

EI-724

LAURA JEAN VERNI MAXWELL
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ITALY, 1915
AGE 4
PASSAGE ON "THE SAN GUGLIELMO"

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LEVINE: Today is December 15, 1995. I'm here in Oceanside, Long Island, New York, and I'm with Laura Jean Verni Maxwell, who came to this country from Italy when she was four years old in 1915. And today Mrs. Maxwell is eighty-four. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Maybe if we can start at the beginning, and you would say where you were born, and the date you were born.

MAXWELL: Okay. I'm Laura Maxwell, and I was born in, uh, Sanncandro, Bari[ph], on December 5, 1911.

LEVINE: And did you live in the same town until you came to

America?

MAXWELL: Yes, I did.

LEVINE: Okay. And do you remember anything at all about life there?

MAXWELL: No, nothing at all. I was too young at the time.

LEVINE: Okay. And do you remember then what your mother or father said about why the family decided to immigrate to America?

MAXWELL: Uh-huh. Well, my father was living here in New York at the time. He came here, I believe, in 1905, then he came back to Italy and married my mother in 1909, Margarite Biatto[ph], and my father's name was Michael Verni, and they were married in 1909, May 8, 1909. And, uh, I was, uh, born the following year, December 5, 1911, and my father came back to New York, and then he sent for my mother and me after, in 1915. And, in the meantime, I had another sister. He came back to Italy. I had another sister, and she was born sixteen months after I was, and her name was Vincenza, and she passed away nine months later, so my mother and I came to this country in 1915. And my mother

used to tell me that when they came from Italy, when we came from Italy, she was very sick. It took one whole month to get here. And I don't think that they had cabins or anything else, and it was cold by the time they got here. It was one month, apparently, they had left, we had left in October. I remember we, I don't remember, but my mother told me that we left from Naples, Italy, to come to the United States. And we arrived here, uh, I think it was November 28th, my mother said, 1915.

LEVINE: And the name of the ship?

MAXWELL: Was the San Guglielmo.

LEVINE: Now, do you, do you know why it took a month? Was that, was that the standard?

MAXWELL: That was pretty standard in those days. But my mother said that it was a very, she was very, very sick all through the trip. And, uh, it was funny, but she used to have to go get the food for us to eat, and I used to hang on her aprons, and as the ship rolled by, sometimes she had soup, and many, many times, my mother said that I got full of soup. (she laughs) But it was very funny. But we arrived here in New

York in 19, uh, '15. And it was, uh, and when the ship went back, I must tell you this, when the ship went back to Italy, it was sunk by the Germans on the return trip to Italy.

LEVINE: Wow. So you were actually coming over here during World War One.

MAXWELL: Well, 1915. I don't know when the World War One started. But, uh, I don't know about it. And, uh, but it was very interesting, because my mother used to keep me well-informed about everything, yeah.

LEVINE: Well, you were the oldest child.

MAXWELL: Yeah, I was. Uh-huh.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, uh, do you remember anything about when you got, when you, well, when you started, um, how far your memory goes back. Do you remember any of the initial experiences here in this country?

MAXWELL: Yes, yes. When we first moved here, uh, when we came from Italy, uh, I remember, I don't remember, but my mother told me, that we stayed with her brother. As a matter of fact, my father came to pick us up at Ellis Island, but there was some mixup, and we were going to

go stay with my mother's brother and his family until my father got an apartment, or whatever. But, anyhow, uh, when we, when my father came to pick us up, he couldn't, we couldn't go with him. The next day my uncle came, my mother's brother, and he picked us up, and we went to his house to live. But I don't remember, vaguely I do remember, and it was, uh, when my mother, when my father got the apartment in New York, it was a very dank apartment on 89th Street. It was terrible. They couldn't, I don't know what it was, but anyhow, uh, he got an apartment, and it was downstairs in the basement, and my mother, coming from a very sunny country, uh, she got mastoids very bad, and she was very, very sick, and then, but we survived. And then the, uh, the next thing I remember is when my brother was born. He was born in 1917, uh, on, um, he was born on May 20, 1917, my brother Ralph. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: Do you remember if your mother and father tried to hold on to ways of the old country?

MAXWELL: Oh, yes, they did. But I'll tell you something. My mother was a very bright woman. Um, she, uh, learned to speak English right away. And in 1920, uh, my

father got her a small grocery store on 19, uh, on 89th Street between First and Second AVenue, and she ran the grocery store, and my father had his own business he was working at. But it was wonderful. My mother learned to speak, and everybody helped, and she spoke and wrote in English.

LEVINE: And what was your father doing?

MAXWELL: My father was in the ice and coal business. And this is what they did when they first came, because they were very ignorant. I mean, the immigrants, you know, they always, we always had, uh, when other people came from Italy, like friends of my mother and father, they would come and stay with us, and my mother always had a bed for them.

LEVINE: Would they stay for a period of time?

MAXWELL: Yes, until they got started on their own. But my mother and father helped others get started.

LEVINE: Now, these would be people from the same town?

MAXWELL: The same town.

LEVINE: What, now say the name of the town again?

MAXWELL: Sanncandro.

LEVINE: Could you spell it?

MAXWELL: S-A-N-N-C-A-N-D-R-O. Sanncandro, Bari[ph].

LEVINE: Was this a village?

MAXWELL: It was a village. The province was, uh, Bari[ph] is the province, and the village was Sanncandro. But, uh, it was, my mother used to say it was just lovely. But we went back, in 1948 I went back with my mother and father, and it was a nice little town, you know. Of course, it's not like the United States, but my father was a hard, hard worker. He worked so hard. I'll never forget when there was, like there was very, very cold spells in New York, and people had, uh, to get a ton of coal, my father had to work all night in the coalyard, and he'd get a ton of coal, just chute it down to his cellar, which was underneath that grocery store he bought for my mother, and, uh, I'll never forget this. When my brother Ralph was, uh, well, it must have been 1919, because the war was over, and my mother went to help my father down in the basement before the store, and went to help him. She would take the money, I'll never forget this, as long

as I live I'll remember it, she left us all day. My brother was only two years old, and I was, we had gas light. We didn't have, in the apartment, and we moved to 315, which was on the first floor, and then, uh, but we, uh, it was wintertime, it was so cold. I'll never forget. And then it got dark, and my mother still didn't come upstairs to see what we were doing, but she knew that I was about, oh, I must have been about nine years old then, or eight years old, and, uh, she knew that I would take care of my brother. And I used to open the, the window and scream out, "Mom!" And she couldn't hear me, of course. The basement was far away from where we were. But finally they came upstairs, and the ton of coal was finished. But people were all the way from the middle of 89th Street to, all around the block, with pails, little pails, just to get a pail of coal. Twenty-five cents, it was, twenty-five cents a pail, and everybody got a pail of coal. But my father, they really worked, my father and mother. I felt so sorry, but, of course, I didn't know in those days what was happening, but that's what, I remember those things, you know.

LEVINE: Now, your father would get the coal from the coalyard.

He would chute it down to the basement, and then people would come to the basement . . .

MAXWELL: No, uh, yes. There'd be a line all the way from Second Avenue to the middle of 89th Street, and they'd all walk down with their pail of coal, and then they'd walk up. But my mother, I'll never forget this as long as I live. She had a round table like this, and, you know, she had a big apron, a big, big apron. And you know what? She threw the apron, you know, picked it up, and on the table were all this money. I'll never forget that as long as I live, the money, you know, all quarters, all change. And some dollar bills, but very little dollar bills, from the coal, you know. They had sold a whole ton of coal. All day long she was there, all day. It was torture for her, you know, but she did it.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the ice side of your father's business?

MAXWELL: Yeah, I sure do. Because we had customers up on the fourth floor in New York, and I got a little pail on my shoulder. My father used a basin. He used to say, "Go to the top floor and charge five cents for that

ice." I used to help, but it wasn't easy. (she laughs) Yeah. I mean, what they did for money. And, uh, of course, my mother's other brother, there was another brother that, uh, was here in New York, was in New York at the time, too. And, uh, of course, you know, our families got together very often, because we didn't have friends. I mean, it was only family that we had, because we had no time for friends, you know. But in those days everybody suffered so much with the, uh, you know, the, I don't know, it was the environment. Of course, we were, talk about the people nowadays getting ridiculed. We got it. I did, anyhow, at school.

LEVINE: Can you remember specifics?

MAXWELL: Oh, sure, sure. They used to call me all kinds of names, little ginny whop, and all those terrible names. And now people think that they get it, too? We got it, too. Everybody that comes to this country from another country. Not so bad any more, because people learn to speak English in other countries, they learn to speak English. If they're coming here, most of them do.

LEVINE: Did you, tell about how, your experience learning the language.

MAXWELL: Well, to tell you the truth, I must have been, either I was stupid or something, because I was in kindergarten for three years. And, uh, it was very hard for me to learn English. And I still speak the dialect of Italy. If another person speaks dialect, I don't understand the real Italian, because my mother was the only one that went to school out of seven children, and they only had two, the first and second grade in Italy. But she was the only one that learned to read or write, or speak the Italian. But we mostly spoke the dialect at home.

LEVINE: And that continued even when your mother was learning . . .

MAXWELL: Yes, yeah.

LEVINE: Were there any other ways that your mother and father kept up, that were Italian, that were coming, that they . . .

MAXWELL: Well, the shopping, the eating. And then our families, it was hard to get an apartment in New York

for Italian people at that time. And then my uncle, my mother's other brother, not the one we went to live with, but another one, uh, came to live with us, and we had three rooms, we had a bedroom, and then they made the dining room into another bedroom, and the kitchen. So I slept with my mother and father, and my cousin Jimmy Biatto[ph] slept with his mother and father. I remember that.

LEVINE: For how long a period?

MAXWELL: Well, for about a year, until they really got an apartment. It was rough.

LEVINE: Was it because you were Italian . . .

MAXWELL: Yes.

LEVINE: Or because apartments were scarce?

MAXWELL: No, it was because we were Italian. We were discriminated. I mean, people say today they get discriminated, but we were. I know I was very embarrassed, you know. Then we moved out here, and then people carried it on out here.

LEVINE: Oh, they did.

MAXWELL: One, one party that i know of that, uh, I went to school with, very nasty, very nasty. And, uh, I mean, how can they do that to children? I don't understand that, you know. But we got it bad, I did.

LEVINE: When you were in school, were there other children that immigrated as well, or . . .

MAXWELL: I don't remember that, no.

LEVINE: So you felt like you were, maybe, the only one.

MAXWELL: The only one.

LEVINE: You really didn't know the language and . . .

MAXWELL: Yeah, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, that's (?).

MAXWELL: Yes, it is. Whether I was in kindergarten for two years, a year, well, I don't remember that too well, no. But it took me a long time to learn to speak English.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And then did you develop friends once you started?

MAXWELL: Yes, oh, yes, but they were Italian friends, see? I

never had, uh, an American or a, there were a lot of Irish people and German people in that area, a lot of those. But, uh, we never had, I mean, we, since my mother had many brothers and family, that's who we, and then other people, I mean, people that came from Italy and, you know, they came, and then we got together with them all the time.

LEVINE: Can you remember any of the social life with your family?

MAXWELL: Yeah. Social? (she laughs) Well, it wasn't too social. The thing is that, uh, we used to go to each others house, you know, and they'd make coffee or something. And, uh, that was our social life. We never went anywhere. We never . . .

LEVINE: Did you have clubs, like an Italian-American club?

MAXWELL: Not in those days. Later on in life we had clubs, but not in those days.

LEVINE: And what was it like getting used to your father for the first time?

MAXWELL: Well, I hadn't met, I don't remember meeting my father in Italy because, I mean, he must have come, well, he

got married, and then I was born, he was here, and then he came back, and my sister was born, and then after that I don't remember my, well, I don't remember anything about Italy. But my father, he was a very, um, he was a nice person, but he was very gruff, he was very gruff. And, uh, him and my mother's brother got along, well, once in a while they'd argue back and forth but, uh, I remember, why must they shout? You know, I mean, sleeping in a very small quarters, you know, and they shouted. But, you know, my father had a very heavy voice. My mother was very silent. (she laughs) She was introverted, and he was, I couldn't understand. I said, "Mom, how could you marry Pop?" And he was one way, and I was, she was another way. But she says, "You don't know how good looking he was." He was, very good looking. I had a nice looking father.

LEVINE: And, uh, how about, um, food and, uh, um, just the ways, any particular dishes that your mother made that she would have made in Italy?

MAXWELL: Well, they brought back, they brought to New York what we used to do in Italy, I imagine, you know. And, as a matter of fact, I have never changed from my mother.

Other people have changed, and what my mother did, I do. You know, I still do the same as my mother did.

LEVINE: Do you have any particular recipes that you can mention that you like?

MAXWELL: Well, the thing, the lasagnas and the pastas. And, uh, we used to eat a lot of beans, too, beans. And, uh, but, uh, the thing is that, uh, with the food, actually most Italians do, but our area was mostly the red, uh, red . . .

LEVINE: Kidney beans?

MAXWELL: Sauce.

LEVINE: Oh, sauce.

MAXWELL: Sauces, you know. And northern Italy was more or less of the white sauces. But, uh, where I came from was on the heel of the boot. It was a town, a city near Forgia[ph] where, uh, Bari was. And, uh, when I went to Italy we landed in Forgia[ph] in 1948, and it was quite a ways from Bari.

LEVINE: How do you consider yourself when you think, when you think, like Italian, American, how do you see

yourself?

MAXWELL: Well, I'll tell you what. When, uh, let's see now. Right now I'm American. (she laughs) But the thing is that, uh, in the early, well, we moved out here in 1923.

LEVINE: This was now your mother, father, brothers?

MAXWELL: Yes, we moved to, yes. We had, uh, I said about my brother Ralph being born in 1917, and I had a brother Joe born in 1920. And then in 1923 we moved from New York to here.

LEVINE: What prompted . . .

MAXWELL: To Baldwin.

LEVINE: What prompted the move?

MAXWELL: Well, my uncle, who received us from Italy, he came to get us from Ellis Island, they had moved out to Baldwin from New York. Somebody told him, gave him a proposition of moving out of the city, and he moved to Baldwin, New York. And so, um, we, uh, used to come out, they used to come and get us. He had an older son. It was my mother's older brother. My mother was

the youngest of all her children, of all my grandmother's children. But, uh, my, uh, my uncle had an older brother, children, and they used to come to New York to pick us up, and we loved it. There were very few homes in Baldwin when we came. It was like heaven. It was really wonderful. And so we, uh, we, uh, oh, my father, uh, when my uncle bought the property in Baldwin, maybe I'd better not say this. Some of my cousins might go and, it isn't very nice. But the thing is that, uh, he had a store, and since my mother had learned to speak English and run the store, my uncle asked my mother if they wanted to come out, you know, and run the store, buy the store. So my father and mother said yes, and that's how we came to Baldwin.

LEVINE: So then your mother and father together ran the store?

MAXWELL: Together ran the store. And that was it. My father didn't work outside any more. He worked in the store. My mother mostly did, my father mostly did the work, you know, because my mother was tied up with children.

LEVINE: So was this a grocery store?

MAXWELL: Yes, a big grocery store. It was very nice,

beautiful, big, a big store.

LEVINE: Would you say your mother and/or your father were, um, well, you said before your mother who had come from such a sunny, nice place, and then to be in this apartment, did they feel, did they ever feel they had made a mistake?

MAXWELL: Oh, no, no. No, never. My mother loved it here, my father did. Because you could work and make money here and not, in Italy everybody in our town had farms, and you lived from your farm. If you sold your food, that's what you lived on, but nobody went to a job. No. They had farms, and everybody worked on the farms, and that's how they maintained their, I guess, status, I don't know. I don't remember what they did, but that's how they did.

LEVINE: What was it like for you to visit Italy in '48?

MAXWELL: Oh, it was, it was, they're very primitive. At that time it was very primitive over there. My mother, my mother was very, very sick at that time, and that's why, she wanted to go back, and she insisted that I go back, too. And, uh, I had, uh, I had married John Adamo in 1934, and my son was born that year, and he

was fourteen when my husband, he was three years old when my husband died from a mistake in an operation, and then in 1948 I took my son back to his grandparents on his side, to see his grandparents of his father. And then my mother was there, my father and mother were there, and they had, uh, she just thought it was just wonderful. And, you know, when we went to Italy, everybody knew who I was, you know, so I was a little child, and they knew, and here I was a grown person. And, uh, it was funny. When we went there and, they would get, houses are very, very big, very large, spacious. Cold, but nice, in the summertime. And it gets cold in Italy. I didn't realize that it got that cold. They get snow sometimes. But anyhow, where my father, my mother and father were staying, uh, I stayed with Nick's grandparents at their house, and my mother and father slept at one of her brothers' homes over there, because there were quite a few brothers. And so, um, people would all come in, and my father brought movies over there. We had just had a wedding here. One of my cousins got married. And, uh, he, I brought the movies with us, and he brought the whole, uh, what do they call that? The, uh . . .

LEVINE: The projector?

MAXWELL: The projector. He brought the projector to Italy. And, uh, every day, people slept in Italy every afternoon, every afternoon. But nobody ever slept when we were there, nobody, because people from other towns used to come. "Please show us the movie, please show us." It was just wonderful. It was just great. But it was very primitive.

LEVINE: In other words, they hadn't seen, like, a home movie.

MAXWELL: No.

LEVINE: Before that.

MAXWELL: No, not prior to '48. Not that I know of. But it was wonderful. And then my father went and took a lot of movies.

LEVINE: There, you mean.

MAXWELL: Over there, yeah. But it was wonderful. You know, we went in, uh, I think, they went in May, and Nick and I went, they went by ship, and we went by plane. And it was a Constellation plane. It was one of the first planes that went to Italy. And, I'll tell you, I got

sick from here to there. It was twenty hours. We were supposed to stop in the Azures, and it was such a storm there that, uh, I got sick. We never stopped. They had too many, it was a storm. And they stopped in Lisbon instead, and I was sick as a dog. But the minute I got to Italy it was fine, I was great. But it was so wonderful. And we had, my father had hired, uh, what would you call that, Ira?

IRA: What?

MAXWELL: One of those cars that he hired, and everybody used to jump on it? It was one of the old, no, it was big.

IRA: It was an army vehicle.

MAXWELL: An army vehicle. And everybody would come. It had both sides open, like a bus.

IRA: What they used to call a command car.

MAXWELL: Yeah. He had hired one of those, came to pick me up in Forgia[ph] with Nick. And all his relatives, my mother, I speak a lot of my mother, but my father had brothers, too. But, uh, since, I don't know. We were closer to my mother's family than we were to my father's, because my mother had brothers here, but he

didn't. They were in Italy at the time. So, anyhow, uh, it was, uh, an experience, let me tell you. We used to, like I said, we were staying at Nick's grandmother and grandfather's house, and every afternoon they would go to sleep, and, uh, they'd get up four o'clock in the morning to do, to go out. He had two oxen, my father-in-law, had two oxen that pulled this great big cart. And they would go to the farms, and then by twelve o'clock they'd go home, eat, and go lay down. Well, we never laid down. Nick and I would run over to my mother where she was, and, you know what? As we passed each house, uh, people would come out, and they'd say, "Imericani[ph], Imericani[ph]," you know. And so, it was funny how people just adored us. I'll tell you, they were really wonderful to us. Uh, and it was nice to see them. But most of all, it was funny, because I spoke the same language they did, the dialect, because that's what they spoke at home, and that was it. But it was nice. It was great.

LEVINE: Now, do you know why it was that your father was unable to pick you up, but that your uncle could?

MAXWELL: I don't know why. Maybe because we were going to go

to my uncle's home, you know, because we were going to live with them for, uh, until my father got, he didn't have an apartment, so I guess they wanted to make sure that we went to someplace where we would be living in a house or an apartment.

LEVINE: Now, was your father living with that uncle . . .

MAXWELL: No.

LEVINE: Before you and your mother showed up?

MAXWELL: All the men that came from Italy lived together, you know, they all housed, you know, a certain amount of men, and they'd hire a place and rent a place, and then they'd have beds and that's the only thing they did is go to bed, and that's it, you know, and they'd get up and go to work. (she coughs)

LEVINE: So, let's see. How about religious? Was your family a religious family?

MAXWELL: My mother was. My father wasn't. Well, he was. We were born Catholic, you know. But I found it very strange in Italy. Now, here we never miss mass, and funny, when we went there, Nick's father's parents, uh, well, he had an aunt, and she was going to become

a nun, and she didn't. I don't know what it was, but she went to mass every day in Italy, so she took us to mass. But it was very strange. There weren't many people at mass in Italy. I couldn't understand that.

Here the churches are crowded, but there, and it was very strange to me. Of course, I was, I've always been to mass. My brothers, kind of everybody was christened and, rather, communion, confirmation, and when they got married they just pulled away from the church. Not everybody stays, I guess. I don't know. Everybody does what they have to do.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Now, how about attitudes? Were there any attitudes that your mother or father had about how you should behave, or how they wanted you to be or to act?

MAXWELL: Well, I don't know. I mean, we just grew up, and we knew what, what was right and what wasn't right, and if we weren't right, we'd get it. My father wasn't easy. Very, very strong-willed. And I wasn't allowed, and on my, the uncle that housed us when we first came, moved, well, they came here in 1919, and

they lived alongside us. The store was here, and their house was next door. So we lived next to each other for the past sixty-five years. So we were together all the time. But the attitude, my father wouldn't even let me go. I had to work when I was a child. I really did. Take care of your brother, take care of your sister, do this, do that. But I came out in the seventh grade, in school, and the thing is that I had to stay home, run the store, run the children, whatever had to be done, I had to do it. But that's what Italian people do. The oldest child, if it's a girl, not the boys, my brothers both went to Columbia University. Yep. It's not fair. It isn't fair. But that's the way it was. But my father was very generous after I got married, when I got married. I mean, he was very generous (?). (a doorbell rings on the tape) (break in tape)

LEVINE: Okay. We're resuming now after a visit from the American Legion for Mr. Maxwell. And, um, you were mentioning about your mother marching with the VFW.

MAXWELL: Yes, with the VFW.

LEVINE: Why don't you talk about that?

MAXWELL: Sure. My brothers, my one brother, he was born in 1924, my brother Frank. When war was declared, he went, he was in high school and he left high school and he went right in. Then I had another brother that was born, Joe. He went in, he was drafted, but he became a lieutenant immediately, and my other brother was sent to . . . (she clears her throat) Went to Guadacanal[ph], and we never saw him for four years. My mother was the proudest mother, I'll tell you. In the window she had, you know, the flags with the stars and things, and, but my mother was a real go-getter. Do you know that my mother was, uh, she used to love the Yankees. She was a baseball fan. I never, I can't be that way. I mean, I'm not that way. I don't get too excited for either one. But she used to march in the, uh, in the Memorial Day parade all the time. She'd march, she'd be marching up there all dressed in white with the white shoes, and my mother was a heavy lady, and, but she marched, she didn't care. And, so, it was, uh, she was very dedicated to the United States. I'll tell you, my mother was the best citizen. She voted, she did everything that was supposed to be. Some people come from Italy. I had an aunt, she never learned to speak English. She

never went anywhere. But my mother was dedicated to this country. She loved the United States. And she says, "I'm an American." (she laughs)

LEVINE: Can you say any more about the Italian communities that you lived in in the upper east side of Manhattan, and then out here in Baldwin? Was there anything about, uh, the community, the people who had immigrated here, that you can . . .

MAXWELL: Yeah. Well, we all got together. This uncle of mine that lived next door had a big, big coalyard at his, where he lived. And, uh, we'd get together, all families. We had St. Joseph's day, it was on March 19th. (she clears her throat) On March 19th, and he'd, in those days, in the '20s, he used to have, uh, bonfires, they'd have, uh, get all wood and make a great big stack of wood for St. Joseph, and we'd all get together. My aunt would cook for days, and then we'd all get together. But it was Italian people only, you know. We never, as a matter of fact, because there were two big families, we had no, well, we went to school and had friends, you know, in school. But as far as going to visit with any other, you know, nationality, I mean, we had friends, and my

mother had a store and, I mean, we just, we had friends, but never to visit back and forth. But our, uh, we stayed within our own. And, uh, outside of, after people got married, either one would move out of the state, and we moved to California for twenty-five years. We lived there.

LEVINE: When was that?

MAXWELL: That was when my son was in the Marine Corps, and he was stationed in El Toro[ph], California, and my grandson was born, and that was in 1960. We moved to California because my grandchildren were coming, we were going to be there. In fact, um . . .

IRA: Look what you got here, Laura.

MAXWELL: Yeah, that's nice of her.

IRA: A package of fruit and a box of cookies.

MAXWELL: Isn't that nice? (she laughs) That's from the Legion. That's very nice. But, anyhow, we, uh, we, uh, had, uh, amongst ourself, all the time. Because, I mean, we had parties in the backyard there, and we'd have barbecue, and we'd all get together, and there must have been, and then when we moved to California,

we were the first ones out there. Oh, no, Jeanie was the first one out there, wasn't she? Jeanie and her husband. And then when we left California, there was sixty-five of them there. And we came back to New York after twenty-five years, and they stayed, and they're sixty, sixty-five people there. And they go picnicking, they have, all our children have friends now. I mean, the Italian has gone out. I don't speak to anyone that is Italian any more, unless we meet someone, you know. But, uh, sometimes I don't even speak to them because I, as a matter of fact, we went to Washington, didn't we, two months ago, and I met these, uh, I understood what they were saying, so I says, "Are you from Italy?" And she said, "Yes." And, uh, in broken Italian, you know, and I understood what she was saying. So I couldn't say too much more because I'm a little embarrassed because I speak the dialect, and they speak the real Italian, because everybody in Italy goes to school now. It isn't like when my mother and father were there, you didn't go to school if you didn't want to, or if you had to work, and that was it. But now everybody goes to school. As a matter of fact, everybody goes to college in our family, and it's very nice. But, uh, you know, they

learn, and, but it's funny how the families have spread out now. There's, I have cousins that are fourth and fifth cousins. And, I mean, from my mother and father to my uncle's children, then they had children and they had children and they had children.

And I have great grandchildren right now. I have five great, two grandchildren and five great grandchildren.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, now, you, when you married the first time, who did you marry?

MAXWELL: I married John Adamo.

LEVINE: And did you have any children?

MAXWELL: Yes, I had a son named Nick Adamo. And, uh, when I married Ira, my husband died in 1938 by a mistaken operation, a doctor made a mistake and he died right away, peritonitis. And then, uh, I had a big business in Baldwin. We had an oil and fuel business. And my husband had started it then with two other partners, and then, uh, well, it was very hard getting people to work in the business for me. Uh, and then, uh, we had hired, uh, someone, and his name is Ira Maxwell, and after two years all of a sudden I start getting

flowers and candy and . . . (she laughs)

IRA: The usual stuff.

MAXWELL: And he was very nice, and the business really flourished with him. And it was wonderful. But then he went, uh, he had to go in the service. But, uh . . .

LEVINE: And then did you have other children?

MAXWELL: No.

LEVINE: You have one child.

MAXWELL: No, we just have the one. Ira adopted him, but he retained his name, because he's the only grandchild that the Adamos have. And so, uh, my son is a grandfather already. I can't believe it. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Well, now, uh, was Mr. Adamo from the same village?

MAXWELL: Yes.

LEVINE: As your family?

MAXWELL: Yes. Let me tell you about his family and our family. In Italy they have, uh, different, what would you

call it, Ira, status?

IRA: A different culture.

MAXWELL: Well, no, it's not a different culture.

IRA: A little higher class.

MAXWELL: Yeah. We, my father's people, my mother's people, were working class. They worked their own farms. But John's people were, uh, they were owners of farms, but they never worked. They had people working for them. And it's funny, he came to the United States in, uh, 1927, I think it was, and he came here with, uh, a group of priests from Italy and, uh, they went back and he didn't. So, uh, he got, uh, a visa to stay, and then after a while he didn't get a visa. So by 1932, I think it was, he had to leave, otherwise he'd have been, he wasn't allowed to stay any more. So we were going together at that time, and, uh, we got married by the Justice of the Peace, and he went to Bermuda to, uh, enter back into the United States, because Bermuda has a very, had a very low, uh, what would you call it? They, the, when they came to the United States from Cuba, they weren't, I mean, from, uh, what did I just say?

LEVINE: From Bermuda.

MAXWELL: Bermuda. There was a very, uh, low amount of people coming. There wasn't many immigrated to the United States. And so he went there. He had gotten a lawyer, and, uh, he went there, and he came back in, uh, in six weeks, six weeks. He came back in July, from May. And then the following year we married by church. We didn't live together or anything in those days. And, uh, I had become a citizen because my father became a citizen, and, uh, because I was underage when, uh, I came to this country, and then when my father became a citizen, through him I became a citizen. And then my husband applied for citizenship right away, and he got it.

LEVINE: Now, was he able to stay because he married a citizen?

MAXWELL: Yes.

LEVINE: And, okay.

MAXWELL: He came back, because I was a citizen, and I called him back.

LEVINE: I see.

MAXWELL: But if he had gone to Italy, it would have taken two or three years, and he went to, found out Bermuda was a low quota, and he came back in six weeks, but he came back very sick. He came back, he had tuberculosis, and worrying whether or not he was going to be sent back to Italy, but he stayed. And, uh, so, anyhow, it was, uh, then we got married in 1934.

LEVINE: Did your family know him?

MAXWELL: Oh, yeah. My father and mother were real proud to have me marry him because he was a, the dons of the town. And, uh, he was a wonderful person. He knew how to speak English, and learned very fast. And it was wonderful how he, uh, learned. Well, he had gone right through to college. And, uh, so it was, uh, an experience. But, uh, everybody loved him. Even when Ira took over the business, everyone told him what a wonderful person he was, but it was a tragedy what happened to him. It was terrible. He came back, he had an ulcer so bad, and the doctor operated on him, and he died right away. So my son was only three years old. So if it wasn't for Ira, we would have been in bad trouble, because I was in partnership with two other men in the business, but we pulled through.

LEVINE: What do you feel proud of? What do you feel, um . . .

MAXWELL: Proud? Well, I'm proud to be an American, that's the first thing. And I'm proud to be for my family. And, uh, we have a wonderful family. And, uh, all my brothers have gotten far in, uh, working, and I have one brother that's an attorney. The other brother passed away in September. He was an accountant, worked for the Town of Hempstead. And, uh, then my other brother was an artist. He passed away. As a matter of fact, that's one of his paintings. He has an art shack down in, uh, Freeport, on the canal down there. He was some artist. And we never knew how wonderful he was. And then I have another brother that lives in, uh, out in Long Island, in Brookhaven. I have a sister, Jean, and, uh, we were a big family.

LEVINE: How about this phase of your life, when you're not, you're not working or raising children?

MAXWELL: Well, in, in Italy, excuse me, in California we had a nice life. I had a wonderful life in California. It was wonderful being with my son and his family, and the two children. We were there for all the time until they were twenty-five, twenty-six years old.

But then coming back, first we went to settle, my son asked my husband if he wanted to retire in Seattle because that's where they lived, up in Washington state. So we went to live there and, uh, I was working. (she laughs) It was funny. My whole life I wanted to be a waitress. When I was seventy years old I got a job in a, in a golf club, and I got a job as a waitress.

LEVINE: And how did you like it?

MAXWELL: I loved it. I was number twenty-four going in, and when I left, I was number four, three years later.

LEVINE: You mean, in . . .

MAXWELL: There were twenty-four people ahead of me, and then I went down to number four on their list, and it was wonderful. I like to work. I've always liked to work. I think that's what keeps me young. (she laughs)

LEVINE: And, um, let's see. Is there anything else you can think of about, um, your whole family, you know, cutting their ties, although they still have family in Italy, but starting a new life in this country.

MAXWELL: Oh, yeah. Well, my mother had, my mother had, of course, I've spoken about them, but my father had brothers, and they had children, and one, that's the one that those people were talking about. He's very, very sick. He has emphysema. She was telling me about Ralphie, Ira, Ralph, young Ralph.

IRA: Yeah, yeah, I know.

MAXWELL: And, uh, they all came from Italy, but none of the children. All the children were born here. My father's brothers were all unmarried, and when they came here I had an Irish aunt, I had an Italian aunt, and all the rest of them on my mother's side were all Italian. See, that's, the generation that came here, and they were married there and then came to this country. And some of them came with children, on my mother's side. But on my father's side they were younger anyhow. My father was the eldest of all these children that they had.

LEVINE: And what was it like for you when you visited Ellis Island?

MAXWELL: It was wonderful. My son came with us, and there was about ten of us that went into the city. A few of my

brothers came in, and my mother and father's name is there, and it was wonderful. And, like I said, we, uh, there was a, uh, a place where punched a button and, uh, for the Biatto[ph] family, that's my mother's family, and lo and behold out comes Angie, Angie Biatto's wedding picture, and all that, the whole wedding party's name is right there, and it was so wonderful to see, and I thought it was great, and we enjoyed everything from Ellis Island.

LEVINE: So that's the family album you're talking about.

MAXWELL: Yes, that was wonderful to see. But, uh, I didn't put my name down, because I thought, well, I'll just put my mother and father's name down there, and we did.

LEVINE: On the wall.

MAXWELL: On the wall, yeah. I don't think there's any more, no more room, is there?

LEVINE: Well, they closed it, but, uh, it looks as though they're going to start a new wall.

MAXWELL: Are they?

LEVINE: And they're taking now names on the waiting list.

MAXWELL: Oh, I should, Nick wanted to put, my son wanted to put my name there. Oh, that would be great. That's wonderful.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, is there anything else that maybe we haven't covered that has to do with, uh, coming to this country.

MAXWELL: We have a very happy life, and when we moved to California, that was a real bright spot in my life. It was just wonderful. California, of course, we hear that now it's not the same as it was thirty years ago, because it's thirty years since we were there. In the beginning, 196--, thirty-five years. We went there in 1960, and here it is '95. Thirty-five years ago. And, uh, it's different there. I mean, when we moved to this one town, when we went to visit, when Michael was born, we went to visit. And, uh, we went to this one town, it was all orange groves, all orange groves. Not one house. And there was a new tract, that's what they call the houses going in, a new tract, and we bought one of those homes, and then we moved there. We went to visit, and then we bought one, and it was beautiful. Now I hear, the other day one of my cousins came back and said there isn't one orange

grove in California, in this town where we lived. There are all homes. And traffic? You wouldn't believe. It was just, I don't know what's happening, but even here. I mean, we came, from Seattle we came back, and we didn't want to go back to California because we had sold our condo, and then we thought, well, let's go to Florida and see how that is, but Florida's nothing like California. California's just beautiful. We had family there, too, you know, but it was wonderful. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Okay. Well . . .

MAXWELL: Well, this has been very interesting.

LEVINE: Yeah. I want to thank you very much for a very interesting interview.

MAXWELL: Yeah, thank you.

LEVINE: You remember a lot.

MAXWELL: I do, I do.

LEVINE: Of your early life, and . . .

MAXWELL: My son says, "Mom, you know everybody's birthday." And I do, even my cousin. Well, when I was growing

up, you know, I wanted to, I wanted to learn, and I did learn, a lot. And even though I went to the seventh grade, and I never went back to school, but I know a lot, yeah.

LEVINE: Well, I'm very happy to have had this opportunity to talk with you. (a telephone rings)

MAXWELL: Thank you very much.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off.