

EI-76

MADLINE (MADELLENA) POLIGNANO ZAMBRANO

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SIGRIST: Good morning, this is Paul Sigrist for the
National Park Service. Today is Tuesday is Tuesday, August 27th,
1991. We are here at Ellis Island with Madeline Zambrano, who
came from Italy in 1920 when she was four. Good morning.
Mrs. Zambrano, can you please give me your full name, include
your maiden name, and your date of birth.

ZAMBRANO: I was called Madellena Polignano.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Polignano, please?

ZAMBRANO: Polignano is P-O-L-I-G-N-A-N-O, and we were called in America Polignano (pronouncing a hard "g"), but it's really Polignano. And I was born on November 9th, 1915.

SIGRIST: I see. Where were you born?

ZAMBRANO: I was born in the town of Putignano. Putignano, near Bari, province, province of Bari, Italy, on the Adriatic Sea.

SIGRIST: You'll need to spell the name of the town for me, please.

ZAMBRANO: Putignano is spelled P-U-T-I-G-N-A-N-O.

SIGRIST: And I'm sorry, because I interrupted you, where in Italy is that?

ZAMBRANO: It's on the Adriatic Sea. It's near Brindisi, where the Albanians are now landing. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Sure, sure. Talk a little bit about the town that you were born in. What was it like?

ZAMBRANO: Well, what I do remember about the town is that I was born in Putignano on a small, narrow street, cobble stone street, a winding street. And I don't remember the street too well but I do remember the apartment with a balcony full with flowers, and I remember the room.

SIGRIST: Describe the room for me.

ZAMBRANO: Well, the room was a square room and I remember a bed in the room. And I remember the toilets. I don't think they had the facilities that they have now, as far as that goes. And if I remember my brother telling me is that a cart would come along and take care of the, uh, business. And, but I do remember the country, which was about, I would say about a ten, fifteen minute walk, which is not far, it's not like America, into the country. And my summer home, I don't remember that too well, but I remember the home but I later found out that they're cone-shaped homes. They're over a thousand years old and it's very cool inside. And I had, they had two rooms, the bedroom and the kitchen and they had a little bit of a slot in the wall where I would sleep in, and they had a pump. But I remember running around near fig trees. I used to love figs. That's the only food I remember. I used to love the figs. And I used to run

around, playing around with my brother. My father owned the property and so his brothers and sisters were all in the surrounding area. They weren't too badly off, well-off. They were pretty well-off.

SIGRIST: Good, let's talk about them. What was your father's name?

ZAMBRANO: His name was Vincenzo, which is Vincent.

SIGRIST: And what did he do for a living?

ZAMBRANO: Well, I don't know what he did in Italy, but I know in America he was a tailor.

SIGRIST: Well, you said that he owned property. Was this family property?

ZAMBRANO: Family property. His sister owned one square acre, I think. Then he owned one and his brother owned, you know. They were, they were pretty well-off actually. I can see why they came to America, because when I went there to visit they were doing okay. The people there are still there.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

ZAMBRANO: My mother's name was Juliet, Guitta, Guitta.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

ZAMBRANO: I'm not sure, "J" I think, I don't think there's a "J"
in the Italian language.

SIGRIST: "G."

ZAMBRANO: I think it's G-U-I-T-T-A.

SIGRIST: Was she from this town?

ZAMBRANO: She was from the same town.

SIGRIST: And did she have family in this town?

ZAMBRANO: Yes, she had two sisters. Her mother died when she
was young and she sort of ran the house. She was the youngest.
And from what I know, she came to America, I don't know the year,

with her first husband and they settled in Greenwich, Connecticut and he was a blacksmith. I was trying to find out if the blacksmith shop was still there, but he became ill with spinal meningitis. They didn't know it at the time and the doctor thought he's better off in Italy where the climate was better for him. So they went back to Italy and he died in Italy. My father had seen, had been in America as a single man and lived on MacDougal Street. My brother told me this, I didn't know it. he lived on MacDougal Street but I think jobs were hard to find so he went back to Italy, got married and had a little boy. And then his wife died. I think it was some sort of a plague going around. She was kind of weak from the birth and she died. And I assume that they finally got together, my mother and my father and the boy needed a mother and they got together. And I think one of the reasons that they, there were too many busy-bodies in my father's family telling him how she should raise the boy. So they decided to come to America. They got married and decided to come to America. In the meantime, she realized she that was pregnant with me. She didn't know, she thought she just couldn't have any children. They always blamed the lady at the time. And then she had another baby, another girl. And at that point I think they decided to come to America. They had been here before and they decided to come to America, which they did.

SIGRIST: It's interesting that they had both been in America separately and then had sort of met, do you know how they met in this town?

ZAMBRANO: Yeah, yeah. Well, I think the town, everybody knows everyone in that town. It's really, I was there a couple of years ago in September and it's really, in the afternoon, in the evening, towards evening they all come out for their walks and they all know each other. It's really very interesting. You can walk the street and it is, there is some kind of form of theft there because I noticed my cousin was minding the car at one part and he put it in with his son-in-law's cars, and my brother-in-law said they have a Mercedes and whatever in this garage. He didn't want to leave it on the street.

SIGRIST: But it was a small, tightly-knit community.

ZAMBRANO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit about what your father was like as a person. Can you kind of describe him? What was his temperament?

ZAMBRANO: He, he was a very gentle man and he had a sense of humor, which he sometimes under his breath, "sotte voce" as they would say it, you know. And he was, he was kind of, I would say he was kind of gentle and he, he did have a temper. And when his temper came up, then he spoke in his dialect which is Barese, which we call Bari. So, but he went to school in Italy so he spoke Italian real well but when he lost his temper he went into his dialect.

SIGRIST: What did he look like?

ZAMBRANO: I should have brought a picture. I wondered, he was, he was, what's the word, he was sort of slim-faced. When I see the pictures I have he was gray, but I think he was blonde and blue-eyed. And, yeah, that's it, and I don't know what he did in Italy but in America he was a tailor.

SIGRIST: Let me ask the same questions about your mother. What was her temperament like?

ZAMBRANO: My mother was a more hearty person. She was olive-skinned, brown eyes...

SIGRIST: Physically hearty? Substantial?

ZAMBRANO: Well, I would say physically and be able to take life very, a lot of common sense in her way of growing up. And, in fact, she took care of her two sisters who were older when their mother died, her father and mother died. So...

SIGRIST: Both your parents endured a certain amount of tragedy in their life, too.

ZAMBRANO: Yeah, I would think so and I wish I knew more about it. But, in fact, the only thing I remember vaguely is my father's mother when we came to America, this woman. She lived to, close to one hundred, I think, in Italy, yeah.

SIGRIST: Wow. Let's talk a little bit about, you said, you said there were other family members in this town.

ZAMBRANO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Talk about some of them. Just tell me...

ZAMBRANO: Well, when we went back to Italy, I had, my father had

a sister who came to America, too, and she had three girls and two boys. So when I went to Italy I got in touch with this cousin, the brother...

SIGRIST: You're talking about recently.

ZAMBRANO: Well, we went in '65, 1965...

SIGRIST: When you were a little girl, talk about what other family members...

ZAMBRANO: Oh, I don't remember them.

SIGRIST: But you just remember, because you said your father's sister owned some of this property and...

ZAMBRANO: Oh, yes, yeah. I didn't know it at the time but I do, going back my cousin there showed me the different, they call them "trulis." They're summer homes. They're made in a cone shape. They're very interesting. I have some pictures I could show you just to...

SIGRIST: Yes, yes. Do you remember any kind of religious life?

ZAMBRANO: No, I, uh, no. Although, my father's uncle was a priest or a monsignor. I don't remember that. So they were, they had a little bit of education, I would say, background, you know.

SIGRIST: So you remember perhaps most of Italy playing in the countryside.

ZAMBRANO: Playing in the countryside and the apartment. And, of course, when we boarded the, I don't know if we took the train to go to Naples to come to America, I remember a little bit of Naples there, too.

SIGRIST: Well, let's begin that journey then. Tell me who decided to come to America and why.

ZAMBRANO: I think they both decided to come to America. I have a feeling they wanted to get away from the family. It's just too, and being they were here before, I think they wanted to come back.

SIGRIST: Now you were born, there is a step-son...

ZAMBRANO: Half-brother.

SIGRIST: Half-brother and, uh...

ZAMBRANO: And a younger sister, two years younger, two years. She was a baby when we came and we boarded the, we came to Naples...

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying good bye to anyone in...

ZAMBRANO: Yes, I remember vaguely my grandmother. There were other people but my grandmother I remember, and I heard that she gave my, they were partial to boys so I think she gave my brother a few pennies to buy something and that's all I remember in...

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you packed or what you took or anything like that?

ZAMBRANO: No, no. And, uh...

SIGRIST: Okay, talk about the train ride to Naples.

ZAMBRANO: Well, I don't remember if it was a train, but I remember Naples and my brother got lost in Naples because he was looking around for a place to spend his few pennies. So my father had to get the, what we call the "cabonieri," which are cops in Italy, to look for him. And they found him and I remember it was a little traumatic wondering what happened to him, you know. And then we boarded the ship.

SIGRIST: How long were you in Naples?

ZAMBRANO: I don't think we were there too long. I think, I don't think we slept overnight in Naples. I'm not...

SIGRIST: Was this the first time you had ever been in a big city?

ZAMBRANO: Yes. In Italy? My father took me to the opera. He was an opera buff and he took me to an opera in Italy and I remember the room was round and the stage was in the center. I just about remember that, you know. He would take me along, but I don't remember...

SIGRIST: Do you remember what it felt to be a little girl in a

city for the first time?

ZAMBRANO: In New York City?

SIGRIST: No, in Naples, because Naples is a big city.

ZAMBRANO: No, no. I was just one of the crowd. I was only four and a half, so I don't remember that.

SIGRIST: Do you think you stayed overnight in Naples?

ZAMBRANO: I don't remember whether we did or not, yeah.

SIGRIST: So anyway, your brother got lost and they found him and then...

ZAMBRANO: We boarded ship.

SIGRIST: I'm sure your parents were greatly relieved when they found him. (they laugh)

ZAMBRANO: And, uh, I had a great time on the ship. I was...

SIGRIST: What was the name of the boat?

ZAMBRANO: Oh, I forgot to put that in my resume, but it was called Regina D'Italia, meaning the Queen of Italy.

SIGRIST: And can you describe what your accommodations were like?

ZAMBRANO: Well, they weren't that great but it didn't bother me. We were steerage. Now I don't remember, I think my brother told me, he has since passed away this year, that it was only maybe twenty-five dollars, I don't remember if that was it that it cost to come over, you know. But it was steerage, and, uh...

SIGRIST: Did you have your own cabin or was it a great big room?

ZAMBRANO: No, no cabin. You were there, opened I remember. And you slept on these bunks and I, one thing I do remember the cats, the rats running across the panels, but it didn't bother me. I, you know, they had a tub I guess where they used to bathe the children. I don't know where the grown-ups bathed, to tell you the truth. And I would roam around the ship and the sailors would give me fish, cooked fish which I brought to my mother and

she was thankful because the fare wasn't that great, I suppose, you know.

SIGRIST: You said your mother was sick.

ZAMBRANO: She was seasick, yeah.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about that.

ZAMBRANO: Well, that I don't, I do know that she was seasick but I didn't have too much to do with her. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Who was watching you?

ZAMBRANO: Well, I was all over. I guess there was nobody to watch. My brother hurt his arm and he was, he had it bandaged because, I don't think he broke it but he hurt himself.

SIGRIST: How did he do that?

ZAMBRANO: I think he said it was kind of slippery, they had washed the deck. And the thing I remember, I don't remember stopping in Palermo because my brother told me we did because

they loaded the ship with lemons and oranges, but I do remember they stopped in Portugal because I, my father took me off the ship and we went on a rope ladder going down while they loaded the ship with bananas that came from Portugal. And we had our first bananas, bananas. And we walked while they were loading the ship in Portugal and then we went back on the ship. And then I remember just having a good time on board ship.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of other people on the boat?

ZAMBRANO: Yes, there were people on board, yeah. But I didn't pay attention to them and I did my own thing. Some how or the other like I say the sailors took a liking to me and I, anyway...

SIGRIST: Was it a rough trip?

ZAMBRANO: Well, I don't remember that it was rough. But my mother...

SIGRIST: But you didn't get sick.

ZAMBRANO: I don't think children do get sick. My mother was sick.

SIGRIST: Sometimes they do.

ZAMBRANO: My mother was sick.

SIGRIST: What about your father?

ZAMBRANO: I don't remember that he was sick, so, I don't remember the Statue of Liberty because, I don't know, my mother and father must have known about it but they weren't about to talk to us about it, I suppose.

SIGRIST: Do you know how long the trip took?

ZAMBRANO: I think it was about three weeks.

SIGRIST: So a long time.

ZAMBRANO: Yeah, three weeks it took. That's why I remember, it sort of stayed in your memory spending three weeks. And when something big happens, I think you tend to remember it. If you just go through life and not have anything big happening, you know, so anyway, we docked and someone found an apartment for us on...

SIGRIST: Wait. You docked and you went to Ellis Island.

ZAMBRANO: Oh, yes! I forgot that part (they laugh), because it is a big thing, I mean, it was a big room. I remember the room, the Great Hall upstairs and the noise and the people talking in the different booths that they would go into. And I know my sister started to cry. She didn't want her eyes checked, so we had to...

SIGRIST: Now, your sister was very young.

ZAMBRANO: She was about two and a half. She didn't want to be bothered with the checking of the, they had to check out the eyes, you know. They would roll the eyes up on some kind of a stick or something. And we had to wait until she quieted down and then we couldn't dock because it was the Fourth of July, so we had to stay an extra night on board.

SIGRIST: You stayed on the boat.

ZAMBRANO: On the boat.

SIGRIST: How long were you at Ellis, do you think?

ZAMBRANO: I think it was an overnight stay.

SIGRIST: Oh, you stayed overnight here.

ZAMBRANO: Overnight on the boat, yeah.

SIGRIST: On the boat, but here on Ellis Island?

ZAMBRANO: Well, I guess we went back on the boat to sleep, so we checked in and then I think we went back on the boat. It would stand to reason that way. There were no accommodations on Ellis Island. Actually, my brother told me that was, it was the Fourth of July and, he was two years older, and we had to wait 'til, you know, the day was over. So I imagine we went back on ship to sleep.

SIGRIST: I see. Who came to meet you, or did anyone come to meet you?

ZAMBRANO: Well, I think some friends came, so of my mother's friends, my mother's and father's friends, and they had rented an

apartment in the Bronx, in Manhattan near where they all were, most of them. And we had a fifth floor walk-up, three rooms and we did have a bathroom in the apartment.

SIGRIST: This is the first place you went to after leaving Ellis Island that was all prepared for you.

ZAMBRANO: Yes, this is the first place.

SIGRIST: Well, good. Let's talk a little bit about being a little girl in New York City.

ZAMBRANO: Well, we would, uh, I don't know what age, it couldn't have been too long, my mother would let us go on the roof and we used to have our, when it was too hot it was either the fire escape or go up on the roof, and lay on the tar. They used to call it "Tar Beach," you know, and take a, and then I would go downstairs there, and I used to go downstairs and roller skate. We used to hitch on to, they were horses at the time, to the wagons and roller skate. I don't know how old I was. I may have been six or seven, you know, at that time.

SIGRIST: Where was the apartment, I'm sorry.

ZAMBRANO: It was on, between Pleasant and First on 118th Street.

SIGRIST: I see, way up town. Was this an Italian neighborhood?

ZAMBRANO: It was a mixed neighborhood at that time. Further, a few blocks down it would be mostly Italian, but this was a, a few people were Jewish, Irish and Italians, yeah. It was a mixed neighborhood.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about your parents. Of course, they've been to America already. Talk about them kind of adapting to life here. Did they speak any English?

ZAMBRANO: Not really, no. In fact, I used to, as I grew up, when I went to school they wouldn't take me in the public school because I was too young, so my mother put me in a parochial school, which was kind of hard on me, too, because I didn't know too much English. I had to, in fact, I used to, I tell people I was called a "greenhorn," which was very upsetting. I thought, well, it was just me. Then I realized that, as I grew older I realized that even the Irish were called "greenhorn" if they came from the other side. But I went to school and I was frightened

because I didn't know what to believe because when the nun told a child who was misbehaving that she would throw him out the window, I sort of, I believed her. But then my mother took me out of the school and put me into the public school and at that time the teachers would get a little rough with you and every time somebody took a beating, I never did I don't think, when the teacher would say to the child, "Take your glasses off," I knew they were in for trouble. And they used to take a beating from the teachers. It was terrible.

SIGRIST: How did you learn English?

ZAMBRANO: Well, just, just growing up with the other children. And I was telling my son the other, today that I was about maybe over ten years of age and I had moved again, and I remember talking to my friend and I said to her, "Your screen is kind of crooked." She says, "My what?" I says, "Your screen." So it turned out that the screen is the part in the hair that I didn't know, I used the Italian word. You know, it takes awhile to get acclimated to the English language. She was a Jewish girl, she says, "Your what!?" (she laughs)

SIGRIST: You said your father got work as a tailor.

ZAMBRANO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Talk to me a little bit about that.

ZAMBRANO: He worked in a factory, he worked in a factory and he would bring home homework and he would, he worked hard. And he was kind of frail and you live in, I think he used to sit on the kitchen table and put his feet on a chair to be closer to the light overhead and he would sew on collars, men's collars. And my mother would help, help him when he'd bring the homework home. And then she would have her own work during the day. She would work on, I think they were dresses. She would sew beads on the dresses and they used to have this, they call it "caralla," it's like a board that they put up in the kitchen, and they would, she would work on that. And then she would have homework for us, my brother and I. We would sew little, they're little doilies and flowers that you would sew. It's like piecework they used to do. Before we'd go out to play we had to do that type of work. So that's about it. And then she would let us go out to play. My brother was pretty good, in fact, in sewing. He was pretty good at sewing. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: How much older is he than you?

ZAMBRANO: Two years older than I was.

SIGRIST: I see. So not really that much older than you. Was this a kind of slim living? Was it hard to make ends meet?

ZAMBRANO: Well, I think they were all right. After all, they were working. I think they were doing okay. I don't remember ever being denied too much. We didn't have too much but we weren't. You know, when you're young you don't know if you're poor or not, but I don't think we were really poor. And then we decided to move. Of course, our biggest thing in Little Italy or in that area was sometimes we would go to the funeral parlors. We see flowers on the wall. They used to put flowers on the doorway and you go in to see what was, who was what and who died and who, it was sort of a little bit of a, and then when my mother's brother-in-law from her first marriage died, I don't know if this is nice, but they were in the bootlegging business and he made a lot of money. And when he died, they bought, before he died they bought a country home because he had syphilis and so they had him up in the upstairs, a very large home in Yonkers. They used to have a summer place, uh, New York City he had just an upstairs. And we'd go to see them and then he died.

And they have I don't know how many horse and carriages with the funeral procession going to the cemetery. That I remember so well. And...

SIGRIST: How old were you at that time?

ZAMBRANO: Well, I must have been below ten, before ten years old, yeah, before I was ten.

SIGRIST: So your mother's, this brother-in-law by her first marriage, they were in America also. I see.

ZAMBRANO: Yes, yes, yeah. Her first husband, yeah, had come to America because his sister, was it a sister, yeah, it was a sister.

SIGRIST: And interesting had been enterprising enough to make money bootlegging.

ZAMBRANO: Well, they had, well, bootlegging, yes. They lived on 114th Street and they made a lot of money that way. I guess it was bootlegging, yeah. And they got very wealthy doing that sort of thing. I'm trying to remember, yeah, and then they moved. In fact, they're dead now but the son became a doctor,

yeah, and his nieces and nephew, they're well-off. It all started with bootlegging. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Did you ever take any ribbing for being a blonde, fair-skinned little Italian girl?

ZAMBRANO: Well, I thought it was a terrible thing because, you know, they used to call "cat's eyes," you know. (she laughs) But then you sort of stand out. My father's side of the family were fair. My mother was olive-skinned, like I say. And it's funny, my brother, that was not his mother yet he was brown-eyed and dark haired and we were blue eyes, my three sisters were blue eyes.

SIGRIST: Now there was another sister born here?

ZAMBRANO: Another sister born in America, yeah.

SIGRIST: When was she born?

ZAMBRANO: She was born, well, six years after I was born so that made it, what was it '15, 19, what is it, six year before...

SIGRIST: '22.

ZAMBRANO: '22, was it? Yeah, when we were in America, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your mother being pregnant and...

ZAMBRANO: No, but I do remember we were shipped to somebody's house for an overnight stay, or more than overnight stay because she had to go to the hospital. But I don't remember her being pregnant, no. She was a little bit chubby anyway, so it didn't, she didn't show too much.

SIGRIST: We just have a couple minutes left. Let me, let me ask you two questions. One is, do you think your parents were happy that they made that final decision to come to America and stay?

ZAMBRANO: They might have been because we were growing up and we were used to it. I don't know if they ever expected to go back but I know they were very aggravated with this particular brother of my father who wasn't paying the rent on the property we had and my mother was telling my father, "Why don't you sell it?" And I guess he hesitated because it was his brother and I remember the different discussions at night, you know, you hear that. But finally did get, my mother finally did get rid of it

and sold it to the family...

SIGRIST: Did they really try to become American or did they hold on to their Italian culture as much as they could?

ZAMBRANO: I think they were mostly Italians. My mother tried because I said, "I'm only speaking English to you," and she used to call me "Lena" because that was short for Madeline, Madellena. And I said, "I'm not going to answer until you call me Madeline," which I'm sorry now. So, I used to push her that way. She was, she was pretty good, she was. My father, well, he died, I think I was about twenty-six when he died, so...

SIGRIST: What did he die of?

ZAMBRANO: Well, we don't really know but I think it may have either tuberculosis or cancer. I don't know. It was a respiratory illness and may have been from his work, the dust and thing like that, you know. My mother didn't want an autopsy performed so we really didn't know.

SIGRIST: I see. And you told me before the interview began that really your parents didn't talk a whole lot about, about

their past immigration experience.

ZAMBRANO: No, no, no. It was only something that I remember and my brother told me. Occasionally I would tell my mother something and she would say, "Well, I never told you that." She realized that I remembered, you know, so...

SIGRIST: Interesting, very interesting.

ZAMBRANO: Yeah, she would say, "I never told you that," so I says, "I do remember." So it was interesting. Going back, I went back three times since, yeah.

SIGRIST: Are you glad you came to America? Are you glad that they...

ZAMBRANO: Well yes, I'm glad but it's a funny thing. I always feel as if my roots are really in Italy. I don't know. Of course, if I tell anybody that they say, "You're an American."

SIGRIST: But it is where you came from.

ZAMBRANO: Yeah. And now it seems I think more about it than I

did when I was growing up. I never gave it a thought but now it's important that I remember these things, you know.

SIGRIST: That's interesting.

ZAMBRANO: And I've been there and it's very, I find Italy very interesting, maybe because I know the language and I've been through it. Have you been there?

SIGRIST: I have been there, actually. It's a very beautiful country.

ZAMBRANO: Nobody's been on the Adriatic and I've been up north, which, yeah, but I've been there and I, I enjoyed it, yeah.

SIGRIST: It's a beautiful country.

ZAMBRANO: It's different. It is, every, what you say, the county of the town has a different dialect, so, and I still have my relatives there. A lot of them have passed away.

SIGRIST: Well, I want to thank you for coming all the way out to Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty (they laugh) this morning for contributing to our Oral History Collection. Thank

you very much.

ZAMBRANO: Well, I enjoyed talking about it, too.

SIGRIST: Good. This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the
National Park Service.