

EI-748

MICHAEL PUTIGNANO

BIRTHDATE: AUGUST 16, 1911

INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 19, 1996

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 84

RUNNING TIME: 54:21

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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ITALY, 1925, ARRIVED 1926

AGE: 14

SHIP: MARTHA WASHINGTON

PORT: NAPLES

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is May 19th, 1996 and I'm here in the oral history studio at Ellis Island with Michael Putignano.

PUTIGNANO: Putignano.

LEVINE: Putignano.

PUTIGNANO: Right.

LEVINE: Who came from Italy in 1920—

PUTIGNANO: Five.

LEVINE: —'5. He left and arrived in 1926. And he at that time was 14 years of age. At the time of this interview Mr. Putignano is only 84. So I'm looking forward to all the stories you can remember. I'll ask the broad questions and whatever comes to your mind would be great.

PUTIGNANO: Very good.

LEVINE: Okay, if you would start with where in Italy you were born and when you were born.

PUTIGNANO: I was born in Badi [PH] August 16, 1911.

LEVINE: And did you live in Badi up until the time you left for the United States?

PUTIGNANO: We le—we lived in a little tiny town about three miles away due south of Badi in a little town called Bitetto.

LEVINE: Is there any chance you could spell that?

PUTIGNANO: It spells B-I-T-E-T-T-O.

LEVINE: And how many people lived in that little town, roughly?

PUTIGNANO: I'd say maybe 1,500.

LEVINE: Oh.

PUTIGNANO: Maybe less than there, maybe a thousand.

LEVINE: And what did people do for work there?

PUTIGNANO: Well, it's supposed to be an agricultural unit, small town, like. But what they were teaching me over there was mechanical items, like to—to be acquainted with mechanic—how the—an auto car runs. And after I was taught a little bit about motors and automobiles and things like that, I got a job in the sawmill running the sawmill and things like that. And then when time came, we had—then we came here.

LEVINE: Well, let's—before you talk about coming here, you were only 14 when you came here so you were working—

PUTIGNANO: Oh, yes. I—

LEVINE: —in the sawmill.

PUTIGNANO: Yeah, I was—

LEVINE: From what age?

PUTIGNANO: From 10, making big money. [chuckles] I'm not—I'm not joking because that—that was a privileged trade that this friend of my father taught me because he was a good friend of my father. Otherwise, you don't get taught these things.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

PUTIGNANO: My father's name was Niuzio—N-I-U-Z-I-O.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

PUTIGNANO: Julia.

LEVINE: And do you know her maiden name?

PUTIGNANO: Yeah, Campenela. [PH]

LEVINE: Campenella?

PUTIGNANO: Campenela.

LEVINE: Okay. And how about brothers and sisters?

PUTIGNANO: Well, I have another three brothers beside me. I had my—my brother, Leonard, my brother, Tulio [PH] and my brother, Ceasar [PH].

LEVINE: And sisters?

PUTIGNANO: [unclear], nothing.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, when you think about your life there before you came, what are the kinds of things that you remember most? Like what—what—

PUTIGNANO: From Italy?

LEVINE: Yeah. What stands out in your mind?

PUTIGNANO: I don't know. I'm that kind of a person that could say, "Well, I don't want to think about it," and I th—take it out of my [unclear].

LEVINE: Do—do you h—do you have fond memories of your—

PUTIGNANO: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: —life at that—

PUTIGNANO: I have fond memory of my grandfathers.

LEVINE: Oh, tell me about your grandfather.

PUTIGNANO: Well, I had two grandfathers that everybody has. One was a carpenter, used to manufacture cart—used to manufacture horse and wagon. And I—I remember him. And then I had my other grandfather that lived in—in a different town than where we lived, a place called Santeramo [PH], which is about, mmm, maybe 15 miles north of this place, Badi. And he had huge farm over there and he had a lot of people working there. We used to go and visit them, oh, twice a year, I think.

LEVINE: Would you stay for a period of time when you went there?

PUTIGNANO: Yeah, we would stay there for—like, if it was in the summertime, it was a b—it was not too busy. But then we used to go and see him sometime when he used to gather the—the grapes. And we used to watch him making w—chopping the grape to make wine. And I—also, I used to enjoy watching them when it was time to get almonds. And they used to dry them and then they used to storage and things [unclear] there, agriculture stuff up there. So I think great deal of them, even today, about these grandfathers.

LEVINE: Do you—can you remember any particular, like, experiences that you had, like doing things with either of your grandfathers?

PUTIGNANO: Well, when there was a feast, this particular grandfather that had the farms, we used to go and watch the horse race. And everybody in the town would—would put these beautiful spread on the—on the [unclear], what they call it. They put these [unclear] that—where the—the horse race will be around the town and everybody would admire these beautiful display that they had.

LEVINE: Were they flowers or—

PUTIGNANO: No.

LEVINE: What?

PUTIGNANO: They were, like, grapes, like those—those spread you put on the bed. So they used to take them off the bed and they put it on the lodger [PH], which—which is the rail—oh, the window rail that they would have. You know? And is—they have these horse races

where you look at who had the most beautiful, I don't know, spread or drapery or whatever you want to call it.

LEVINE: Huh.

PUTIGNANO: And it was [unclear]. Then they used to have a big firework in these towns there. These are the things I remember.

LEVINE: Anything else about the feasts that you remember?

PUTIGNANO: Well, there—the last year that I was there my cousin, John—they had a big firework today. And then tomorrow morning he came over where we were staying and he said, “Come on, Michael. We got to go and look where it was the firework last night.” I said, to him, “No, I don't want to go there.” He said, “Come on.” So we went there and, as he look—is looking through the place where they had this firework, he found one of these piece of firework that did not explode. And he started toying with that, whatever it was that he found. And before you know it, that thing exploded in the sand and they cut off—and they took that whole hand off. And as today, he's still living. He has one hand. That's him. He has only this one hand. This one is gone. That's the thing I remember so far.

LEVINE: Hmm, right.

PUTIGNANO: That's all I could tell you.

LEVINE: Huh. Did—did you go to school at all?

PUTIGNANO: In Italy?

LEVINE: Yeah.

PUTIGNANO: Oh, yes. I went to school in the—this—the fifth grade, I think it was.

LEVINE: And what do you remember about the school? An—anything in particular? Did you go to school then after you came here?

PUTIGNANO: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: You did? How did it compare? The two—the two kinds of schools?

PUTIGNANO: Tough, because I couldn't understand. I had no—I had no knowledge of the English language. So it took me three or four months really to get in a groove, like, you know?

LEVINE: Well, how was the school in a body different from the school here?

PUTIGNANO: Well, I would say it's the same thing.

LEVINE: Oh.

PUTIGNANO: No difference. You—you do your homework and—and if you didn't do your homework in Italy it was a little r—tough, because over there they had the right to—to whack you with a little bamboo stick. I'm not kidding you. So we had to do the homework.

LEVINE: Did you like school?

PUTIGNANO: I always preferred to have a trade, a knowledge then go to school. But when I came here I had to learn many, many different things. Well.

LEVINE: How about religion? Did—was your family religious?

PUTIGNANO: My mother was very religious.

LEVINE: What do you remember about how she observed religion there in Badi?

PUTIGNANO: I don't. I don't remember much about there because—but I remember my mother always telling me, "Go to the mass, learn the catechism. And that didn't take with me too much. But I, you know, to satisfy her—I did go to the mass [clears throat] and that's—that's about it.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else, like, that your mother told you that you should do or you shouldn't do, or the things she tried to instill in you when you were a little boy?

PUTIGNANO: I know what you're saying but I do not—I do not remember these things no more.

LEVINE: How about your father? Was he—h—did he try to, you know, have you be a certain way?

PUTIGNANO: My—my father was never there. My father came to visit us and from here to Italy, stay there—be a little bit. And then he'd come back here. He didn't like it there. I don't know why.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. So he was mostly—

PUTIGNANO: Here.

LEVINE: —in America when—

PUTIGNANO: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: —when you were growing up there.

PUTIGNANO: He was always here. He had big business so he had his pocket full of money and didn't care about—too much about Italy because [unclear] to be—I don't know. It seemed to be if you—if you have money you're all right. If you don't have money, it's a diff—there's three class over there, even today, because I have gone over—I have gone back to Italy about four or five times. And you can see that in Italy there's three different classes of people. It's not like here. You have a dollar, it doesn't make any difference. You mingle with the poor man. You mingle with the man that's a millionaire. It doesn't make any difference. Over there, no. There's three class. You're poor, you stay poor. You middle class man, you stay with the middle class. You're rich, you stay here with the rich people. So—

LEVINE: So where did you fit in when you were—were there? Which—which one of those—

PUTIGNANO: Well, we fit in with the middle class.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PUTIGNANO: Because my father was acquainted with different kind of people, so that is the reason why they taught me this straight. If you don't have no connection over that, it's like Indian caste.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PUTIGNANO: You know the Hindus?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PUTIGNANO: They have a caste?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PUTIGNANO: The same thing over there. And all over the Europe is the same.

LEVINE: Well, now, when your father was here, was he sending money to support the family?

PUTIGNANO: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah. Always.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PUTIGNANO: Not only money but he was sending shoes. He was [unclear] clothes, send me all those things. I still remember.

LEVINE: Wh—can you remember anything that was, like, a favorite possession that you had over there?

PUTIGNANO: Well, I remember the last thing that he sent me was a big, heavy sweater. Now, where I come from, it was almost like today in the winter. You know? And that—that—that sweater that he sent me was so heavy for me, you know. But I used to take pride and joy because my father sent it to me. You know? And I—I remember distinctly that, before I left, this man came to me. He says, “You’re going back to America.” Said, “Would you like to sell me that sweater?” I said to him, “Why do you want this sweater? It’s already two years old.” He said, “I’ll give you” so much money. I said, “Wait a minute. I gotta go and ask my mother. So I went and asked my mother. She—so she said, “All right. G—get”—I don’t know what she said, the amount of money, you know. So I gave him the sweater. He gave me—he bought the sweater from me. Would you believe it?

LEVINE: Well, I guess it was—it was considered a good item [unclear].

PUTIGNANO: Well, I imagine. But here we give it to the donation. We donate to charity, the other charity, the—oh, my God. Well, they did—don’t have those things there. You have a sweater. If it’s good you can sell it. You don’t donate it to charity.

LEVINE: How about foods? Do you remember any particular dishes that your mother made or—or—you didn’t mention your grandmothers. Do you remember them at all?

PUTIGNANO: Oh, yeah. My grandmother? Well, one—both my grandmother were wonderful to me. I remember one—this grandmother. They had that—she was on my mother’s side there. She was a small woman, maybe five feet. And she was very kind. I remember her always to be very nice to me.

LEVINE: What would she do that was so nice?

PUTIGNANO: [sighs] I—I ca—I can't distinguish. She was very—that's all I can say to you is she was very nice, you know. But my other grandmother on my father's side, ah, they had big farms and things like there. And I remember our—early in the morning she used to—when I used to go and visit her, she would wake me up early in the morning—maybe five, five-thirty in the morning. And she would have a—a big, huge can or pot of milk, maybe a 20-gallon pot. And it'd be on the stove. They had a special stove where they had a small pot, a big pot, a big—and bigger. And this milk—and she would have milk in there that would start to boil and she would make cheese out of it. And so after you have extracted the stuff that makes the cheese, they would make ricotta. And she would have a piece of bread for me and some ricotta and spread like butter on. That's just delicious. I remember that there.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PUTIGNANO: You ask me whatever question you want and I try to answer it.

LEVINE: Yeah, that's great. So—so that was—was that, like, your favorite food that you can remember from there?

PUTIGNANO: No, my mother was a great, great cook. She—she was very good cook. She raised four—four boys and we always appreciated the way she cooked, even when we got married. Wonderful cook, she was. But as far as one partic—telling you about one particular dish, I—she was a good cook. That's all I can say.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, when you—how was it that—that it was decided that you would come to the United States at the time that you did?

PUTIGNANO: I did not make the decision. My father says, "I want you gu—the whole family to come to the United States." So my mother says, "But why do you want us to come there? We all right here." She was very happy because she had the mother, the father, the sisters, the whole—you know, the whole family. And my father would come, stay maybe two, three months and then come back here again. So the last time he came back he says, "I want you guys to come." That's it. And so she gathered everything and we came.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything that she brought with her?

PUTIGNANO: Well, I remember that we had a big—those metal cases. As a matter of fact, I still have one [unclear] my house. I have to have [unclear] come to Dettum [PH], Massachusetts where I live.

LEVINE: You mean the trunk?

PUTIGNANO: The trunk.

LEVINE: That's where she—the—

PUTIGNANO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PUTIGNANO: So it's about four—about four feet in length—two, three feet. No, two and a half feet high and two feet in width. But it does not belong to me, that one there. It's a—a similar trunk that we had when we came here.

LEVINE: Oh.

PUTIGNANO: And it was all full of the clothes that we used to wear there. Ah, things like there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember getting ready to leave?

PUTIGNANO: Yeah. I remember putting—getting—from a friend of mine, getting a horse and wagon and putting this trunk that I'm telling you about it. [chuckles] It was so heavy with material that—clothes that—I don't know—clothes that she had inside. It was so heavy; I couldn't handle it alone. So I had to get—this friend of mine, my cousin and I—we had to bring it downstairs and put it on a horse and wagon and take it to the railroad station so—[clears throat] to be shipped to Naples where we were going to pick up the boat, and then bring the horse and wagon back to this friend of mine that had lend it to me.

LEVINE: And did—did people come and say goodbye? I mean, when you were actually leaving, do you remember, like, the departure?

PUTIGNANO: No, that's one thing I don't know. I don't remember no more. But I remember that I went and visit my grandmother on my father's side. And when I came back to where we lived, most of the—most—most—mostly, the furniture that we had was already sold because we had come here. Most of the—the only thing that was left was a table, just the bed and one chair for each of us where we ate. And we used the same table to—where we used to go in our room and undress. And we used to have that chair with—we used to take that chair from the dining room to the bedroom, put our clothes on. And then in the morning we had to take that chair back into the dining room. So most of the f—all the furniture was sold already by the

time we came here—by the time we were ready to leave. So I don't remember all the people, if there was any—any people at all when we left. The only thing I remember is my grandmother and my—on my mother's side crying, you know. You know, the—saying so long to us and things like that. That's all I remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember how your mother felt about coming? About leaving?

PUTIGNANO: Yeah. She was very sad and crying. That's—sad. It was very sad goodbye to the—to the mother. But once you're married, that's all it is too. You know, you go—you go with your husband or I don't know what.

LEVINE: And how did you feel about coming here?

PUTIGNANO: Ah, I don't know. I never thought of that. I never thought of that.

LEVINE: Did you have any ideas of what it would be like, like, from—maybe from so of the things that your father said or wrote to the—to you, or do you know what you expected?

PUTIGNANO: Well, my unc—I had an uncle that—with I—which I used to patronize a great deal. [clears throat] He was a sort of a—a second father to me.

LEVINE: What was his name?

PUTIGNANO: His name was Nicholas. In Italian, it's Nicola [PH]. And he used to tell me about it because he had been here. And he used to tell me about the United State. He lived in Massachusetts in a place called Canton. And he used to tell me all about this United State. I says, "I have the same thing in Badi." See, Badi is a great big city. It's right off the Adriatic Coast. And—and it's—I would say it's something like Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PUTIGNANO: Big. So I think that's—in other word, whatever he used to tell me, I used to see the same thing in where I was born, you know. So it didn't make me—it didn't make any big surprise to me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PUTIGNANO: I—I say, "Well, it must be the same thing as the Badi."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PUTIGNANO: So that first the impression I had. So there was not much difference, as a matter of fact, when I got here to see what—the only thing was a great big multitude of people, a great multitude of traffic when I got out of Ellis Island. I say, “My goodness!”

LEVINE: What did you do when you left Badi? Did you go by train to Naples?

PUTIGNANO: Oh, yes. We had to pick up a train in Bitetto. Then we had to change in Badi and go to Naples that—that way.

LEVINE: And did you stay in Naples for any length of time before you left?

PUTIGNANO: I don't remember it anymore. I know we stood in the hotel not too far from where we had to go and pick up the boat. I think we stayed there about two, three days.

LEVINE: Did you have physical examinations there?

PUTIGNANO: Oh, yeah. That—we had a physical examination. Everybody passed. Everything was all right. [unclear] my brother coming here, Tulio. [laughs]

LEVINE: Well, tell—tell the name of the ship [unclear].

PUTIGNANO: And so we—we came and we got on on—on the boat called Martha Washington. It was a great big boat, all right, but my goodness, it took—it took us almost three weeks to get here. And what a weather that was. I tell you. I remember Christmas on board that ship. Aye-yi-yi. Did we get seasick! I'm not kidding. Everybody on board that ship was sick. And did it smell—aye, yi!

LEVINE: Can you remember the accommodations on the ship?

PUTIGNANO: Oh, we had a very nice accommodation on the ship. We had—I think we had a little—a cabin about—I'd say about the size of this—of this room here. And we had two beds, one on top the other here and two bed on the other side, one on top of the other, and a little tiny bed for my little brother, Ceasar, there. There—must have been about five or six years old. Fourteen. He was six years old. And so we all fit in that cabin. We had our own cabin. But we didn't have no service for toilet, you know, and things like that. We had to go outside and—not outside. I mean, on—along the commonways there—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PUTIGNANO: To use our—to take a shower or whatever we had accustomed to have.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PUTIGNANO: This is what I remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember any other experiences? Anything that happened on that voyage?

PUTIGNANO: I know it's a very, very tough one. I—I told—my mother was crying continuously because she thought we were going to capsize. It was real rough—very, very rough one. That's all I remember. The food? I think I starved the whole three weeks I was on board there. And nobody ate.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PUTIGNANO: Very, very bad weather. I don't talk about these things for so—for so long. I don't remember so much anymore.

LEVINE: Okay, do you remember when the ship came into the New York harbor?

PUTIGNANO: Yeah, I remember that. I remember quite clear too. I remember we seen—the first thing we seen was the Statue of Liberty. That's number one. As we passed the Stat—the Statue of Liberty, we—we came up Hudson River a little bit, not too much. But then I don't remember if we dock on this side of New York or on the Brooklyn side. I don't remember no more. But I remember seeing my father in a little rowboat. And he waved to us. And we were on top of the ship and we were waving to him, you know. [coughs] And then got examined. We got off.

LEVINE: Did—did you know what the Statue of Liberty was when you—

PUTIGNANO: Yeah, the—my uncle had told me about it.

LEVINE: Did—

PUTIGNANO: And I—he said to me, “When you get to the United States you're going to look on your left and you're going to be a—you're going to see a big statue of a woman with a crown.” He explained it to me. And by golly, when I got there, when we—they told us that we were

in New York harbor, I look on my left and there was the statue all right. I was—I was expecting that, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PUTIGNANO: And that's all my mother said. "We're in United States and we're in New York." [unclear] all right.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Okay. I think we'll pause here and turn the tape and then we'll talk about Ellis Island. Okay?

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: Okay. We're starting now on the—on side B. And we—you told about seeing the Statue of Liberty. And then tell about how you came to Ellis Island and what your impressions of it were.

PUTIGNANO: Okay. When we came to—to landing, you have to go to another examination. I don't know the reason why but that's what we had to do. And my brother, Tulio, was asked to cough at this examination. So my brother, Tulio, says, "No, I don't want to cough." Don't ask me why. [laughs] So I said to him, "Tulio, do me a favor. Cough." He says to me, "No, I'm not going to cough for that man." [laughter] And you know, he didn't cough. So I don't know. The doctors put him under observation and we were sent to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Now, where was he asked to cough? Where were you then? Do you know?

PUTIGNANO: I don't know if we were still on board the ship or we were off. I think we still on board the ship. You know? And—and that is the time—see, this is the time I—seem to be lost with me. Where we got examined and how we come to be here, I don't remember there. It's quite a few years ago, you know.

LEVINE: Do you know if wh—on the ship you were traveling third class?

PUTIGNANO: No, we were—second.

LEVINE: Then you probably were examined on the ship, I w—I would think.

PUTIGNANO: Yeah, I think so. But I do not remember whether it was on the ship or off the ship. But I think it was on the ship.

LEVINE: So because your younger brother wouldn't cough—

PUTIGNANO: [unclear]

LEVINE: —the whole family was brought to Ellis Island?

PUTIGNANO: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And then what happened? What was your impression, first, of—of this place?

PUTIGNANO: This place?

LEVINE: Yeah.

PUTIGNANO: I don't know. It was a very unusual place to be—to be pl—to see so many people. A—a—and all of them, they seemed to have no place to go and nothing to do, you know. There was a lot of food to eat but no place to go to be—they were sort of restrict. They couldn't go for a walk, like we were accustomed, you know. You couldn't—these people, they were not allowed to buy cigarettes, tobacco, anything like there. Did you know that?

LEVINE: Hmm-uh.

PUTIGNANO: Well, that's what I know, that—I didn't smoke but these people that—they told me that they couldn't buy cigarettes. They had money but no cigarettes. So my impression was that, I don't know, a very—very peculiar place to be, I said to my—to my mother. She—oh, she said to me, "Just be quiet and be a good boy." So I tried to be a good boy. I said to—to him, "But I don't like to stay here." So she explained to me that as long as my brother, Tulio, was in the—because my brother, Tulio, was placed in—across the corridor over there—whatever you want to call, a corridor or—

LEVINE: The slip.

PUTIGNANO: The slip.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PUTIGNANO: Was separated from us.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PUTIGNANO: As long as my brother was in that other side, which is the hospital, I think, we were not allowed to go out from Ellis Island. We had to stay here and wait until the doctor decide if he was to stay in United States or be shipped back to where we came from.

LEVINE: Do you know what—what kind of a condition your brother had that he was being held for?

PUTIGNANO: Yeah, nothing. That guy's—he still lives.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

PUTIGNANO: He went—he went through World War II, that man there, and he was wounded very, very bad.

LEVINE: But he—he didn't have, like, a cold or—or something?

PUTIGNANO: I don't—I don't know. I can't tell you. I was not a—that well versed-afi—verstifile in the cold or anything like that, you know.

LEVINE: Could you see—or could your mother go see your brother?

PUTIGNANO: No, I was the only guy allow.

LEVINE: Oh, so what was that like, going to see your brother in the hospital?

PUTIGNANO: Well, first of all, I g—I—I could not even go and have a conversation, like, from there to there. I had to be in the back of a—a screen, a steel screen, like. A divider.

LEVINE: So that suggested that something was [unclear]—

PUTIGNANO: In fact, [several words unclear].

LEVINE: Hmm.

PUTIGNANO: We had no contagious stuff. Well, anyhow, so we were there almost as ye—a month.

LEVINE: And what was everyday life like and what experiences did you have in that month here?

PUTIGNANO: Well, my father would come everyday to visit us. He would bring us candy, food, chocolate, cigarette, which I used to sell because I didn't smoke. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles] Why did he bring you cigarettes if you didn't smoke?

PUTIGNANO: Because—I don't know. You see, my father didn't smoke either.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

PUTIGNANO: I mean it. My father didn't smoke; I didn't smoke. So I used to sell the cigarettes. What the heck am I going to do with it? I can't throw it away. And—and then all you did was talk to people, try to get acquainted. You can't—they couldn't go to school or anything like that. You couldn't find somebody to teach you anything so you just killed the time the best way you could possibly kill it. Either you play cards—so I even learned to play poker here, which I did not know.

LEVINE: Well, tell—tell about how you happened to learn to play poker.

PUTIGNANO: Well, I made friends with these elderly people and I sold them some cigarettes. They said to me that if I wanted to play poker with them. So I say, "Hey, what's—what's poker?" I don't know what was poker. So they—they had a deck of card. They start teaching me—playing cards. And within two, three days, I—I start making nice pile of money over there. By the end of the time I was allowed to—to go out Ellis Island, I think I had all the money that those people had. [laughs] And when I showed it to my father, oh, my God! That man, he was laughing so hard. He says, "How did you come about to get so much money in your pocket?" And I told him I played poker with these people, that they taught me how. And that's why I got so— [unclear] of money. That—that—that was it. [chuckles] But I tell you. It was just—to live in this place here was like a waste of time because there was nothing else to do but—and we didn't have too much read—reading material, like, you know, read a book or something like there. Maybe we did not know where to go and look for—for these materials to read. But it was not easily available like it is today.

LEVINE: And what was it—what were conditions like? I mean, how is the place itself—

PUTIGNANO: Oh, the condition—

LEVINE: —and the people? How they—how were you treated?

PUTIGNANO: The worst—the condition that exist was, as far as clean—cleanness—was very, very, very nice and clean. The food was plain but was not to my liking, was, you know, plain—different kind of food that we were—were not accustomed to, you know.

LEVINE: Do you remember any kinds of food that—that you never encountered before that—that you were served here?

PUTIGNANO: Well, first thing we encount here was—I—I do not remember exactly what it was, but I know we—we had to become a—sort of a—acquainted with this food. But after awhile we got acquainted, we'd like it. Either that or y—or you don't eat. And I got ac—the first time I got acquainted with crackers was every night before you—you retired, they used to give you a—milk, as much as you want, and crackers, as many as you want. That was just, you know, to make you comfortable in nighttime. There I remember. And what else you want me to tell you about Ellis Island?

LEVINE: Do you remember the dormitory or the place where you slept? Were you—were you with your mother and your other brothers? Or—do you remember that?

PUTIGNANO: I remember—I don't know [unclear] my mother was with us when we slept or if she had—or if she was separated. I think she was separated from us. But I remember there must have been 50—maybe 100 beds, one—one, one, one, you know. One after the other. [laughs] I remember one man there get mad and throwing his shoes at this other man, that he snore very, very loud—loudly, you know. [chuckles] And these are the things that I remember, you know, by thinking hard.

LEVINE: So your mother probably went to the woman's part—women's dormitory and you and your brothers went with the men?

PUTIGNANO: I think so. But my little brother was not with me, no.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PUTIGNANO: I think my little brother was with—

LEVINE: With your—his mother.

PUTIGNANO: —my mother, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PUTIGNANO: And I think it was just my brothers, Leo—Leonard and me, that we slept with these—man over there. But I—I don't remember too much about it. The only thing I could see is a great big room with a lot of—lot of beds.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PUTIGNANO: That's about all.

LEVINE: Yeah. So do you remember the day that you were told you were free to—to come to this country?

PUTIGNANO: I remember because my father says—I don't want to tell you what he says. But he said, "Tomorrow, be ready 10 o'clock, everybody. We're going to go out." Okay, tomorrow, 10 o'clock. I say, "What about Tulio?" He said, "Tulio—he'll be"—he told me where he was going to be upstairs someplace up there. And we went up there and there goes my brother, Tulio. I think he lost about two, three pounds, that poor guy did by the time he came out. I said, "Tulio, how—did you cough for the doctor?" He says, "No, I'm not going to cough." [laughs]

LEVINE: What—what ki—how would you describe yourself as a 14-year-old when you came to this country? What k—what kind of a—of a kid were—were you?

PUTIGNANO: At 14 years old, at my age in Italy, you were a man. And I'm not kidding. You are a man. I was more—I was making more money that a average individual over there at that age. A 14-years-old, 72 years ago, you better be a man.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PUTIGNANO: Because when you're 18 you—you have to go in the army over there for three years. So either you be a man or what—I don't know.

LEVINE: Was your brother, Leo, older than you?

PUTIGNANO: No, he's young.

LEVINE: You're the oldest?

PUTIGNANO: I'm the oldest.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, I see.

PUTIGNANO: That's why I was allowed to go and see my brother, Tulio, in the hospital.

LEVINE: Ah.

PUTIGNANO: Because I was the oldest.

LEVINE: You were also the man of the house when you—

PUTIGNANO: Yeah, when my father was gone.

LEVINE: When your father was—

PUTIGNANO: Let's not talk about that.

LEVINE: Well, okay. [chuckles] So—so when you—when your father said, you know, "Get ready to go." And then Tulio came—came out, then—

PUTIGNANO: He was upstairs already. We went over there. So we got reunited with my father. We hug and we kissed each other. We went outside, and my God, it was a cold, cold day. Must have been, I think the—the early part of February. Oh, yi, yi! It was a cold day. And that's the first time I seen snow in my life. Wh—where I come from there's no snow. [unclear]

LEVINE: How did that strike you, the snow?

PUTIGNANO: Oh, I said, "I don't think I like this place here. It's cold." It must have been about two, three feet of snow. I said, "My God! Is it always like this?" He says, "Don't worry." My father says, "Don't worry." [chuckles]

LEVINE: So where did you—where did you go?

PUTIGNANO: My father had a pla—an apartment on 56 Morton Street. Are you acquainted with the Village?

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

PUTIGNANO: Fifty-six Morton Street. And he lived in that very particular apartment—not the same apartment, the same building. He [unclear] passed away in 1981.

LEVINE: Wow.

PUTIGNANO: Always the same place.

LEVINE: And what was it like having your father around in this new—in this new place to you?

PUTIGNANO: My father was a wonderful man but very lavish [unclear], that son of a gun. Anything you want, buy, buy.

LEVINE: And what was he doing here for work?

PUTIGNANO: His—his business was ice and coal.

LEVINE: Oh.

PUTIGNANO: Do you remember there?

LEVINE: I've heard people talk about it.

PUTIGNANO: You don't remember.

LEVINE: I don't remember it.

PUTIGNANO: Where do you come from?

LEVINE: Well, I—actually, come to think of it, I was born in Jersey City and we—my grandmother had an icebox.

PUTIGNANO: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PUTIGNANO: That's what he used to do.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PUTIGNANO: [unclear].

LEVINE: Hmm. So—so what—how—wh—can you remember any first impressions, things that you saw?

PUTIGNANO: So when we—when we went upstairs, there was, I would say, a—I don't think was a doctor anymore. I think was a sort of a—I don't know, a judge or something like that because he says, "Okay, you guys sign this paper." He told my father. And then my father had a lawyer with them. He had a guy—engage a lawyer. And they—they signed some paper. [clears throat] We say, "So long," to the men or whatever we said, and my father say, "Come on. We've got to get the boat." So we got the ferryboat here and we went to the Battery. And we got off and my uncle, Frank Dimattio [PH], was waiting for us outside the ferry. And that's when I got the impression, this horse

and wagon pulling the heavy load of trucks, whatever. And then I seen truck—Mack trucks running—I mean, driving. The quantity of people was double the way the big city that I came from was. “Oh, my good—my goodness!” I said. “What kind of a city is this?” And then we got into a—a cab and we went to 56 Morton—56 Morton Street. And that’s where we lived.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PUTIGNANO: Then I met my aunt. Oh. Then we met the other cousins and things like that and that’s where we lived from there. I don’t want to talk no more. Ooh, I’m [unclear].

LEVINE: Are you getting tired?

PUTIGNANO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, let’s—let’s just—we’ll wrap it up then. So did—then you go get a job right off?

PUTIGNANO: No, I went to school.

LEVINE: Oh you—oh, that’s right. You went to school here.

PUTIGNANO: Right.

LEVINE: And then, let’s see. What did you eventually do? Just give a thumbnail sketch of—

PUTIGNANO: Well, then I went to school a little bit. Then I went—my father bought me a—a piece of business like his.

LEVINE: Coal and ice?

PUTIGNANO: Coal and ice.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PUTIGNANO: But I was with them, I don’t know, maybe five or six years. Then I got marry.

LEVINE: And how did you meet your wife?

PUTIGNANO: That’s not the one out there.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Oh, it’s another one.

PUTIGNANO: [chuckles] My first wife passed away, you know. That's my daughter from the first wife, Rose. What do you want to know about there?

LEVINE: Well, it's usually interesting how—how people meet each other, especially if you're from someplace else. I mean, did you—were you, like, part of a social club of other people who came this country or—

PUTIGNANO: No, no. I was an individual. I don't believe in there to patronize where the young—no. I'm—I rather mingle with the other different nation. I don't believe that you have to stay in that particular—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PUTIGNANO: No, I did not.

LEVINE: How about your mother and father? Did they want to become Americanized or did they want to hold onto the ways of—of—of the Old Country or—

PUTIGNANO: My—my father was almost the same as me. He mingle, whatever. My mother was more on old tradition style, that he rather, oh—
“That—that person, no. She doesn't mingle. It's not right to mingle with that person. I have to stay with—I want to stay with—on my side.”

LEVINE: Hmm.

PUTIGNANO: She beli—she believe in her own religion or things like that. [coughs] My father was a little different, was very much like me.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PUTIGNANO: And he believes that whatever's available is available. And I don't believe the same one [unclear]. Say, “That's where I belong.”

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. How about the—Greenwich Village? Do—can you—say anything about what that was like when you were—

PUTIGNANO: What do you want to know about the Village? [laughs]

LEVINE: Well, it's interesting. You're one of the people who can talk about what it was like then.

PUTIGNANO: Well, we lived on 56 Morton. I don't know if you know Morton Street, what it is.

LEVINE: I—I know—I know the street. I can't visualize it right now but I know I've been on it.

PUTIGNANO: Uh-hmm. Well, the Village is composed of many, many nationality and the quality of people. Mostly, it's a colony of artists down there. But they're nice people. They're very, very nice people if you get to know them. And we lived there, nice. But then if you walk down towards Bleaker [PH] Street, it's entirely a different quality of people there. You see—it's a place where you could buy anything you want in the world from all kind of a—part of the world. It's right there. That's the way it was then. I don't know how it is now because I don't live there no more. So this is the way the Village used to be. What do you want to know?

LEVINE: So you were happy living there in the Village? Did—

PUTIGNANO: My dear, I make myself happy—

LEVINE: Happy—

PUTIGNANO: —anyplace I go, regardless whether it's the Village, Massachusetts, Florida. Wherever I—I travel, I'm happy.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. So you had how many children?

PUTIGNANO: I had two children with my first wife and I have one child with this—this—my wife here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And when you—when you look back and, I mean, you've been here, what, 72 years?

PUTIGNANO: Shh! [laughter]

LEVINE: H—h—how does it seem to you now, I mean, you know, coming here as a 14-year-old, living out your life here? H—how do you think about it all now?

PUTIGNANO: I don't know. It—it—it makes me feel as—it's nothing unusual. It's just like, "I'm here. This is my place. This is what I came from." But it—I—I didn't come from here, you know. I don't think that way. I think—I know I came from there but I—I think I'm—I always been here. So it does not make any difference. As a matter of fact, I'm—

I'm going to tell you something. In 1941, '42—Rosie, she was born in '42—'41—I started working right in the back here.

LEVINE: Where?

PUTIGNANO: With the J.C. Central, was right here in the back.

LEVINE: Huh.

PUTIGNANO: Okay?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PUTIGNANO: And I got a job as a—a fireman on the locomotive right there.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PUTIGNANO: And I used to take the ferry across, come over here and walk about a mile to come to that shed where the—your guard is to come in here.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PUTIGNANO: That is where I used to report.

LEVINE: Really?

PUTIGNANO: Yeah. And then, after about, mmm, a ye—oh, about a year and a half, I think, I went for my examination. And I got my license as a steam engineer. And I was running a locomotive from here.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PUTIGNANO: This place. But I never came back in this building, though.

LEVINE: Huh.

PUTIGNANO: I used to watch it and I used to think about it. I says, "That son of a gun of a building made me stay one whole month." [laughter] But it's unusual. But I never, never thought, like the question you asked me. You says, "How do you feel about it?" Nothing. It's—it—it seemed to me, like, if it's a natural thing that happened or would happen, so nothing unusual.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how is your life now? Now that you're retired? Now that you're—

PUTIGNANO: Good. Thank God.

LEVINE: —have time free and all that?

PUTIGNANO: My wife doesn't want to travel. She wants to stay there. Look, there she is, over there. See, she's waving. [laughter] You fin—okay.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, is there anything else that you can think of? [unclear]?

PUTIGNANO: You ask me a question. I mean, I don't know.

LEVINE: Just about—about your life, about—well, you said about coming here, you feel as though you've always been here, more or less.

PUTIGNANO: That's right. That's the way I feel.

LEVINE: How your life might have been had you stayed in Italy?

PUTIGNANO: I never, never thought of that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PUTIGNANO: I never, never thought of there—how—what—what my life would be if I was there? I don't know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PUTIGNANO: I have a cousin that was my—my buddy in Italy and he did very good. I gave him my job that I had.

LEVINE: Which job was that?

PUTIGNANO: Well, as a sawmill, and then from there, they—they wanted to generate electricity for the town. And I told him. I explained that—all those things to him. He did very good.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PUTIGNANO: Very, very good.

LEVINE: So you probably would have also done very [unclear].

PUTIGNANO: Yeah, but I don't think what has passed. I think tomorrow. Tomorrow is a different day. See what happens tomorrow. You know?

LEVINE: I think that's a good place to end.

PUTIGNANO: Don't think about the end [unclear].

LEVINE: [chuckles] I didn't mean that.

PUTIGNANO: [laughs]

LEVINE: I meant the end of the interview. [laughter]

PUTIGNANO: Okay. Can we—

LEVINE: Okay, I want to thank you—

PUTIGNANO: I—

LEVINE: —very, very much.

PUTIGNANO: I appreciate your time.

LEVINE: And we're going to sign off here at—from the Ellis Island studio on May 19th, 1996. Thank you.

PUTIGNANO: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]