-half, and I went back at five-and-a-half, six, six. I made it in grade schools over there, and that's the only schooling I ever had all my life. Seven years in school, six grades. I repeated one grade, tupipio[ph]. That explained why, and the reason there, between the teacher and my mother. And, uh, so we're here ever since. Then we come back.

SIGRIST: In 1909, when you first came, do you know the name of the ship that you came across in 1909?

TONETTI: Yeah, yeah. The name of the ship was a French line. (?) The, uh, what you call the, uh, the person responsible, travel agent? The travel agent up north is at, (?) from up north, go through France, take the ship in La Havre, France, in 1909. And from La Havre it's much shorter, see, the ocean is narrower, so we did. And we took only eight days, eight days. Other way it would have been eleven, twelve, fifteen. In fact, in 1920 when we arrived after the war, Italian line, Dante Alighieri, name of the ship, 1920, in March, it took us eighteen days, because it was in 1920 there was still a shortage of coal, they were using coal. It was a steamship, you know. They were using coal for fuel. And a shortage, you see? And all the way from, from Genoa, from Genoa to New York, eighteen, eighteen days.

SIGRIST: And that was in 1920?

TONETTI: And yet 1909, with the French ship, only eleven days.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the French ship?

TONETTI: The, The Lorraine.

SIGRIST: The Lorraine.

TONETTI: Lorraine. I remember that.

SIGRIST: Were you ever told any stories about when your mother gave birth to you?

TONETTI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Is there any story about that circumstance?

TONETTI: Well, uh, I think that I was wanted. Yeah. I was wanted, yes, I know. Uh, stories, not until later. I was three when I started to understand, three, three-and-a-half. And we had enough to eat, our own land, our own house. House of our grandparents. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Is that your mother's parents or your father's?

TONETTI: No, the father's side always. The mother in the same village, but she moved to the father's house, and my father had two brothers, one was normal, he went to work in Africa also, and he got lost, he died there. But the other brother was sort of a, retarded, like, you know? And we have a problem with him. He remained a bachelor, and never married.

SIGRIST: Do you know what your mother's maiden name was?

TONETTI: Oh, yes. Maria, of course, Mary. Oliaro. O-L-I-A-R-O.

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

TONETTI: Oh, of course, I didn't know until I go, until I was four, five years old, you don't understand. They were, uh, both, her father and mother, both born in the same village, same village. The used to marry close, simple as possible. If at that time a young fellow would, closest to (?) we had there the east side of the village, and marry somebody, (?), they used to criticize him or her because they were marrying across the water. A stream, imagine that, across the water, there would be no luck and so on. It was already just like marrying here a, uh, a foreigner almost, you know? And, uh, so we were all close.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's personality like?

TONETTI: She was very timid, and not very practical. She never learned to become a professional (?). She instructs in (?), the sweatshops there. So she took in boarders instead. You know, boarders, the room and board, a single young fellow, you know, what there are there. And, and, as I said, my father never earned much, fifty cents or one dollar a day, plus the meals, six days a week.

SIGRIST: Which hotel did he work in?

TONETTI: He worked at the, hmm, Waldorf Astoria, also, the old Waldorf Astoria, of course, not the one that's still there. The old one was on 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue. And, uh, the new one is 51st, Park Avenue, something like that. I know about New York, you know? Can't fool me.

SIGRIST: What is your earliest memory, your earliest memory? What . . .

TONETTI: My earliest memory?

SIGRIST: Yes. What's the, what is the earliest memory that you have of your life?

TONETTI: Hmm, when I was a small kid, when a small kid, hmm. Well, I was very close to my so-called retarded uncle, and he always kept me in under his arm and so on, you know, and was very friends with me. He used to take me to go and, uh, on the vintage time, you know, where the grapes, walnuts, we had walnut trees, and we would make walnut oil, you know, very rich, edible oil.

SIGRIST: Can you tell how that was done?

TONETTI: Pardon me?

SIGRIST: Can you describe how the walnut oil was made?

TONETTI: The oil was made?

SIGRIST: Yes, how did you do that?

TONETTI: They were still using the, uh, the press, all wood, with the weight, you know, strong. And, uh, a donkey around it to go turn the, you think of the word now. Anyway, it's a press, you know, a press. The same as the grape press, and you could have made oil out of walnuts. And I used to, he used to criticize me, he was a bachelor, because he was not too, too, uh, normal, and he used to criticize me. Why? I was (?) baby. And why you make all the oil out of that, it's so thick, so expensive, costs more than the olive oil. Olive oil, we had no olives up in northern Italy, remember that. There's a line there, over in Tuscany. That's about the northeast area where they have olive trees, Tuscana. And the Rivieri[ph] area, you know that, Rivieri[ph] area, Genoa, and all that area there. And then you have to go down south towards Naples, south of Italy, Sicily, that area, very good olive oil, very good olives. And, uh, and so we, we were using the press. And, of course, our most produce that we pay for us was work hard and work in the vineyards, produce wine, see? Because at that time the wine, well, Italy was behind France in the amount of production and so on. Now I understand that Italy produces as much wine as France does, yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you talk to me about the procedure, when you were in Italy, of tending the vineyards and making wine?

TONETTI: I was seven, eight years old when they put me to work after school. The season lasted about two weeks. That's the, uh, our harvest season. Usually the first week of September, then a week or two, depending the size of the property, how many, how many vineyards you have, vineyards you have, and produce that. Well, I did it myself, I ought to tell you, all right. I can remember all right. We, the whole family, no schools, one or two weeks, about. And the, uh, the dates were, was a proclamation from the mayor, they decided at Town Hall when we should start pick the grapes, until you finish, because it could go by the weather, you know, not every season has the same temperature. Sometimes a season will, a few days later, later on. And so then we start to work at sunrise until late at night for that week or two weeks. We had, everybody in the family worked to pick the grapes, and then we'd hire, hire help, usually had people poorer than we were with very little or no vineyards, maybe just a garden, not for flowers, but a vegetable garden and fruit trees and so on but not, not much vineyards, so they were working for others by the hour. And we, they work to, in order to pick the grapes at the right time and finish fast enough. The grapes were picked and crushed and started to fermentation the very same day, because if you let the fermentation only while you were at night in the wine cellar, that's all wasted, you see? And so we did most of the picking. We knew how much we had to pick and complete the job, all day. We start to cut the grapes after the dew was off, d-e-w, from during the night, and because, because we were producing very good, very honest, very conscientious at that time. Now this commercial, you know, they have ways of fixing the wine all over, you know. And so it was trying to get that certain taste, a certain degree of alcoholic count and so on, and they want and they work for that. They don't care too much about taste anyway. And we're just natural. All right, we pick the grapes in the morning after the dew, say start about nine o'clock in the morning, and with all the buckets and everything ready, wagon and the horse and mule or donkeys, couple of cows sometimes, some of them, and the male, neuter, the cow.

SIGRIST: Ox?

TONETTI: The ox, yeah, you neuter, because the other one is male, and the oxen, teams of oxen, were used on the farm to cultivate, cultivate the land, you see? And then now I think they go more for horses. Of course, now they have machines. And, uh, you pick it in the morning.

SIGRIST: Was there a certain technique to picking the grapes?

TONETTI: Well, they had to be just ripe, the right way, not too much, not rotten. And pick the grapes and look at it, take off the few bad, you know? And in the basket there. Was finished in the morning, the early afternoon, pick. Then we'd take everything home right away. Those grapes had to be in the vat the same evening, otherwise they would suffer the alcoholic contents, you know? The strength of the grapes. And those are, (?) very, very ripe, they suffer during the night, you know, if you let them out too long. So we do as much as work possible in a full day, and then we had vats. I'd go, I was a kid, go on top of the vat with sort of a bucket there. The men would throw the grapes there and I'd push it down in the vat. And the fermentation would last eight, ten days. When it stops gurgling, you know, when it stop gurgling, and so on. And they transfer it, they stop the fermentation, they reduce it, actually, and the first wine, the wine that will be sold, and the best part, was the one that came from the bottom of the vat, not being pressed at all. The pressed, because it was, the grapes had a lot of, you know, what you call it? Well, the stems, you know, the stems in there would take some of the juice out, so they had to be pressed. But this first wine, the most expensive wine, no pressing, came out natural, and (?) of the vat, and the fermentation would continue.

SIGRIST: How were the grapes pressed?

TONETTI: Right. The old days when we were kids, small farms and so on . . .

SIGRIST: You're pointing to your feet.

TONETTI: Up to here, my feet.

SIGRIST: Up to your thighs.

TONETTI: Seven, eight, you heard about it. I actually did it. Seven, eight, ten years old, you know? And everything that has to be done. So we'd wash our feet . . .

SIGRIST: And was there a trick to doing it somehow?

TONETTI: Pardon me?

SIGRIST: Was there a trick? I mean, how did you learn how to stomp grapes?

TONETTI: We were born there. We'd watch, we could open our eyes, and we'd learn by watching. And then traditionally they'd follow the custom to some of the parents, father to son, and so on, carry on. And the custom like that, by hand, it lasted for centuries, until about, and we started on machinery, 19, uh, oh,

yeah, before the First World War. I was there in 1910, '11, something like that. We had crushes, you know. (?) in which crusher. And you transfer from one barrel to the other, and the machine crush it with a (?). You know, turn the handle and so on, by hand. And we had electricity by then and it goes through the press, and the press, the (?), the juice was screened, no seeds, no stems, no stem, no skins. The stems, of course, you know, and the skin would go, of course. And we'd transfer it in a vat that would, that would mature. First you had to stop the fermentation, and then when the fermentation was stopped it was put in a permanent vat, permanent, for months. It would mature, and get ready to drink, which would not be until the next spring, you see, because the grape, when it's freshly crushed, it's actually sweet. The juice remains sweet for weeks, and a few months, and it's not good to drink, not to make wine, you know, because wine has to be aged. And then during the winter they used to transfer it and put it in permanent vats, or big bottles, and so on, then they mature. And let it stay until one of the, a couple of transfers, at least, three maybe. And then wine for sale and for drink would be good. You have to wait until the following fall, of one year.

SIGRIST: How would the wine . . .

TONETTI: You could drink any time before.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

SIGRIST: How was it stored in the meantime? How . . .

TONETTI: Always one vat to another vat. And . . .

SIGRIST: In large vats.

TONETTI: And then when the vats were no more room, they, they, uh, in more small containers. You'd use also glass, glass, uh, what you call them in English? You know, and, uh, the wine would, the must, M-U-S-T, because it was not wine yet. So still they had to watch it, and it would ferment there, and then in the fall you start to transfer it, and taste it, and so on, mix it one kind of the way or other, because the grapes were a different variety of grapes, not all one grape only, and the blend of grapes was better than just one. One grape is special and was very good for quantity, but light in (?). The other was instead very rich, heavy, and not too much oil. And then you had to watch it. And then you can start sell it. In fact, in bulk, we used to sell it in bulk because we were so small we couldn't, we didn't have the manpower and the, it was not profitable to finish all the process. And then

bottle the wine, wait till it aged, and we used to sell it in bulk during the winter, in special millier[ph] we used to call it, wholesaler used to buy them, buy the wine like that. But then they had to wait till it ripened right, and it was the proper taste, and good wine would start two years later.

SIGRIST: Was this a major business for your family?

TONETTI: The locals were drinking it much before. Pardon me?

SIGRIST: Was this the major business for your family?

TONETTI: Yes. Most of the families over there, that various area. And although everybody had one or more cows, one or more horse, some had donkey, the donkeys usually were alone, and the mules. We had animals, and that was before the First World War, you know? And, uh, and the trucks didn't show up until automobiles showed up.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the house that you lived in on the farm?

TONETTI: Yeah. Well, the houses there, they were built around the courtyard. The courtyard was, which still is my old house that we're trying to sell now, but I'm having trouble, and, uh, around the courtyard. The courtyard was divided up, different ownership, build the houses around. You have one entrance to the courtyard, in the back we had the stables and the horses and animals and cows and so on would go in the back. The best part of the courtyard, where there was a view, look, look a view of the yards, look at the valley and so on. The animals would get those, the stables. Because the courtyard was actually the main part, because it was practical. They all come out of the same courtyard, the houses, and they were short, short driveway to get into the street, you know? And, uh, they used to surround the view with the houses. If you wanted to have a view, a beautiful view of the yards, which we had all year around. We had to go on the top floor, yeah, where you get the best view, and look on the back of the houses, and then you have a view.

SIGRIST: What was the house made out of?

TONETTI: All brick and stone, brick and stone, and all the local products, I mean, for that area, because we, they used to produce lime, you know, lime for, uh, brickwork, brick and stone, mixed, broken stone in the center, finished brick on the outside. Yeah, it was all, no wood. All my house, even now they build wood floor only lately, a few years ago, over, new floor, you know, sort of very thin.

SIGRIST: How was the house heated?

TONETTI: The house was heated with originally a fireplace. A fireplace only, certain rooms, not in the bedroom, ordinarily, because it would be too, too extravagant to heat up the bedroom to go to bed. So we first went to eat. Most important was the kitchen combination, the kitchen and dining room where you eat, and where you cooked, and the fire and the wood was, of course, owned ordinarily by part of the property. The property was scattered, not solid area. Small piece here, a few square feet here. Well, not feet, but a few square yards. And, uh, one was suitable for hay, on the, on the plain, the valley, where the valley started, and on the hills, some vineyards, and woods, you know. Everything was local. And every property had part wood, part vineyard, part fruit trees, and so on. And we had the houses, as I just said, made there, and then in the back, on the side, or at the end of the walk where the street is, we had a separate piece for, uh, fruits and vegetables, (?) and, (?) and vegetables.

SIGRIST: What kinds of fruits did you raise?

TONETTI: Well, up in northern Italy in Piemonte[ph], in Piedmont, there, by the way, the main city is Torino, Turin, you heard of it. And the (?) is Milan. Milan is really most, very commercial, and Turin is still the corner of France and Italy, is Turin. It was, what you want to see most before, as kids we used to go to Torino, you know. It was a very big city. Uh, where were we?

SIGRIST: The fruits. What kind of fruits did you raise?

TONETTI: At first, because I came late, I came late, you have to go back centuries. Uh, centuries ago they had pears . . .

SIGRIST: Well, in your time there, what did you have?

TONETTI: The same thing. Pears, apples, and not the tropical fruit. That's what you want to know. And pears, apples the best to produce, grapes for, not just for wine, but also for grapes, because you could preserve the grapes by putting it in straw and it would become kind of dry a little bit, like raisin, you know? And eat that in the winter, because we didn't go out and buy, and buy, uh, grape juice in the store. And the, the mid, the mid temperature froze, what we call it over here?

SIGRIST: The average?

TONETTI: The average temperature, yeah. The same as, while we're here, it's going to be colder than where I was born. But the temperature there over in Piemonte and in here, once you were down off the mountains, because the snow and ice would produce cold, you know? And it

was, grapes, on the sunny side of the hill, most, most you then worked on, because it had to be worked. But then, and the other fruit, pears and apples, because you could preserve it through the winter by drying them, you know, in the straw, and so on. And peaches, even figs, warm enough for figs. Peaches, and, uh, apricots and prunes. All those fruits. Yeah, and what other? But, as I said, it would stop at the olive. It was too cold for olive, you know. We didn't have any olives at all. As I said, it stopped the olives there. On the Riviera, that's where Genoa is, and fish in the Mediterranean, you know?

SIGRIST: Getting back to the house, how, how did you light your house?

TONETTI: We had no, no inside toilet.

SIGRIST: How did you light, light the house?

TONETTI: Oh, light, light it. Oh, yeah. Oil, oil lamps. Oh, I thought you said how did you like it. Yeah, oil lamps were, uh, we didn't have any electricity, because the whole town would have to have it, you know? Electricity, I think, I remember now, 19, uh, the war was already on in my house, a different house, depending on the, how the owners were living, and the money to buy. But you could, they had the attachment electricity, we had it already, in 1913, '14, not before that.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the installation of the electricity?

TONETTI: Well, when they installed it in my house it was in '19, my mother was alone, my father was already here, she didn't want the electricity. Connections over were too expensive. We managed with lamps, keep our lamps. And then only over there we used to use kerosene, kerosene, too. Kerosene, oil, doesn't produce any light, you know. And, uh, and then the candles, we had candles, also, and the kerosene, for the stable, we had to milk the cows, you know, and the kitchen attached central, in the 19, as I remember, oh, God, had to be 1910, but not before, you know? That's when we had. But the electric general installment in the village, in the center of the village, they had it way back, 19, when I was born, 1905, or something like that, yeah.

SIGRIST: What were your mother's objections to getting the electricity in the house?

TONETTI: Well, she found out it was more, better light, more practical, and less expensive. You didn't have to carry your lamp, oil lamp with you, to light a few square feet, you know, at the time, the whole room.

SIGRIST: Do you remember them installing the electricity into the house?

TONETTI: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: How did they do that?

TONETTI: Oh, the wires are open.

SIGRIST: The wires are on the outside of the wall?

TONETTI: On the outside of the wall, because it's solid brick and stone. The houses are not, in those days, were built, even now, mixing brick and stone, brick and stone, because those are two local products, stones from the mountains, from the hills, you know, and bricks down in the plain. They had plain brick factories, a lot of brick. So it was lime, and it was brick, and then this stone. Steps, for example, were all stone, steps from one floor to another, and very, very solid. And the bricks were curved, yeah, curved around.

SIGRIST: Curved, the bricks were curved.

TONETTI: Curved, yeah. The original ones, yeah. Curved like that, and just lay one on top of the other. And they had to be checked okay.

SIGRIST: Is there a piece of furniture in your house that sticks out in your mind for some reason?

TONETTI: Well, I'll tell you, the bed would be, I guess, one, two boys were sleeping together, one big bed, and it was made locally, uh, walnut, yeah. Because, walnuts, by the way. I forgot to mention those. Walnut and (?), walnuts and (?) was a local, uh, were very good. Regular English walnuts, you know, we call them here. But, um, yeah.

SIGRIST: And so your parents, somebody had a bed made?

TONETTI: Oh, yeah, made to order. We had carpenters come in and make us, we had to build the furniture. But the beds was the most important because, the most useful, and we could put, uh, a box on the floor for children, especially, and then put a mattress over it, and another regular bed. Then the beds came with legs, you know? They were drier and (?). And furniture, only the necessary, boxes. I think we might have had a dresser, and a storeroom, storage, boxes, you know.

SIGRIST: Was there a piece of furniture in the house that was considered particularly precious?

TONETTI: Well, some of them . . .

SIGRIST: In your house.

TONETTI: Yeah, in my house, no. There was, from my grandfather, ordinary, ordinary dresser, yeah. Oh, yeah, we had a dresser a long time, before I was born. And, uh, but, uh, the living room was a luxury, the living room. Only those that were able to make money outside of the property in selling and buying, you know, especially the men. The men it was their territory to go out loaded with produce and then buy some furniture, whatever they needed, or sheets and so on, you know. And, from the city markets. Yeah. Oh, yeah. Well, we had, oh, my gosh, furniture. We had period furniture. Where do you think it comes from? Centuries ago. When I was fourteen, I worked in furniture. I know something about that. So don't try to catch me, because they fool you. And I worked in period furniture ten years, between 1920 and 1929. Nine years. Then I got sick, that was it. And . . .

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

TONETTI: Well, in a small village like that, it still is, uh, there's only one religion, the Catholic, Roman Catholic. And, uh, there may be two or three churches, but now they cut them down. Instead of having two or three small ones, they have one large one, to save heat and all that, but the Roman Catholic is (?). And all over Italy was Roman Catholic. It was not until, uh, centuries later, oh, my God, that the evangelists, the, like, Seventh Day Adventists, and so on, those are all imports from the United States, most of them.

SIGRIST: How did you practice your religion at home?

TONETTI: Oh, we must go to church every Sunday morning. I'm talking about children now, when I was a kid. And, uh, we had to go to church every Sunday morning, serve on the, on the altar, and assist the priest and so on. And we learned the catechism when we were small, to read the Bible. And, oh, is that what you want to know?

SIGRIST: What about at home? How did you, what did you do at home to practice?

TONETTI: Well, at home we had to, the average house, because there were some (?), follow the rules. Sunday, Mass every Monday, Sunday, you know. And, uh, have your, uh, Baptism, and, first, and then the other one, First Communion. Those were musts, you know? For children, everybody, every parents. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Were there any prayers that you were taught by your parents as children?

TONETTI: Yes. Some, depending on the parents.

SIGRIST: Your parents.

TONETTI: My parents were not very, very fussy about it. We had to say our prayers, but we could also whisper it. We didn't have to say it out loud, just before going to, to sleep, you know? And we had to, my mother wasn't very strict in that different reason, and my father neither. We were not very religious at all. Not in our house. We were taught to go to catechism school, and go to Mass every Sunday morning, and so on. So if you skip once in a while find some kind of excuse, you know, my mother was peculiar. She didn't, wasn't going to church, only irregularly, because she hated the parish priest. And the reason she gave was, when we were kids, was that he was so rough and so intolerant that he was threatening, especially the grandmothers, you know, that if they didn't follow the line, the rules of the church and the rules of the priest, that our departed mothers and fathers and grandfathers, they would suffer, they would go to hell. Here is one, really one true story here. My grandmother, mother's side, was very, my grandmother on my father's side, I never knew her, and she was very devout, and she used to go to church and so on. But, uh, the parish priest was kind of a tough, he expected to survive, survive part of the husband and wife, for example, to make sure that there would be enough money to go to church after a partner died, you know, otherwise the Lord would, you're not supposed to, well, He would hurt the family. And, uh, this really happened. They used to have Communion, and Confession regularly, continuous, almost, and quietly, you know, during the weekdays, and Confession. So a neighbor of my mother was praying quietly in the corner in the dark, and she could overhear from the confessional what the priest was threatening my grandmother, my mother's side, that, shouting, too, and this woman said, "Yes, I heard it myself, because I was in that corner." The priest thought they were alone, but they were not. That, he threatened my grandmother that if she didn't leave 100,000 lire, which at that time was not a fortune but it was a lot of money, 1,000 lire to the church when my grandfather died, that she would go to hell, and he shouted that. So this woman overheard, and she told my mother. My mother hated that parish priest. She didn't want to talk to him any more. She says yes, she won't go herself. And nobody liked that priest. He was very, very rude, rough, you know? So . . .

SIGRIST: What about practicing religious holidays? For instance, what holidays did you observe?

TONETTI: Oh, the same, Roman Catholic church, all over the world it's the same, the same holidays.

SIGRIST: Can you describe how your family celebrated Christmas?

TONETTI: Well, the biggest, believe it or not, but most important over there is not Christmas, but it's Easter, the Resurrection, because that was more important, because the story of the Magi and so on, I don't know. Anyway, they pay more attention for Easter holidays, even now, than Christmas. Over here Christmas is everything, you know?

SIGRIST: How did your family celebrate Easter?

TONETTI: Oh, like everybody else. Go to Mass, you know, Confession first, preparation. Confession, Communion. It was, that was a must, Confession and Communion. Now the Confession not so much any more, but Communion still is.

SIGRIST: Was there a special meal that your family had at some time, or . . .

TONETTI: I don't think they pay much attention. I never remember pay much attention, the diets, you know? Talking about the Jewish, Orthodox Jewish, for example, are much more strict on that.

SIGRIST: No, I'm just, I'm wondering how your, how your family celebrated the holidays?

TONETTI: We were not, we were not very strict down the line. Sometimes we'd skip going to church, find some reason, some excuse.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me how your family, just to sort of change the subject, how your family was affected by World War One, if they were affected at all in any way?

TONETTI: Oh, definitely. Well, World War One, I remember it very well, in 1913. Italy was caught there. Italy was an ally of Germany, German Empire at the time, and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. They controlled most of Europe at that time, when the war, this was in 1913. And then the war, English and French, France, England, and what other? Some of the Scandinavian countries were always neutral.

SIGRIST: But your own family, how was your own family affected?

TONETTI: Well, my whole family, of course, they were, to go to war, because, as a revenge for what Austria did to Northern Italy, Italy was never a united country until 1970, believe it or not. It's a very young country. See, before that Italy was just a geographical, you know, boot with, a long boot, and so on. And so during the middle of the last century, Austria was under the, ruled by German, practically, and they wanted Austria to become big, and so it became an empire by taking

part of Europe, and Germany, between the two, they controlled all Europe, and part of northern Italy also, so Italy was the one calling for revenge. And so they decided to become Allies, our friends, and, uh, England. Ooh . . .

SIGRIST: I'm interested in what happened to you during those times, not necessarily the . . .

TONETTI: My family went on the side of Italy, they were patriotic.

SIGRIST: Did anyone have to serve?

TONETTI: Yeah, because, because then Italy would also be, expand. We would take part of the Alps area that belongs to Austria. There was always an argument there, see, and the Alps, you know, they have two or three different languages and so on, and they don't get along. And, uh, so Austria would expand some more, and also go down on the Balkins, where Yugoslavia was, and all that, the Balkin area, and down the Mediterranean small countries, and they're still fighting now.

SIGRIST: Did you observe any fighting at that time?

TONETTI: Yes. I was 12, 13 years old. I was listening to the speeches that the ordinary men, they had a habit there, of them to get under a (?), and talk about politics, when the war started. And there were some very patriotic. Yes, we should get rid of Austria, because Austria is occupied too much territory of the Alps, that belongs to us, geographic, and so on. And then we should go and help France and England and push Austria back. And also break up the German Empire. And the Russia at that time was allied of France and England also. They wanted to break down the German Empire. But, anyway, so our family was, but I was, I was in favor, I was just a kid. I was favoring a neutrality. That's not the way to do it, have a war just for that. Just fight, you know, we were trying to get it piece by piece, not together.

SIGRIST: Were there any hardships suffered by your family because of the war?

TONETTI: Well, not too much, because we were, we were after the territorial, the fighting, what do you call it, territory. It was the northeast, Italy was occupied, Venice, almost as far as Venice, not quite. But we were, we were in the corner of, of France, northern Italy from the Alps, Switzerland, and Italy, and we were (?), the First World War, affecting, except obligated to send soldiers over and so on. And, uh, you know, (?). Yeah. But the majority was in favor. It was land that, that they broke up, as they used to call it, the German-Austrian Empire, Kaiser, remember

the Kaiser, and Austria was Emperor Joseph, two names.

SIGRIST: Franz Joseph.

TONETTI: Franz Joseph, Francesco Giuseppe, I know it in Italian, in Italian, yeah. How they say, they say Francis? Francis Joseph?

SIGRIST: Franz, Franz Joseph.

TONETTI: Franz, in German, yeah.

SIGRIST: In German.

TONETTI: Oh, with a Z in the end, yes. A zeta in the end.

SIGRIST: Mr. Tonetti, we're going to stop just for a second so I can put a new tape in.

TONETTI: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: So we're just going to pause. We're at the end of Tape One.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay. This is Paul Sigrist. We're now beginning Tape Two with Hector Tonetti, who came from the north of Italy, and we're going to talk about when he came in 1920, when he was fourteen. Mr. Tonetti, we just finished talking about your recollections of World War One.

TONETTI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And I'd like to begin Tape Two with you telling me, again, you started telling me about your father going back to America, but tell me why you wanted to come to America and how that all happened. This would be the second time you would be going.

TONETTI: Mmm. Because it was making a better, making sure, making a better living here than over there.

SIGRIST: How, when did your father go back before you came? How long ago did he go before you came?

TONETTI: He went back only for a short while. I only say, because he didn't like to work the soil, the land, you know? He didn't like to be a farmer. And, uh, so he only stayed there a few years, and then, of course, you know, and then he came back to New York. Because he died in New York, he's buried in the cemetery there, you know, in Queens there. What do you call that cemetery? Calvary . . .

SIGRIST: Calvary?

TONETTI: Yeah, Calvary, yeah. There's two of them there. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you have, at that time did you have any recollections of living in New York as a small child?

TONETTI: Yes, believe it or not, yes, because I went to kindergarten. When I arrived here I was three-and-a-half. They took me, you know which kindergarten took me? French kindergarten. You know why? Because . . . (voice off mike)

SIGRIST: Excuse me, we're going to pause just for a . . . (break in tape) We're now resuming. (voices garbled) French kindergarten.

TONETTI: That's interesting. We were living on 30th Street on those, they called it Hell's Kitchen afterwards. But it was a slum of New York, you know? 34th, 30th Street and Eighth Avenue. And they were just, had just finished, a section of the subway there. And right near the Pennsylvania Station. You know anything about New York?

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

TONETTI: And the other side of Eighth Avenue, the main post office, which I think is still active. But the . . .

SIGRIST: What do you remember about going to French kindergarten?

TONETTI: Yeah, well, I would be like three-and-a-half, I was (?) kindergarten, and we applied nearby, walking distance, of course, 30th Street, and on 28th Street, two blocks, you know, it was a French kindergarten, and in France, this is the only French I know, (French words). You understand all those three words? And my mother, they told her that she could apply because we were born, where we came from, near the border of France, and our dialect, you know, in Europe, they have the dialects. When you're born, you don't learn the real language of the country. Not until you go to school, at that time. You learn the local dialect, and it's not a written dialect, it's a spoken one. You can't spell it, you know? Everybody spells it differently. Did you know that? You didn't know anything about dialects. And not only Italian, but French, and that patois[ph], that means dialect in France. And in German, I don't know, in German, and so on. All over Europe they have dialects in different areas, and they have to learn. So some friend of my mother, a neighbor over in buildings in the same courtyard, they met there. She said, "Maria," she said, "why don't you try to put (?)," you know? At the local school there. "Yeah, but

that's, they speak French, and so on." "Well, you know, the kid is three, three-and-a-half. He learns French very fast." Madame Anna, Madame Anna, Madame Anna, I remember the name, she was the supervisor. She took us in, from what I heard, of course, they didn't talk to me, because we were born over in near France, and our dialect is Piedamontese, something like the, uh, area there of France, well, I can't think of it now, everybody knows it except me, and so she, she accepted me, because I was in the middle, three-and-a-half. My baby brother was not born yet. No, of course not. And the older three, older than me, he was already in the first, the first grade or second grade. And she took me, so my mother could go work in the sweatshop there in Seventh Avenue. This was where the women's, women's clothes, you know. And, uh, so she took me, so the neighbor said, "You're not French." She took, yeah, because north of Italy is different, and the south of Italian people, the few that she met, they were jealous. "How come they wouldn't take my little kid?" You know, from Naples, and so on. They didn't know a word of dialect of French or anything. It's a different culture. Now it's getting even.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the experience of going to . . .

TONETTI: My experience, I went there, and everybody nice. Madame Anna taught us, she taught us, she talked French, and then she talked English, and I knew she was right away, and we ate at tables, you know, long tables, our lunch, and I remember a back yard and all that there. And then they walked us to school and to our homes, accompanied us, because we had to cross, cross Eighth Avenue, (?) here at that time, they still had horses for transportation instead of local, instead of streetcars, they still had horses, and then the streetcars came in later. And the thing is that I only stayed a year-and-a-half, because then we went back to Italy, and I liked it. We were taken care of. We were allowed to bring home some leftover, you know, and so on. And we were learning something. We learned to scribble, you know, to draw, and all that. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, let's zip ahead to 1920.

TONETTI: I have a picture of that whole classroom. (voices garbled)

SIGRIST: In 1920, tell me a little bit about the preparations that were made to get ready to go again to America.

TONETTI: Well, the decision was made by my mother. She wanted, she couldn't make it, and in 1920 she came, but my father was already here. She was separated from my father through the whole period, imagine, about seven, eight years, you know? And she had no choice to come

back here, and my older brother came in 1917, at the height of the war, because he was accompanied by a local man, he was the guy I didn't like, you see, because my older brother was three years old, so he was six, six, ready for the first grade, you know? And he came, and he stayed with my father, and then we waited, we waited another three years, because the war was raging, and very difficult to get the passport, you see? So in 1920 it was already finished two years, 1918, the war ended in Italy. And the United States, it was a picnic for them. They enter in 1914, I think, right. And 1917 the war was over for the United States. It was already won, the United States and England, but Italy stayed an extra year. And, uh, I had no problem at all learning English, but I wasn't a . . .

SIGRIST: What did you have to do to get ready to leave?

TONETTI: When I came back in 1920 I was already . . .

SIGRIST: But what, what did you have to do to get ready to leave for Italy in 1920?

TONETTI: Oh, 1920, no problem at all, because, who was here? My father was here. Right, right.

SIGRIST: And this is just you and your mother who are going to travel?

TONETTI: And my mother was with me. Yeah. And I finished, 1920. I finished grade school. I was . . .

SIGRIST: You had gone up to the sixth grade?

TONETTI: Sure, I finished. Yeah, I was in the sixth grade. I didn't tell you why I was in the sixth grade, and I went to school seven years. I, when I went there I immediately learned Italian in the first grade, you know? They didn't push me back. But I went to the, uh, a local public school, there was an agreement between the town public school and the local parochial school at that time that I could go to the parochial school because the school was in my courtyard and I'd save a half hour, twenty minutes anyway, twenty-five, walk to go to the, to the town school, what you call it, the school. And, uh, the school of the community, of the town for the, uh. So I went, over here in 1920, I went to the first grade. No, of course not, 19, I was thirteen years old, I was fourteen, and I had almost fifteen. I was fifteen by the time I entered in the fall, September, you know, fifteen, in the first grade over in . . .

SIGRIST: So they put you in first grade when you came to the United States.

TONETTI: That's right, yeah.

SIGRIST: I see, so at age, you were fifteen by the time you were put into the first grade.

TONETTI: Right. But I already had first and second grade over there, in Italian. Here I skipped one, the first or the second, I skipped one. And I was in line with the other boys, and I was learning the language fast. Because I still knew some English words quite a bit, you know? The reason . . .

SIGRIST: Tell me . . .

TONETTI: Let me finish this for one second.

SIGRIST: Okay, sure.

TONETTI: I went four years in a row when I passed there, the public school. The public school I went, by the way, was built the year I was born. And, and I passed him, and when I was in the fourth grade, my mother told me, she went to the teacher, who was not a priest, he was a, he was teaching the parochial school, his brother was a priest. And, uh, I passed, but when I arrived in the fourth grade the classes in the village of the grammar school ended on the fifth grade, only five grades. Our next village, our next commune, town, had an extra grade, sixth, sixth. But then if you go to that school there, at the end of the, you have an extra school in grammar school, and then if you go to high school you have to start all over again, you know? And my mother said, "No, we have to go back to America, and that, you'll be learning English right away." Because she had been here before. So, "Couldn't you do something, (?) five," which was, we went to, fifty over there, ten is equivalent of a hundred. And give, on arithmetic. We had no, at that time, what you call it, the second theory, already, of mathematics. Mathematics was for the higher grades. And, so, so they got together and said, "Okay." So they sent me to the next village, you know, with four, five boys, see, and I went to school in sixth grade, and I passed very easily, but then I came over here and, but I went an extra year because there was no, there was no seventh grade. Seventh grade was already what you call junior high, or something like that. And, uh, so I had, that's why I went to school seven years. But I hardly believe that. I think she, because she knew I was going to finish going to school there, and then coming over here, so if he has an extra school here, an extra year, it'll do him good. She was right, you know, and that's why.

SIGRIST: Where did you go to get the ship?

TONETTI: When?

SIGRIST: Where?

TONETTI: Where. Oh, at that time, it was the Dante Allegheri, it was already, Italy already, it was in Genoa.

SIGRIST: You went to Genoa to get the ship.

TONETTI: Genoa, of course, yeah.

SIGRIST: And how . . .

TONETTI: That's why, that's the trip that took us eighteen days.

SIGRIST: That's right. And it's you and your mother, and who else? You, and your mother . . .

TONETTI: Yeah, all right, I got to picture. Me and my mother, and the two, and, uh, one brother.

SIGRIST: One brother.

TONETTI: The youngest, because the other brother was already here.

SIGRIST: Was already here.

TONETTI: He arrived in 1917, I remember. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: How . . .

TONETTI: And my father was already here, too.

SIGRIST: How did you get from your village to Genoa?

TONETTI: Oh, through a travel agency.

SIGRIST: But, I mean, how did you travel from . . .

TONETTI: Oh, by car already.

SIGRIST: By automobile?

TONETTI: 1920? To Genoa? Automobile? 1920? I don't think we had any carriage.

SIGRIST: Train?

TONETTI: Why not . . . Oh, probably by train. You're right. We went by train.

SIGRIST: It's quite a distance, isn't it, to Genoa?

TONETTI: Yeah, oh, yeah. And the, our village in 1920 was poor. She went by train. No, no horse and carriage, you know? Because the travel agent took care of about four or five, about four or five families. We were a big

group.

SIGRIST: So there was a group of people from your village going?

TONETTI: Yeah. And we slept one night in Genoa, too. We arrived there one day before.

SIGRIST: Did you have to undergo any kind of examinations in Genoa?

TONETTI: Oh, definitely.

SIGRIST: Before you got on the ship.

TONETTI: Before we got on the ship, physical examination for the health, you know? Now, of course, I developed TB after when I was, when I was twenty, twenty-two, but that was a long way off from, from, I never had trouble. But I was a weakling. I was a weakling. I had what they used to call it, uh, whooping cough, and that's what children had it, babies. I got all kinds of disease of children, yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me where on the Dante Allegheri you slept?

TONETTI: Where I slept in the Dante Allegheri?

SIGRIST: Yes, where did you, can you describe the accommodations?

TONETTI: Uh, there's a word for you. Very, very bad word, people, we slept like cattle, which is true. Steerage. You know that word, steerage? Yeah. And I was, as I say, fourteen, almost fifteen, and we had the picture of the passport, my mother and the two, the two boys, myself and the other boy, together. You know what I mean, just separated, picture, take me apart? Because I was over fourteen, see? So I had to have a separate special passport, we leave two, three days, a special passport for that. And I was, oh, fourteen. And I had to sleep with the men in the steerage. Husband and wife didn't matter, because it was only eighteen days, you know, it was separate. Steerage, big room, you know, cots, two levels, one over the other. A little kid over me peed in my face and I was there sleeping, woke up, my face was all wet. Yeah. Oh, yeah. That's the steerage. My mother was with my younger brother, who was six. See, he could sleep with the mama, you know, in a different bed. And we'd meet every morning. We had, what did we have? We didn't have sheets, mattress, we change our underpants and so on, that's all.

SIGRIST: Where were you fed on the ship?

TONETTI: Well, we were supposed to, we had dining halls. But

from Genoa to Naples we made many stops. That trip was unbelievable, half full and so on. Then they told us, the sailors told us, "You complain about this? Wait till you reach Naples." And the mob, and it starts to let it in, yeah. Like an iron(?), you call it, a nickname. We were insulting the southern Italians, Neapolitans, yeah. Because we were supposed to be superior. So when they arrived, and the men were running, we were in groups together. We used to eat on the deck. The food, we had to stay in line, fill up our sacks, you know, and then carry that with us, a group of eight or ten in a family or friends, they wanted to, that was optional, the way, if you want to. We were all from the same village, three families, I think. So we were all together. We were there on the deck, on top of those air vents, you know, and so on. And, uh, because when we saw all the dining hall, when the Neapolitans, practically over a thousand got on, the same day, we said, "We're not going to eat in there. You stink and everything. Let's eat on the deck. This was already the latter part of March, and we came there in Ellis Island, and the weather was not too bad except for seasickness and all that. That's something else. And that's how we ate. And, eighteen days . . .

SIGRIST: Talk about . . .

TONETTI: Because we had to stop . . . Eh, talk about . . .

SIGRIST: I was going to say talk about the seasickness.

TONETTI: The seasickness. I can tell you that I had it badly. The seasickness seemed to affect teenagers much more than younger ones. My kid brother used to make fun of me, and, because he was eight, seven or eight, between seven or eight. And, uh, he could eat and so on. And he'd watch me throw up, he'd laugh and roar. He thought it was funny, you know? And I had very seasickness. And they gave us this stuff, seasickness. In fact, my mother brought some con--, kind of concoction, liquid, and they told her in the village, "Maria, take this and put it in the container there, and it's got onions and so on, and it helps." It didn't my, uh, yeah. We could buy water, because we had water free, and the food was just mostly, mostly stew a couple times a day, you know. That's all. And then we threw up in the corner regularly. And I was, I got very sick, and I was fourteen, yeah. But, uh, then I got over it, and threw up again.

SIGRIST: So many people are sick.

TONETTI: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Were there, were there lavatories somewhere for people to use?

TONETTI: There were lavatories, but, boy, by the time you find a lavatory, the corner was handier, and the stairways. And these poor men, all they were doing was cleaning up, nothing but, with the mops, and swearing, the sweepers. And we had, it was a tough day. And we threw up and we, the food just didn't stay in, it would just go. It was not funny. And we had tables in the dining hall, yeah. But, as I said, we refused to go in the tables.

SIGRIST: Because the southern Italians were eating at the tables?

TONETTI: Right, right. Because they were, some of them, when we, when we got on in Naples, we could not get seats. They were all taken over by the, by the new arrivals, those tables. And we had to, more or less, if we wanted to fight, or we didn't, they kicked us out of the dining hall. And then the smell, I tell you, so much food, rotten food and so on. Oh, that was not a pleasant stay. And very long. The reason of the length was the war was practically, say, two years old. There was still a scarcity of everything, you know? And, uh, a scarcity, you had to eat what they gave you, and the food was very bad. And, uh, so there used to be a lot of seasickness. And the ship was used to keep, the captain used to keep the ship, what you call, the, uh, the best speed possible, you know? And what is that, a moderate speed, you know, so that we didn't throw up too much. But, uh, yeah, I got, they got sick. My mother, too. We had to carry our own bag in groups, stand in line, then eat, and then wash our own utensils, you know? But there was salt water, and that's the cold water, and keep together, and all that. And when we arrived there, in port of harbor, New York City, and the lower bay, in the upper bay. And the last meal we got we got in the morning, some breakfast I guess, it was breakfast in the morning, in the upper bay, they said, "Oh, that's the last meal." So we went and got the meal we had left over. "What we gonna do with this now? With this, what? This shit here?" We ate it, I threw out. "There goes your garbage, there goes your garbage." Even the sailors in there stop us. We threw away the sacks of the utensils and the plates and the glasses, everything, and leftover food, so when we landed we didn't have a bit of food to eat, you know, but you couldn't do it anyway, the food was . . .

SIGRIST: So you say the trip took eighteen days.

TONETTI: Eighteen days.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

TONETTI: Who? The Statue of Liberty? We landed, I lived, in the meantime, it was, uh, eight, nine years, between

1909 and 1920, no, 1909 and 1911.

SIGRIST: Eleven years.

TONETTI: Three years living in New York. 1911 we come back, you're right. And, uh, and then back again. Well, anyway, and this was 1920. Uh, we had, uh, another meal in the morning, and what were you saying about?

SIGRIST: The Statue of Liberty, do you remember seeing it?

TONETTI: Oh, Statue of Liberty, yeah.

SIGRIST: When the ship came in.

TONETTI: We, sure, we knew all about it. But, uh, the harbor was so packed, ships, arrivals. They were arriving, you know, after the war, you know. So, the Manhattan, the docks were all filled. We had to, uh, dock on the New Jersey side, opposite about 14th Street, something like that. And, uh, I remember seeing a big sign, Colgate. What is that? Well, it's a factory by the name of Colgate soaps, and they were making, and the pier, landing, it was under the same, the same building. So did I sleep there? Yes. Then we had to go to Ellis Island, and we couldn't land in New Jersey, you know? And Ellis Island, I think, by that time, belonged to New York City. They're still arguing about it. And, yeah, so a small boat took us over, and we stayed there two nights, sleeping dressed up, you know, two nights. And my father came over and claimed us, and then we were all right, we were all right. We took the boat to, uh, to South Ferry.

SIGRIST: Describe for me what you remember about being at Ellis Island. What sticks out in your mind about Ellis Island?

TONETTI: Well, that's when the kid wet my face. Uh, being all those men. I was kind of afraid they might hurt me, you know? But I slept, oh, I was so tired. I slept. The big hall, the big hall there, and, uh, the cots were in two layers. The kids all usually on top, and the women, the women and the little kids, the women, except I didn't see them, because I was already with the men. And the men down below, and the boys on the top, yeah.

SIGRIST: So Ellis Island was . . .

TONETTI: And the food wasn't bad.

SIGRIST: Oh, so you, yes.

TONETTI: When you stand in line and, uh, my kid brother used to come over here, eat together, from the women's side, because the food, the dining hall was all joined, you

know? And, uh, I remember my brother, eight years old, hungry like anything. We spend(?) those tables there, those big sandwich bread, you know? We never saw them in Europe, in Italy. And we went right here and saw them. My brother was still hungry, you know? The bread, so sweet, sweet bread like that, you know, we never had that in Europe, only in salt and water and that's it, and bread was made. And, uh, so my brother used to go back and looked at it, and I remember I was with him, and the woman asked him, "Hey, little kid, you want more bread? More bread?" "Yeah, yeah, yes." He was eating plain bread. He thought he was eating cake. He said, "You know, so sweet. Just like biscotti." Like, you know, cake. And we had to stay two days because they couldn't go over and go through the inspection in time in regular twenty-four, regular one day, so we stayed in there. On the second day it was only part of it, I think we were all discharged about noon time.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

SIGRIST: So you only, you only slept there one night then?

TONETTI: Yeah, actually it was only one night.

SIGRIST: Did you have to undergo any kind of examination while you were there?

TONETTI: Uh, on Ellis Island? An examination maybe, yes. Yes. Because one was in the ship before landing, the day before, or something like that, and then on Ellis Island again, yeah. And, uh, examined the eyes and ears, so on, and weight, and all that. We went through, you know, and then we took the, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Who met you at Ellis Island?

TONETTI: My father.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me seeing your father?

TONETTI: Yeah, well, seeing my father, enormous. And, uh, my father was very cold toward my mother. I remember over here he say, "Maria, you look ugly. You're ugly. You're . . ." Because she had no makeup, nothing, you know? And I overheard that. I said, gee, son of a gun, complaining, he's got his wife with him now. Because I was fourteen already. And, uh, we took the, uh, elevated, you know, no taxis. The elevated from South Ferry. There is a subway, but the subway, the Eighth Avenue Subway was not built yet, see, we had to go to Eighth Avenue, and it was the elevated station, Sixth Avenue, Eighth Avenue, yeah. 30th Street, that's where I landed. And we stayed there for a while, and

then we didn't like it. Ground floor, the humidity was high. And we used to call them a railroad, a railroad, uh, flats, front room, and a room in the yard. You had the whole floor. They had windows in both. The other rooms in between, the windows in a shaftway. And the ones who were sleeping in the middle rooms, they had to let through the ones sleeping in the back, go through the kitchen, and I go through there, that's the hallway.

SIGRIST: Did the apartment have electricity?

TONETTI: Oh, yes, at that time, 1920, oh, yes. Uh, but electricity for light only, though. Gas was still cheaper for cooking. I remember having the gas box.

SIGRIST: What were some of your impressions of New York City as a fourteen-year-old seeing, first you have a whole different perspective . . .

TONETTI: I was really excited about it because I was fourteen (?), and I was so tight in seeing the knickers. We lived there and some friends found us a flat, right behind the Pennsylvania Station, on 30th Street, between Seventh and Eighth Avenue. So in order to go to the Biltmore Hotel on Madison and 44th, you had to take the trolley car because, as I said, there was no subway. Trolley car, Eighth Avenue, let's say, Seventh Avenue, and then transfer for across town, 42nd Street, take the streetcar there. And then walk, Madison and 42nd and 44th is two short blocks. Do that, and it was quite a trip. We had to be in the dining room six thirty in the morning, fourteen-, fifteen-year-old, and still they let me work. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Tell me how you got the job at the Biltmore?

TONETTI: As I said, by lying. The age. My, uh, you know, I tell you, my poor mother there. She said, "Sit down, Hector, I want to talk to you." My younger brother was working already, my father was still working, and we were just the two of us. "Sit down." She said, "Look here at the table." I remember just as you, I swear it. She says, "You know, your father's sick, he can't work any more and, uh, and you're a, you're not even fifteen, but would you like to go to school or go to work?" I was brought up, in the old country, to help your father and mother, and all those stories from the Bible, you know, and so on, help, help your parents. And not only, not only adore them or something. And so I said, "I'll go to work." I figure I have work, I can learn English after school, after work, you know. I didn't realize the hours I had to put in. Instead at the Biltmore Hotel at six thirty I had to be in the dining room, the gray room on the ground floor there. So I get there, two blocks from, you know, three, one block, square block. 43rd to 44th, Madison Avenue, and

then 43rd, 44th, Vanderbilt Avenue, a brand new building. It was built in 1913, just before the war. And, uh, I was over there at six thirty. I had to get up at five thirty. Then in the morning I wait for a streetcar, it never showed up, six, six thirty. So I started to walk. Fourteen short blocks, all right. But then three long blocks from Seventh Avenue to Madison Avenue? You know Manhattan well? Yeah. And, uh, so I did that. In the dining room, ready for breakfast, at seven. We set up, everything, and then ready. The dining room opened at seven, seven, seven-thirty, seven. Until eleven, eleven thirty is breakfast, so we had to stay there until eleven, eleven thirty. And you have time off, a half hour, for lunch in the, where the help eats, you know? Not in the dining room. And, uh, then from twelve, because since we worked for breakfast we were allowed to go in the dining room right at the moment when they start serving, from twelve to two thirty. And then from two thirty until five thirty, you had time off. What would you do with that afternoon time off? Fourteen, fifteen, twenty blocks from the flat, which was like a damp place, and then go back for dinner, serve dinner. So I walk home and I said, "Gee, that's a long trip, and not too much time." And we had also English schools in the afternoon, a couple of times a week. I was anxious to learn some English, you know? So I took that in. And, uh, I walked that, I'm getting mixed up now. Then one waiter told me, he says, "Why do you want to go home, then, in the afternoon? Take a, get some fresh air." The double buses started to move in, come in. You remember double decker buses on Fifth Avenue? Double fare, ten cents, instead of a nickel. I used to go up, pay a dime, all the way at the end of the line, stay there, pay another dime, come back. And one day I was, I wanted to see the Hudson River, and Palisades, and so on, and the city, and I was all excited. But, boy, it was a long strain. So I lasted about two years.

SIGRIST: What was your job at the Biltmore, exactly? What were you doing?

TONETTI: The hotel was in the class of the Waldorf Astoria, and the Plaza, and the St. Regis. First class hotels. They had a gradation. Little kids at sixteen, you're supposed to be sixteen, they make you silver boy, and you take care of the silver, and the water boy. Not even the bus boy. Only take care of, you have your stations in the dining room, here and there, fill your pitchers of water, and make sure there's enough silver, all separated, you know, in the different trays, and rows, and that was your job for a while. But then you become bus boy, and bus boys help the waiter, you know? Clean the table, and help set it, but no serving. And the waiter takes the order, the captain usually takes the order. Every waiter has a, every captain has half

a dozen waiters, two, three tables, just those tables there, that's all. That's the way they used to work in those days. And I did that, and then I didn't like it any more. I wanted to learn a trade.

SIGRIST: So you actually started, then as a water boy, or a silver boy?

TONETTI: As a silver boy, yeah.

SIGRIST: Were they all immigrants, who worked at these jobs?

TONETTI: Yes, I would say. And you'd be surprised, there was a segregation already, prejudice, among us. And I went there, I talked to the waiter in Italian, and they were all from our area, from North Italy, Piemonte, and they knew dialect, and so on. Finally he tells me, "You had a girlfriend before, a girlfriend?" I lied, I said yes. I was only fourteen. I had no girlfriend. And he's talking dialect and so on. And southern Italians were hired in the kitchen, clean, work like that there, southern Italians, only. Take care of the heat. At that time the heat was, they shoveled coal like that. It was coal. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: So the southern Italians were hired in . . .

TONETTI: Were not in the dining room. And the head waiter at the, uh, not (?), but what you want. If you didn't want a certain man, he'd tell the maitre d'hotel. He'd say, "No, not that man, no." Southern Italians, only the more menial work. This, at that time, imagine that. So we had northern Italians, French, and, uh, Germans, some Greeks, just beginning to come in. The Greeks also busboys. And, uh, the kitchen was strictly French service, French food and so on. In the kitchen everybody was speaking French. They had the head steward, a young man, you'd order from him, and he'd make the slip, give the slip to the comi(?), who is the assistant. I became a comi(?), assistant waiter, takes the order, takes, run down to the kitchen. We had stairs, besides. And hands it over to the crier. He orders. You know, and in French, he says, he orders so much of this and that, all in French. And then you carry your trays up. Imagine a kid, fifteen years old. Of course, I became, they promoted me right away. I was only silver boy a few weeks, a few months, maybe, and I was small, you know? And it was very hard work.

SIGRIST: How much did you get paid?

TONETTI: Paid? One or two dollars at the most a day. And your meals, and, uh, six days a week. That was yours, yeah. And, uh, a uniform, partly a uniform, yes. Black, a stiff front, not all the shirt, and, uh, they supply that. And in the afternoon sometimes they told me that there was an English class up on the eighteenth floor.

So instead of going out on the buses, I used to take an English class in the afternoon, between an hour or two hours at the most.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what that was like?

TONETTI: School, or private teachers, or, they were doing that part-time. They were regular teachers from the school system, or private schools, you know, and they were considered private schools. Yeah, because they were nice. She was nice, the woman, but she didn't know any Italian at all. But I learned fast. And one way of learning English while working all those hours, I had the books and the newspaper, all right, but the newspaper I had to, I had to read the New York American and New York Journal, the equivalent of The Daily News, yeah, newspapers, you know? So I learned that already. And, and the signs on the windows. This is the (?) one. (?) big sign. And through the window, (?) near the hotel, and then through the window I look, haberdashery. All men's clothes, shirts, and so on. And in Italian I say, (Italian). You know what it is? Fort, you see, and you pronounce it (Italian). So I laughed at myself. It's a joke, you know? Why they have a sign like that there. So when I got in the room later I talked to the waiter, the German waiter, and I mentioned it, what's the idea of that? Oh, you didn't get fooled? For a moment I got fooled, but I didn't know what was wrong, yeah? That's what it is. Sale here is salt in Italian. And I was watching, I used to have a little pocket, pocket book, pad, pad I took from the club, from the hotel, and I take home and I make notes, words I wanted, and look it up in the dictionary, the hard way. But I never went full time school. Then I went to high school for a while, and I went to bookkeeping school, oh, after working. Then I quit. But the school I went when I started to work in the factory, and I had my regular eight hours, five-and-a-half days, you know? And in the evening I had more time to go to school. I never went to a regular school, because the regular school you don't get paid.

SIGRIST: Did your parents speak English?

TONETTI: Neither one nor the other. They knew some words. My mother, believe it or not, my mother more than my father, yeah. And they learned some, yeah. They could understand. In fact, I remember we were buying some apples or something on the fruit store there, and they were making fun of her English word, and so my mother got mad and said, "Me no speak English, you no speak Italian. So, all right, we're even." He got mad, he got mad at her. She said, "I don't speak English, you don't speak Italian." So, and, uh, of course, there's no comparison, you know, and he was trying to show a particular word, you know, she got offended.

SIGRIST: Did you find in your, say, the first couple of years you were here in New York, did you ever experience any prejudice because you were an immigrant from maybe outside of the workplace, any kind of conflict?

TONETTI: Yes. But being North Italian, they could not figure out through my mistakes, my half English, where I came from. In fact, because even this is a year, it's years later, when I was working in the club, and a professor, Scotch, Scottish language, and he was Scottish, not Scotch. And, a professor there. So he says, "Hector, you've got a peculiar accent." More than I am now, you know? He said, "You sound like you have a Scottish accent. Are you Scottish?" He took me for a Scot. I started to smile. I says, "No, Professor So-and-So." I forgot his name. "I'm Italian." "You're Italian over here, you know, south Italian, north Italian." I said, "I know what you mean, Professor. I come from so-and-so." "Oh, no wonder, I knew it was a brogue," they call it. Sort of a brogue, you know? And that's, a Scottish brogue. And I said no. So, oh, sure, they made fun of me, but not me, because I learned English all by myself. And then we made a pact, P-A-C-T, with my older brother. He was here three years ahead of me, and he had studied the hard way, too. So he said, "No, listen, from now on we have to take a lesson before you go to bed, English, and we have to make a pact to go together, partly in Italian, not to speak any other language but English. Even if you make a mistake, you go learn. It was hard the first few months. After that it was easy. That's how I learned my English. After that, of course, I did a little bit of a school, but not much. And I read a lot. I'd read books. Now my eyes are going bad.

SIGRIST: Did your parents ever wish to return to Italy to live, or did they return to Italy?

TONETTI: No, no more after, because we rented the property there, we rented the property, and they were paying the taxes on the rental, and my mother told me, except going over and visit, and we used to have enough rooms to stay there for a few weeks.

SIGRIST: Oh, so they used to go . . .

TONETTI: In the same house, yeah, yeah. But we never rented outside, no. There it's also small. I think there was only one rooming house there. You know, oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you think of yourself as Italian or as American, or how do you think of yourself?

TONETTI: American, of course, American, because we have so many nationalities here, you know, and so many different languages, and then combine, it becomes English and, uh, we've been here so long. And when I left there,

1920, I had made a decision not to go back any more to live, but visit. That's what I've been doing.

SIGRIST: Did you become a citizen, a United States citizen?

TONETTI: Oh, as soon as possible. I was so anxious that I almost broke the law. (voices garbled)

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

TONETTI: At that time was twenty-one, eh?

SIGRIST: This is when you were becoming a citizen.

TONETTI: At that time, I would have been twenty-one in July, in July. What happened?

SIGRIST: You applied for your citizenship . . .

TONETTI: But I wanted to, I wanted to, I applied the papers, I wanted to, oh, there was an examination in New York City, in Long Island City, in December before 1926. I couldn't (?), they wouldn't let me, because I was not twenty-one yet. So the minute I got the papers, right away I applied to, the right to vote, and I voted, as soon as I was twenty-one. Anyway, most of them, they waited two, three years, four years. Like my mother, my father waited about ten years before he became a citizen. He could have before. He didn't need it, he said he didn't need it, you know? Yes . . .

SIGRIST: We're going to have to end soon, Mr. Tonetti. I have one final question for you before we end.

TONETTI: Okay.

SIGRIST: Do you have any advice for young people who are just beginning their lives on ways to live their lives successfully, maybe rules that you would apply in your own life?

TONETTI: The rule is the common sense rule, the common sense rule. The rule is when you grow up, try to learn as much as possible, and be serious in school, and everything you do take it seriously, not just as a pastime. In fact, I was so serious when I was going to the special school in the afternoon, to the teacher in the hotel, she says, "What do you do in your time off, Hector?" I think she called me Hector already. And, uh, "When I go home, I go and lay down and rest, you know?" "Don't you go out and you play football and play any games you play?" "I have no time, six-and-a-half days a week, you know?" So I never had any, any, too much, you know, sports, you know. I never followed football too much, and all those games. I worked in a golf club for twenty-eight years. I never played golf seriously. Six days, and I said, "My day off is

Monday. I want to get out of here. No matter how nice it looks, I stayed six days a week, go and see my people, my family and so on, yeah. But I was very serious, yeah. And I did read and write a lot. I read serious books, books, what you call it, not, not junk, and, uh, when, uh, I was going to tell you this here . . .

SIGRIST: That's all right.

TONETTI: Oh, oh, classics, you know, all classic books. And, uh, and, and reading and writing a lot on my own. So when I became sick with the, with the (?) in connection with this disease here, and I decided I was getting old, I was seventy-five or so, I decided to write my memoirs. I said very few people know my life, and I want to leave something. So I wrote in English, little by little, and so on. And only for relatives only, private. I didn't want anymore, because amateur work, you know? And, uh, so my brother and so on, and the cousin, she work, I see them, they say, "Why can't I have a copy?" "Because you're a cousin. You're already too far distant from the relationship." Anyway, I let myself down, so I included all the cousins, so that means about seventy-five, eighty copies, maybe more, you know, all the cousins. I tell you only that many because, in Italy they wanted it, too, so I have to write it in Italian now. So I translated all that in Italian. I have two, now this volume, you haven't seen it yet, you haven't seen it, of the ninetieth birthday party they gave me, my daughter-in-law and my son, they made up some mementos, and they covered, they bought the book cover and so on, and then they filled it in, and they had everybody contribute something. The title is I Remember When, period. I Remember When. I don't think it's so popular. My gosh, they had to go, everybody wanted it.

SIGRIST: Well, that's probably a good place for us to end. I want to thank you very much, Mr. Tonetti.

TONETTI: So I keep busy all the time.

SIGRIST: Hang on a second. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Hector Tonetti on Monday, August 21, 1995, for the Ellis Island Immigration Oral History Project.