

EI-754

ARTHUR DE SALVO

BIRTHDATE: MARCH 1, 1911

INTERVIEW DATE: JUNE 6, 1996

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 70

RUNNING TIME:

INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST

RECORDING ENGINEER: PETER HOM

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

ITALY, 191

8

SHIP:

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

[NOTE: Because of his age and accent, interviewee is very difficult to understand]

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, June 6th, 1996. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Anthony De Salvo. Mr. De Salvo came from Italy, he thinks about 1919 and he was eight years old at that time. Running the equipment is Peter Hom and several of Mr. De Salvo's relatives are also here in the studio.

Mr. De Salvo, can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

DE SALVO: My birth date is March 1st, 1911.

SIGRIST: And where in Italy were you born?

DESALVO: A small town like the southern part of Italy by the name of Andretta.

SIGRIST: Andretta.

DESALVO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you know how to spell Andretta?

DESALVO: Yes, A-N-D-R-E—D-R-E-T-T-A.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

DESALVO: Province of Avalino.

SIGRIST: Avalino [PH].

DESALVO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Can you describe for me what the town looked like to you when you were a kid?

DESALVO: What the town—

SIGRIST: Yeah, what did it look like? What buildings do you remember about the town?

DESALVO: Oh, right off the ship, I was living that time on Arthur Avenue in the Bronx.

SIGRIST: No, no, when you were a child in Italy.

DESALVO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the town that you lived in?

DESALVO: Oh, it was a very happy town. My mother used to work. You know, she had to go to work the fields, you know, so they'll be produced, you know, food like grain and corn and all that. And most of the time I was taken care of by my grandmother. You know, she was my watchdog, but after awhile, you know, when I started to, you know, walk around the streets, which by that time everybody used to know me. I used to walk from one end of the town to the other and every person would know me. So I never got lost, in other words.

SIGRIST: What was your name when you were in Italy?

- DESALVO: Sabota Antonio De Salvo.
- SIGRIST: I see, and were you named for anybody?
- DESALVO: Yes, Sabota was my—my grandfather, my mother's father. Yeah.
- SIGRIST: Can you spell Sabota for me?
- DESALVO: Yes, capital S-A-B-O-T-A, Sabota.
- SIGRIST: Sabota. You mentioned your grandmother. Was that your mother's mother or your father's mother?
- DESALVO: That was my father's mother.
- SIGRIST: Tell me some of the things you remember about your grandmother.
- DESALVO: Yes, I can remember I was about—about four, four, four or five years old, you know. It was just before I came to America and my grandmother, which was my mother's mother, she took me for a walk, you know, because I just it was a small town with a lot of [unclear]. Like that, trees, you know, and all that. She took me for a walk, you know, and all of a sudden she must have got some kind of an attack and she fell, you know, and naturally as a kid, I didn't know what to do, but what I remember is that my grandmother says, "Sabotino," that's like a small kid for Sabota, he [sic] says, "Go call your mother," you know. So I had [unclear] to go right home, you know, which was maybe a half a mile or so and I met some of my friends, you know. So we started to talk. I forgot completely about grandmother. So that night at suppertime, you know, see, we lived in one house and my cousins that were on my wife's side—it was a big family, and my mother, they used to invite her to eat there every night, you know, and we used to go over there to eat. So we started to eat and then all of a sudden we discovered that my grandmother was missing, you know, at the table. So he says, "My God," he says, "where's Archangela?" [PH] You know, her name was Archangela, you know, in Italian.
- SIGRIST: Archangela.
- DESALVO: Yeah, and, you know, they asked, [unclear], you know, he says. "Oh," I says, "Grandma"—I says, "She fell on the floor. She couldn't get up and she told me to come and call you." You, which meant my mother. I said, "I forgot all about it. I started to

play with So and So,” you know, one of my friends. I had other friends there, and I forgot completely about her. So right away my mother and my uncle there got up and went looking for her and the poor thing was still on the floor, you know, and they took her home. And sometime later she died. Boy, it was quite a—oh, quite sometime after that because I—I was keeping company with my wife then, you know, and—what was I saying? Oh—

SIGRIST: We were talking about your grandmother.

DESALVO: Yeah, and I took—you know, I took—I took the family, my mother and her nieces, and we found my grandmother still on the floor. And they picked her up, you know, brought her home, and she was doing good, you know, until I was keeping company and one day I went there with my—with my fiancé. I was still with her almost all day, but the meantime, she got to a point where she couldn't talk, but she was alive, you know. And we stood there all day, you know. Then all of a sudden a doctor by name of Dr. Cella, C-E-L-L-A, he was our doctor, family doctor. He and my father used to be very good friends when they were in Italy, you know, but then when he came to America, he opened a big office on Park Avenue. He was a big doctor and that was our doctor, and when he came and saw my grandmother there, she still had her eyes open, and I remember his hand going over, you know, her—her eyes, you know, closing the eyelids. And then he come and tell them, he says, “Sabota,” he says,” you know, “Go away now.” He says, “Grandma’s dead,” and that was it. It was heartbreaking now, but right after when she passed away.

SIGRIST: When you think back.

DESALVO: When I think about it, it still gets me. [Weeping]

SIGRIST: Well, let's talk about the house that you lived in in Italy.

DESALVO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you describe—

DESALVO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: When you were a child, the house that you lived in in Italy?

DESALVO: Yes. The house was, was built for two families. You know, one long house. We only had like one big room. Then there was a

partition and neighbors of us were the name of Occoclas [PH], you know.

SIGRIST: Arcacellas?

DESALVO: Occocla.

SIGRIST: Occocella?

DESALVO: Yeah, O-C-C-O-C-L-A.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

DESALVO: Occocla. Yeah, Occocla.

SIGRIST: So you shared this two family house with the Occocla family?

DESALVO: Yes, [unclear] house—yeah, right. But in other words, my father had bought half of that house and it was our own, and downstairs we had an old woman, living. The floors, they weren't like over here, carpet or dirt. In other words, our apartment was built like on a slope of a mountain, you know, and they dug in there, you know, underneath our apartment, and they made an apartment for an old woman, you know. And—

SIGRIST: So she had like a dirt floor.

DESALVO: A dirt floor, yeah.

SIGRIST: What was the—what were the walls made out of?

DESALVO: Oh, the walls were made of stone.

SIGRIST: Stone, and do you remember what the roof was made out of?

DESALVO: The roof, ah, yes, it was—ah, tiles, but they were red, you know. They were about that long.

SIGRIST: It's about a foot and a half long, you're gesturing.

DESALVO: Yeah, about a foot and a half long, and they were like half a circle. You know, the [unclear] you take a round pipe like this and cut them in half and that's how they were made. See, when they put them on the roof, they put some kind of insulation on the bottom. You know, what it was, I don't know, but we never got a leak.

Then they used to lay these, these tiles start from the roof, work down to the end and they were facing this way, cupped up.

SIGRIST: Facing cupped.

DESALVO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

DESALVO: Then the other one was facing down, you know, and the one after that was faced up. In other words, when it rained, it didn't hold water. You know what I mean? They used to drain right out, you know.

SIGRIST: Drain right off.

DESALVO: Yeah, it's very simple but—

SIGRIST: Did you have windows in the house?

DESALVO: No. No. No, we had one big door because the apartments, you know, maybe I would call my apartment a room and a half because it was very [unclear] large on the top and on the bottom we had a tenant, an old woman, you know.

SIGRIST: Is there any furniture that you remember from that house? What kind of furniture did you have back when you were a child?

DESALVO: Well, it was—we had two chairs because we had a carpenter that was in on the family and he provided us, you know, with chairs and a table, you know, and outside of that, nothing fancy. You know, no china closets or something.

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep?

DESALVO: Oh, I slept in a bed with my mother. Big bed, and my mother never slept alone because my father—I don't know if I was born or about to be born, and he had got his passport, you know, to leave Italy to come to America. So naturally, he couldn't hold onto that, so he came there but before he came here, the first thing he did, he bought me a little dog. It was brown and white. It was beautiful and we grew up together. No matter—when I got to the walking stage, like four or five years old, I used to roam the whole town and never got lost because everybody used to know me, you know, small town. That's how I passed my, you know, my time.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the dog?

DESALVO: Pitzerella. [PH]

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

DESALVO: It was a black and white. Yeah, when I was about five, six years old, they come out with a law, anybody that had a dog, had to either get a license for it, you know, otherwise they would destroy the dog. But we never looked into it because at that time we wouldn't have understood things like that. But, number one, money was scarce, you know, in Italy and so we never bothered getting a license. But within a few days, I was looking for my dog one time and I roamed the whole town, you know, calling his name and everything. I couldn't find him. Then I heard from grown-ups, you know, they were talking, that there was a bunch of kids that they took it upon themselves, you know, to gather all these dogs that had no collar, you know, license, whatever they want to call it. They used to take them at the end of the town which the road, you know, was at an angle, but by the time it reached our town, there they couldn't go any lower. So that was the end of the town, but the next land was about two hundred feet below that. It was like the side of a mountain. That the younger boys, you know, the teenagers, they start chopping a pit on the face of this mountain and they used to go hunting for crows there, black crows. Yeah, and that I remember vividly, yeah.

But when my dog got disappeared, I knew that they had—somebody had grabbed it, and I go at the end of this road, which was the lowest. But then from my house, the road went up like that right to the top of this mountain and it was a chapel there. God knows how many years it was there, that was deserted. There were no roof on it, but the walls were up there, you know, and it was about ten feet from the end of this mountain, you know, and I looked down there and I saw these, you know, older guys, where they were hanging the dogs. One of the dogs, they put a rope around his neck, you know, and then threw the rope over a limb of a tree way down there. I recognized my dog, I started crying, I started yelling and I started taking rocks, you know, at my feet, and I happened to be lucky to get one loose rock and it was big. And by the time it got down there, it caused like an avalanche, you know, stone, and my dog got away. But a few days later, they got him again and that was the end—end of that.

But believe it or not, I'll never remember—I'll never forget the guy's face that, you know, took my dog and put the rope around

her, and I meet him, you know. And I was living that time on 216th Street.

SIGRIST: So you were here in America when you saw him?

DESALVO: Yeah, I was eight years old when I came here, you know. But now I'm grown up, you know. Here I was married and everything and I used to like to play bocce.

SIGRIST: Bocce ball, uh-huh.

DESALVO: Yeah, and it was right around the corner from there, 216. I lived near 217 Bronxwood Avenue. Then around the corner was the bocce alleys, you know, and everybody used to know me there, you know. So one day I went there, I think it was a Saturday. Soon as I get a top of the steps into this plot where there was the bocce alleys and then they had put also courts, you know, to play tennis and all that, you know. But I used to go there for bocce. As soon as I got up the top of the steps over there, one of the fellows I saw, there were two brothers and they used to very good bocce players, you know. But young as I was, I used to beat them. You know, I used to play, and they were so in love with me, you know, how I learned how to play bocce like that and I used to hit that ball thirty, forty, forty feet away. Not just rolling it. Up in the air, you know, and hit that ball. Sometimes my ball would stay there and his ball—I was just a natural. You know, I was good and they all knew it.

So I went there one day to play. It was, you know, kind of early in the morning. There was nobody there except two men and they were talking to one another. So this guy here that used to play with me, or one of his brothers, he recognized me, say, "Hey," he says, "Tony." They used to call me Tony in America, you know. "Tony," he says, "come here. I want you to meet somebody," you know. So I walked over. Now, while he said that, this man that he wanted to see me, he turns around to look at me. It hit me right away. I says, "That's the son of a bitch," I says, "that grabbed my dog on the other side that killed him." So I walked up to them, this guy, with a smile. Either he thought that I didn't remember him or something like that. So this other fellow that called me was introducing me to him. So I says, "You don't have to introduce me to him." He says, "I'll remember that face as long as I'm alive. That's the son of bitch"—that's just the words I said. "That's the son of a bitch that hung my dog," you know. Well, he gives a smile, you know. He said, "Well, you know, it wasn't us. You know, it was law," and this and that. I don't care what it was, I says, "I freed the dog one time and then you's got

him a few days later." I said, "I'll never forget you as long as I live," and that was it. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, let's get you back to Italy and let's talk about your parents a little bit. You said your father came to America.

DESALVO: My father, I was just born, and before he left, he bought a little dog.

SIGRIST: And what was your father's name?

DESALVO: Angelo.

SIGRIST: Angelo, and in Italy what did your father do for a living?

DESALVO: My father had no trades. He had a knack for—oh, he was an altar boy when he was young, you know, but then he continued that until of a certain age. And then they came to America and I was born.

SIGRIST: And you said he came to America about the time that you were born?

DESALVO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yes.

DESALVO: Right after I was born he came to America.

SIGRIST: And what was your mother's name?

DESALVO: My mother's name was Maria Giuseppe.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name before she was married?

DESALVO: My maiden—my maid—my mother's maiden name was Corbino.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that please?

DESALVO: Corbino, yeah.

SIGRIST: How do you spell Corbino?

DESALVO: C-O-R-B-I-N-O.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me what your mother's personality was like?

DESALVO: Oh, she—she was a wonderful woman. Her and my aunt, which was my father's sister, they were better than two sisters, you know, the way they carried on with a smile joking around. Never an argument, and it was a pleasure.

SIGRIST: Did you have brothers and sisters?

DESALVO: Well, when I came to America.

SIGRIST: But when you were in Italy?

DESALVO: No, I was alone.

SIGRIST: You were the only child in Italy?

DESALVO: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: You mentioned to me before that your mother worked in the fields.

DESALVO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What were some of the other things your mother had to do around the house when you were growing up?

DESALVO: Well, she used to bake a lot. You know, macaroni, now, for instance. She had a board, you know, my uncle had built, you know, flat board. Used to mix the dough there and roll it out. If she had to make, say, lasagna, you know, they were wide macaroni. You know what lasagna are. Well, then she used to cut the strips, you know, with a—they had already come out with the roller. You know, you roll it and then you cuts, and she used to make them wide, you know. If she wanted to make like a thin macaroni, here she cut them a little smaller, or making gnocchi. Do you know what gnocchis are? You cut them into strips about that big, you know.

SIGRIST: That's about two inches.

DESALVO: No, smaller than that.

SIGRIST: Smaller than that.

DESALVO: So you're cutting for the [unclear], and she would cut them—this is a strip, cut them at an angle this way, you know. In other

words, when they already cut, they look like, cut like this here. Like this here. Like this and like that. These two corners, she would put them around her fingers and squeeze them and there was this curl macaroni.

SIGRIST: What was your favorite food as a child that she made?

DESALVO: Well, I was always crazy for macaroni, you know. Meat. Everybody used to grow a pig, you know, and a pig now they used to--well, within a year, you know, it from a small pig, but in a year that pig will grow to a full size pig. So the one we had before that was already for slaughter, that was mostly in the month of December or January, you know. In the meantime, we already had another little pig to grow. See, there already was, were a step ahead, you know.

SIGRIST: Who slaughtered the pig?

DESALVO: What?

SIGRIST: Who slaughtered the pig?

DESALVO: Oh, my uncle was one of the chief ones, you know.

SIGRIST: And how did he do that?

DESALVO: Oh, if I had to look at them now, I wouldn't even be able to stand it. The poor pig, standing there, you know, alone. All of a sudden my uncle would go, you know, with a noose, you know, put this rope around the mouth and tie it so he couldn't open his mouth, and then a few turns and then the rest around his neck over there. And when the pig was—well, with the mouth so they couldn't bite, then a couple of men will grab him and they put him on the table and they tied the front, two front legs together and the two hind legs, you know. Then they'd throw him on a board with the head hanging, and with a knife like that. My uncle was the chief—

SIGRIST: That's a big knife.

DESALVO: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Foot and a half.

DESALVO: One thrust of the knife, the pig, you know, yelled, you know, squealed as hard as you could because, you know, the mouth was shut. But they fought for their life and then all of a sudden,

you know. The blood, they put it in a pail. They didn't throw the blood out. They used to make what they called sanguinacce, you know, and that was a blood salami. Now, the only thing is, when I think about it today, I still don't know where the intestine come from from one animal if they survive that intestine to make salamis. You know, because an intestine, how wide could it be, to make sausages. But then, they used to make we used to call it simposauta [PH], and that was a delicacy. With the way they pre—uh, prepared the chopped meat, you know, from the pig, you know, little fatty and then they used to stuff these big intestines, you know. Now, salamis usually they made them about that big.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

DESALVO: They used to tie the ends and then they used to—

SIGRIST: It's like eight inches around. You're gesturing seven inches—

DESALVO: No, not around. Around it was more—

SIGRIST: Four inches.

DESALVO: No, the three inch [unclear].

SIGRIST: Three inches.

DESALVO: Yeah, and when they would dry, after they seasoned it, you would—you kept—your mouth leaves water, but the taste was a delicacy, you know.

SIGRIST: So that wasn't food that you would eat every day.

DESALVO: Oh, no. No.

SIGRIST: That was special food.

DESALVO: No, no, no, no. But the sausage, you know, they used to make plenty of sausage from a pig, but half the time all your neighbors, you know, would help you. They'd do that one thing in a day they were all finished. Killing the pig, hang it up to expose all the inside, the heart, the liver and everything like that. The intestines and then other people would accept the [unclear]. They call prosecution if you ever heard of it.

SIGRIST: That's where prosciutto comes from? The back of the pig, uh-huh?

DESALVO: Oh, yeah. Oh, yes, yes. [unclear] the hind and then the shoulder sometimes, you know, but it wasn't as sweet as the back part.

SIGRIST: It was a different way of life back then, wasn't it? [Chuckles]

DESALVO: Oh, beautiful.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you, what religion were you in Italy?

DESALVO: Well, Catholic—

SIGRIST: Catholic.

DESALVO: Yes, because my father was—in his younger days, my father had no trades.

SIGRIST: You said he was an altar boy, right.

DESALVO: He was an altar boy at a certain time until he got married and he came to America.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a prayer that you learned in Italy in Italian? That you could say for us on tape?

DESALVO: [pause] No.

SIGRIST: No? Okay, maybe we'll come back to it later.

DESALVO: Yeah, [unclear].

SIGRIST: Did—who is—how did you practice your religion at home?

DESALVO: Well, I know I went to school until I was eight years old.

SIGRIST: Was that a Catholic school that you went to?

DESALVO: No, it was just an ordinary school, and I tell you that. What I learned from the short time I lived in school, when I came to America, that I didn't go to school until about two months later, you know, and there was a woman in my building because [unclear] on Arthur Avenue.

SIGRIST: Oh, wait, don't tell me yet. Don't tell me yet. Wait until we get you to America and then you can tell me about going to school.

DESALVO: Okay.

SIGRIST: Let's finish talking about Italy first. Could your mother read and write?

DESALVO: No.

SIGRIST: No, but you did go to school.

DESALVO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: When you were a little boy in Italy, what did you know about America?

DESALVO: Well, we used to hear like the older boys, you know, because when I left there, everybody was, "Hey, Tony," you know, in Italian. "When you go to America, who knows, maybe some day you'll be a doctor and this and that," you know. But you know, kids talk.

SIGRIST: Was your father in communication with you from America while you were growing up?

DESALVO: Yeah, through letters.

SIGRIST: And do you remember the kinds of things he would tell you about America?

DESALVO: Oh, well, that time I wasn't interested in that, you know, but I know then one day he send me by mail a sailor suit, you know, and when, you know, the neighbors, they [unclear]. My mother supposedly dressed me up in that sailor suit the following day, which was a Sunday. I swear to God if there wasn't twenty, thirty people there when my mother put the suit on me, you know, and it was really something cute. And when she finished dressing me, you know, and she lifts me up under the arm, puts me out. Me, I went outside and I start playing in the dirt. You know, I got all dirty but she cleaned me up and everything. Then from there we went to the church. Things like that.

SIGRIST: Was the sailor suit different than the clothes that you usually wore?

DESALVO: Oh, sure.

SIGRIST: What did you usually wear?

- DESALVO: Was a pants, you know, a shirt, but the pants [unclear], to a certain age, see how the pants is, you know, like that. This is from here up—[unclear- away from microphone and moving]
- SIGRIST: Yes, go ahead and sit down.
- DESALVO: They was open.
- SIGRIST: Yeah, they were split up the middle, the pants was.
- DESALVO: Yeah.
- SIGRIST: Right.
- DESALVO: And when you walked, you know, the shirt was longer, you know.
- SIGRIST: Right.
- DESALVO: To cover your behind and sometimes it would come out [unclear] and you looked like a chicken, you know, with the—it was really funny, you know.
- SIGRIST: Well, that must have been a surprise for you when you got to America and they didn't have pants like that.
- DESALVO: Oh, sure, yeah. No, but then, well, I was eight years old when I came here, you know. But I remember everything.
- SIGRIST: You're doing a great job.
- DESALVO: On ship—
- SIGRIST: Wait, we're not on the ship yet. Let me just ask you one more thing. Do you remember what you packed to take to America? What did you and your mother pack to take to America?
- DESALVO: Well, very few things, you know. Like your clothing that you couldn't wear, you know. [unclear] she left a lot of things there. When we got to Naples—see, my uncle took us, which is my mother's brother. He was familiar because he was in America a couple of times, you know, way before and he knew the ropes, you know, what to do. To go to Naples, made our passport and everything. He used to take care of us, you know.
- SIGRIST: So your uncle traveled with you to get to Naples?

DESALVO: Yes. Well, we went over to Naples to board ship, and the first thing he told my mother was he found a hotel there. He brought us there and he gave my mother, her sister was brother, orders, "Don't take your eyes off that boy," you know, in Italian, because he knew I used to like to wander around.

SIGRIST: Okay, we're going to have to pause just for a second so Peter can flip the tape over and then we'll get you back to Naples. Okay

END OF SIDE A
BEGIN SIDE B

SIGRIST: Okay, we're now beginning Side Two with Anthony De Salvo. Mr. De Salvo, you were just telling me that your uncle took you and your mother to Naples and he told your mother to not let you out of her sight.

DESALVO: Yeah, because he knew I used to wander around, you know. Even in the town, you know, I used to go all over the town. Everybody used to know me. And—

SIGRIST: Do you remember how long you stayed in Naples before you got on the ship?

DESALVO: Oh, a day or two. Yeah.

SIGRIST: What sticks out in your mind about being in Naples?

DESALVO: Well, it was—you know, a town that was so big, you know, and as a matter of fact, when I arrived at Naples, my pockets were full of liras, you know, money, paper money because everybody used to give me money. And like I said, I used to like harmonicas and first I got there, my uncle told my mother, "Don't let the boy out of your sight." That's the first thing I did. I got a chance to sneak out and I walked, walked a certain direction and got to come to a—I walked about two blocks and I come to a corner store and in the window showed harmonicas. You know, so big, I was four foot nothing, you know. The man had to look at me like this is that. He says, "Yes, sonny, can I help you?" in Italian and Neapolitans. I was warned, you know, that Neapolitans, they could recognize people, you know, that they don't come from Naples. That they had some way and you had to be careful, they'd steal the shirt off your back, you know, but being as a kid, I didn't understand that. And she—when I saw the harmonica there, she says, "This one?"

I says, "Yeah." And she saw me pulled out so much money. "Oh," she says, "no, this one here is more," you know, and I counted the money, more and more. She took every lire I had out of my—in my pockets, and my uncle knew how much, what I had in my pocket, and finally when he looking for me and he spotted me coming up the street and he hides behind a telegraph pole waiting to see if I would know where to go, you know. But I had passed it because then I really noticed there was more than one tall building, you know, for a landmark. [Coughs] He made me walk about a half a block or so. All of a sudden I felt a hand on my shoulder, you know. I look, first thing, he looks at me, gives me a slap on the ass and if he had half killed me, you know, I wouldn't have felt so bad because he never touched me, you know. But then, you know, in Italian he says, "Didn't I give you orders not to go out," and this and that, "you get lost," and I'm crying. Then he couldn't make up, you know. He felt sorry, you know, in order words. So he took me back, you know, and I was playing the harmonica. So he says to me, he says, "Where's all the money that you had in your pocket?" I said, "The harmonica." He takes me by the hand. He walked back, shows me—you know, to show where the harmonica was, you know, where I seen them in the window, you know. I says, "In here." Well, he walked in there, if only looks could kill, you know, he would have killed, and the Neapolitans were known for that, you know, stealing from out of town people, you know, so-called. And he walks right in, comes behind the counter. He rings the cash register, opens, and the women didn't know, you know, "What are you doing?" in Italian. He says, "See, first of all, I'll put toothpicks in your eyes and I'll call the police." So [unclear] he took ever lire he had on there and I stuffed it in my pocket and that woman didn't say a word anymore. Yeah. Well, he knew, you know, because he used to do a lot of favors for that town because there were, especially old timers, out there, and any of them went to school, you know.

SIGRIST: He knew people would take advantage.

DESALVO: Oh, sure, he knew that because he was very protective with the Neapolitans.

SIGRIST: Now, before the interview began you said that the ship was the Dante Alighieri.

DESALVO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about being on the ship.

EI-754/DESALVO

DESALVO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What did you think when you first saw the ship?

DESALVO: Well, it didn't phase me a bit, you know. We got on the ship, but as the ship started to go, you know, we got into the ocean, you know, waves, and we had I think it took us thirteen days to cross the ocean.

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep on the ship?

DESALVO: In the berths, you know.

SIGRIST: And what did it look like, the room? Can you describe what it—

DESALVO: It was one big room like with berths, you know, on one side there. Berths on this side. This was a place to run into. They had, you know, three beds that they can, one on top of the other. You had to climb, you know, and that's the way it was. And I remember one night all of a sudden all the lights when out, people screaming and praying, you know, and me unphased, you know. There was a tension, something happened, the ship broke. Quite a few hours without the electric and then finally the electric went on again and everybody went—but the people that were seasick. I often wonder, you know, a long time ago that God knows how many people were washed overboard because the seasickness was terrible. People throwing all over the deck and they used to get these waves, used to cover the whole ship and all of a sudden you see the deck is clean. You know, the decks are clean and at the railing it was thick pipes like that. It was about that high, but between each one, like this here, there was that much room and then that much room on the bottom and then a small rail, about three inches above the deck are another [unclear]. The deck was about, you know, that much space. So that's why I figured that when those waves come—you know, this I thought of after not then because I had no sense of a thing of that. Then I often thought how many people washed overboard.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where they fed you on the ship?

DESALVO: Ah—ah—

SIGRIST: Or what they fed you?

EI-754/DESALVO

- DESALVO: [unclear] Well, Italian food. You know, macaroni, maybe pieces of meat or something like that.
- SIGRIST: Did you see anything on the ship that you had never seen before? Something that was new to you?
- DESALVO: Well, I tell you, it was—it was a small ship. The only thing that impressed me so much was those waves that used to come. You know, all of a sudden, a wave would come, would cover the whole ship and maybe it's my imagination but I know there was a lot of people on deck, you know, from seasickness. They were like piece of rags, you know, throwing up and everything like that.
- SIGRIST: Did you get sick?
- DESALVO: Never.
- SIGRIST: Did your mother?
- DESALVO: Not even my mother, no, because we didn't think about it, you know. And me, I was too young to understand danger, you know. Yeah, I was always happy, and as a matter fact, I had a friend, you know, we were the same age that we left together, the same day on the same ship and, you know, we used to play a lot then. So I don't feel the danger, you know.
- SIGRIST: It was fun for you to be on the ship.
- DESALVO: It was fun, yeah.
- SIGRIST: So you said the ship took thirteen days?
- DESALVO: Yeah.
- SIGRIST: Do you remember when the ship came into New York?
- DESALVO: I just came from there now.
- SIGRIST: That's right, you did. [Laughs]
- DESALVO: Yeah, I went there.
- SIGRIST: But do you remember when in 1919 when you were on the Dante Alighieri, do you remember when it came into New York Harbor?
- DESALVO: Yes. We stopped at Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Yes, what do you remember about that?

DESALVO: Well, that there—we were, you know, dismissed from the ship and we went to a big room, you know, and there was dividers, you know. Well, you know, room was bigger, you know, wider than this and had chicken wire, you know, here and there that they could see, you know, people that came to claim you. You know, the big wire fences, like almost a hexagon, “o” like that. You know, they could see right through. Just so that you couldn’t go over and run to there, and they were all marked, you know. That when people come to claim you, they give you the name of the—the number of the cage. [unclear]. But the way I recognized my father, you know, because—he had opened the door a little bit wider and I seen a short man, you know, and I poked my mother. I was sitting on a bench and I’m facing the door, and I poked her. I said, “Mama, mama.” I says, “[in Italian]?” “Is that pop?” You know, she looked, “Oh,” she said, “my God,” in Italian. I recognized him from the stories I used to hear, you know, from the people he was short, you know, and jolly. Yeah, I’ll never forget that.

SIGRIST: How did your mother and father greet each other?

DESALVO: Oh, well, they kissed. I know he grabbed me from the first minute, but his arms about me and this was on Canal Street, you know, where the ship landed, and then from there we got on the ferry to bring us to Canal Street, but we landed on Ellis Island. It was a big room, you know, but the floors were wood and they had like I said in cages. Not today. It’s not like that.

SIGRIST: Were you examined at Ellis Island? Medically examined?

DESALVO: No.

SIGRIST: No.

DESALVO: No, but when we boarded ship in Naples, I had four vaccinations in my arm. See, that’s, you know, towards disease, you know. So my mother, she was first and she thought that hurt her, you know, and well she, you know, she got the vaccination, she went on and I was next. So now either she thought that I felt that, you know, that cut there with the—and as soon as the guy lets me go, [unclear] right away. You know, man says, “Come back, sonny,” you know, in Italian. “Come back,” and he gives me another one. My mother kept on—I had four vaccinations in the arm until she

stopped. You know, the man had to tell her. He says, "Look, this could keep on all day. Do not wipe it off."

SIGRIST: And that's what she was trying to do was wipe it off every time?

DESALVO: Yeah, but when the cut heals it forms like a—it leaves a design there somehow, you know, and I had it until maybe a few years ago that it disappeared, you know.

SIGRIST: But that all took place in Naples?

DESALVO: Yes.

SIGRIST: That didn't happen here at Ellis Island. When your father came to get you and you said you took the ferry back to Canal Street—

DESALVO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Where did your father take you?

DESALVO: He took us to our apartment on Arthur Avenue. He had the apartment already.

SIGRIST: On what avenue?

DESALVO: Arthur Avenue.

SIGRIST: Arthur?

DESALVO: Arthur Avenue.

SIGRIST: Arthur Avenue. Is that in—where is that? Is that in the Bronx?

DESALVO: Bronx.

SIGRIST: In the Bronx.

DESALVO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the apartment where he lived?

DESALVO: Oh, it was a three-room apartment that to us was like heaven, you know, because we didn't have no stoves on the other side or running water in the house or gas and electric light, you know. It was all—

SIGRIST: And do you remember how you spent the very first night in America? What did you do that very first night?

DESALVO: Well, I just must have slept like a log. You know, but then I started making friends, you know. There was one fellow there, his name was Freddy Carsi and we grew up together. We were—we had friendship from the first day and then this fellow's mother was, this here was smart woman, Amelia. Amelia Carsi she was. Very smart woman. She's the one that took me to sign up in school and she was my mother's right hand because my mother couldn't read or write, you know, and that came to a very bad ending. About eighteen, nineteen years old that I was, her son was going out with a Jewish girl and he was—she really brought him up right because their father died, you know, after they were born, and she had to bring these—she had three boys and a girl, and she [unclear] and she raised them like, you know, the way they should be raised, you know. Better than a husband.

SIGRIST: This is the woman that sort of had helped you out.

DESALVO: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: You and your family.

DESALVO: Yeah, she took me to school. She showed my mother a lot of things, shopping on Arthur Avenue and everything like that. She was a wonderful woman. But anyway, that came the tragic day. As a matter fact, the night before her son committed this crime, I had a Desoto Roadster.

SIGRIST: A Desoto Roadster, a car? Yes, right.

DESALVO: A car, yeah, and I think I bought it from a junkyard, twenty dollars.

SIGRIST: You're a little bit older now, right?

DESALVO: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: It's a few years later.

DESALVO: Sure, and I had that car there. I was a cab driver for the whole Arthur Avenue there plus. Nobody—never see cars parked in front of the house.

- SIGRIST: Actually, what I'd like to talk about, Mr. De Salvo, is when you were brought to school. When the woman brought you to school and that whole experience of beginning school here in America.
- DESALVO: Yeah. Yeah, when she brought me to school, they took me like an ungraded class they call it. Ungraded.
- SIGRIST: Ungraded?
- DESALVO: Yeah, and I was there two days until finally they passed me in the regular class of 3A. Class 3A because I had experience, you know, from Italy. I was going to school in Italy already, and believe me, what they teach you in Italy, you go to school so the fifth grade you could compete with any high school graduate.
- SIGRIST: What do you remember about how you felt when you went to school right at the beginning? How did—how were you treated by the other classmates and the teachers?
- DESALVO: Well, no, I wasn't treated any different, you know. I was placed in the, you know, in a seat, you know, like the back of the class there and what started me off, on a Sunday I had gone to a movie, you know, what that was called? It was on the corner of 187th Street. For ten cents we used to go to the movies then, you know, and they gave us a program and on this program was a picture of George Raft, you know.
- SIGRIST: The actor George Raft, yeah.
- DESALVO: Right. So I'm sitting in the back there, all of a sudden I take—you know, put my hand in my pocket, come out with this program with the picture of George Raft, you know. So my book was open. I turned the page. In the meantime, the teacher's reading something, you know, but I got enthused so much in that picture that I'm drawing it, you know. Finally, the teacher, she never seen that I never had my head up and she sneaks up behind me, you know, and she sees this, you know, almost [unclear] picture of George Raft. She taps me on the shoulder and says, "Tony," she says, "what did I just read in the last half hour or so, you know?" I says, "Miss Herbst," I says, "I forgot." "You forgot?" She says, "No, you don't forget. You never paid attention. Every time I looked at you, you was with your, you know, your eyes on that paper there." Says, "Where'd you learn how to draw like that?" you know. I said, I didn't learn, I didn't go to school. I said just—well, you know what she did? She brings me to her class. She started me in 3A, but this class was like advanced. Years

ago, every six months you graduated in like 6A. The next six months was 6B, you know what I mean? Every time you graduated half a class, you know, not like they go from 6A to 7A. It's before that, the 6A, 6B, to 7A, 7B. That's the way it was years ago.

SIGRIST: So she put you into 3A?

DESALVO: This was after I was with the ungraded class for about a month or so, yeah.

SIGRIST: Now, how did you go about learning English?

DESALVO: Came very fast to me.

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

DESALVO: The first word, I'll tell you exactly what it was. One night my father sent me to the drugstore to get a box of pills, you know, like aspirin pills. So I'm on my own. You know, I know that the druggist was very close, you know, like a half a block away, and used to know him, you know. So when he saw me, he had to look over the counter. He goes—you know, I was only eight years old, and he says—he says, "How 'bout these?" Says, you know, "What do you want?" I says, "My father sent me," you know, like broken English. I says, "And he wants a box of pindles." He said, "What was that?" "Box of pindles, you know, for headaches. You know, for the head." "Oh," he says, "you want aspirins." "Yeah, pindles." Because, you know, I'm learning English. In English, pills, so in Italian it must be pindles, you know, and that's what started me off in that.

SIGRIST: Could your parents speak English?

DESALVO: Well, my mother. My mother, no, but my father used to understand, you know, so much. But he was—like on the other side, he didn't have no trade. He was an altar boy at the church.

SIGRIST: Right, so what did he do when he got to America?

DESALVO: When he got to America, he got a job at Fordham University.

SIGRIST: At Fordham University.

DESALVO: Fordham University, yes, and he called them up by himself there. By—he introduced—at that time students, you know, used to go

to Fordham University, they're supposed to have money and one of them, he mentioned so many times. When I came to America, the first thing he gave me, a baseball glove. Well, and he told me, "This," he said, "I have saved it for you because one of my customers is the millionaires and he told me that this glove was for you when you came to America," and it was [unclear] outfield glove. But that thing was so big, I couldn't even hold it up, you know, and I gave it to one of my cousins that was—he started to go to the high school on Fordham Road there where I used to live, instead of [unclear] and that was the end of that glove, you know. I got beautiful memories.

SIGRIST: Was the neighborhood that you lived in an Italian neighborhood?

DESALVO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: How long did you live in that three-bedroom apartment on Arthur Avenue?

DESALVO: Oh, that was—wait a minute. I think I got married in there.

SIGRIST: Oh, so you were there a long time.

DESALVO: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

DESALVO: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me what the first job was that you got, the first job that you got paid for.

DESALVO: Let's see. Oh, I got a job in an A&P, yeah, way up Fordham Road almost near Ballantine Avenue where I was there. Delivering orders.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how old you were?

DESALVO: Eight, nine years old. Yeah, because I always liked to have money. I always had money in pocket, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how much you got paid?

DESALVO: Ten dollars a week. Yeah.

SIGRIST: And what did you do with your money, when you were paid?

- DESALVO: Oh, I used to give it to my father, you know, and he used to give me like a quarter, you know. I didn't need money. The movies were a dime at that time, you know, and maybe the rest. I didn't smoke then or anything like that, so a quarter was more than enough. [unclear]
- SIGRIST: How long did you work at the A&P?
- DESALVO: Well, let me see now. Oh, I worked there about a year, you know, then one day—you know Webbs—you know Fordham section?
- SIGRIST: I don't know it, no.
- DESALVO: Oh, I see. All right. I was up almost near the Grand Concourse in between Ballantine Avenue and Grand Concourse. That's where the A&P was that I used to deliver orders. Then at the bottom was Webster Avenue. Now, Webster Avenue ran, you know, the opposite way and about I'd say fifty feet from the corner, the fellow that came from Italy with me—his name was Rob Corvino, his father had a shoe repairing shop, you know, and he was partners with a Greek fellow. They used to clean hats. You know, they rented the store. He had part of the store to cleaning hats and my friend's father, a shoe repairing shop with a big four-seater, the chair for shoe shining. And one day I'm coming down delivering an order from there and I meet this Rob, you know, that came from Italy with me, you know. "Hey, Tony," he says, "what have you been doing?" I said—"Is it work?" I says, "Yeah." I said, "I just delivering an order. I still work for the A&P." "How much you get?" you know. I said, "Oh," I said, "I'm making ten dollars a week," but I said, "I make more than that on tips," which I did, you know, because Concourse that time was [unclear] rich people's haven, you know. He says, "I make more than that on"—he says, "Why don't you come and work with me in my father's place?" I says, "Doing what?" "Shoe shining." He says, "I make this, this and that." He talked me into it, you know, and I quit the A&P. I went to work for them. Well, really, there was some money in there, but he told me, you know, the tricks. You know, when a guy comes to put a shoe shine in, that usually are people from the university because Fordham University starts on Webster Avenue. Goes way down almost to the Boulevard. That was all their property, and—
- SIGRIST: So you had a whole new job then.
- DESALVO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You went to—how long did you stay doing that?

DESALVO: Oh—oh, my father—you see, he knew what he wanted from me, but my father wasn't a talker, you know, like at the table, you know, sit down [unclear] "When you graduate, you could do this, you could do that," you know, because I could of went to the university for nothing, but this I didn't know until way after it was too late. But my father wasn't the kind of man where he could discuss to me like, you know, father and son business, you know, and first thing you know, I got a—took a job and it was way down Chamber Streets, and that's far away.

SIGRIST: In New York City.

DESALVO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

DESALVO: And I liked it. You know, we were making showcases, you know, out of stainless steel. Then I learned to weld—the trade as a welder. I was one of the finest welders, believe it or not, in high school, weld anything. Now, years ago you could weld anything, but castings, you know, like aluminum castings. If you didn't be careful when you weld aluminum because when you heat up aluminum it don't change colors like it was steel, you know. Starts to get red and all that. Aluminum don't change colors. The only way is you learn the trick that this is your feeding rod, you know, with the torch and you keep rubbing that. When you see this scratching, then you know that aluminum is hot enough to take the fill, you know, from this, the rods and I learned that so perfect. Well, I had a good teacher, a guy by the name also Tony. He was the welder that I got the job [unclear] Machine Manufacturers and he saw that I was a [unclear] kid. He taught me whatever he knew. Then at the end that happened they fired him. The kept me, and I knew that was that. I felt so bad about it, you know, but he told me. He says, "Tony, don't feel bad." He goes, "They couldn't keep me forever," you know, he was past fifty then, you know. And I was doing work, sometimes even better than him. [unclear] and I used to make those seams there had a long weld, like you do the [unclear] [unclear], the homework. I was very, you know, in a way—I used to learn fast, you know, because I liked it.

EI-754/DESALVO

- SIGRIST: When you look back on your life now—now, when you think back on your life, what did you do that made you the most proud? What are you the most proud of in your whole life?
- DESALVO: [unclear] my job in the machine shop.
- SIGRIST: Doing this kind of work that we're talking about.
- DESALVO: Oh, yeah. Yes. I made the first [unclear] [unclear] the marines, the Corps, the Army, the Navy and it was a small motor no bigger than a bowling bag, you know, and it was supposed to lift up the—the most weight was about nine hundred pounds. They tested that thing there, you know, when it was finished. You had the Army, [unclear] the Army, the Navy, the Marines and the Coast Guard and when they gave the demonstration, you know, they called the twelve pine—twelve pound hoist. Now, what meant is that a kid twelve—ten, twelve years old, he could turn that wheel with a finger. You know, that was all how this motor was geared up, you know, small gears, bronze gears and all like a clock, and that's how they named it the twelve pound pressure hoist. And—
- SIGRIST: We have time just for one more question.
- DESALVO: Yes.
- SIGRIST: And I wanted to ask you before we end how you felt about your parents' decision to come to the United States?
- DESALVO: Well, tell you the truth, I was too young to realize that, you know. Because, yeah, I was about eight years old. I had no fear of anything, you know.
- SIGRIST: Are you glad that they came or—
- DESALVO: Oh, sure.
- SIGRIST: I mean, for your life are you glad?
- DESALVO: Well, seeing what happened later, you know, sure. I was a first class machinist, that's what [unclear] tool and die maker and I was very proud of myself and so were my people.
- SIGRIST: Mr. De Salvo, I want to thank you very much. We've been talking for a full hour now and you've done a great job. You're a good story teller.

EI-754/DESALVO

DESALVO: I'm glad to be here.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Anthony De Salvo on Thursday, June 6th, 1996 with Peter Hom running the recording equipment here at the Ellis Island Recording Studio. Thank you very much, sir.

END OF INTERVIEW