

EI-773

MARIA RIVA TESIO

BIRTH DATE: MARCH 5, 1896

INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 29, 1996

RUNNING TIME: 1:01:25

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

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HACKENSACK, NEW JERSEY

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TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

ITALY, 1914

AGE 17

PASSAGE ON "THE VERONA"

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Funding for this transcript, one of many interviews conducted with Italian and Sicilian women, was generously provided by interviewee Elda Del Bino Willitts, EI-8. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 8/14/1997.

LEVINE: Today is July 29, 1996. I'm here in Hackensack, New Jersey at Wellington Center, with Maria Tesio.

Mrs. Tesio came from northern Italy when she was seventeen years of age, in 1914. Today, at the time of this interview, she's one hundred years old.

TESIO: Oh, yeah. And one.

LEVINE: And one?

TESIO: And, one hundred and one, because in March, this month, in March, I was going to be one hundred and one.

LEVINE: Oh, so actually you were born in 1895? Does that ring a bell?

TESIO: I don't think so. I don't know.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, we'll check on that afterwards in the records. Okay. Now, we're going to start out talking about your, you said your birth date was March 5th.

TESIO: Right.

LEVINE: And we thought it was 1896, but we're going to check just to make sure on that one. And, uh, where in Italy were you born?

TESIO: North Italy, Piamonte[ph].

LEVINE: And, Piamonte[ph]. Was there a town where you lived?

TESIO: I was born in Torino[ph], but the town that my mother was Piamonte[ph], is in Piamonte[ph]. Anyway, but I was born in Torino[ph] because there was no hospital there, and I was going to have a baby, and so they put me there because my mother was sick. She had to go to an operation, and there I came.

LEVINE: What did your mother ever tell you about the day you were born, about your being born?

TESIO: Well, I never was with my mother. I was with my mother's sister, because my mother, she came to America before me. She left me in Italy to look for a house, to look for a place, and she left me there until she know where to, where we lived together. So, anyway, but I don't know too much about it there, but I was born in Piamonte[ph], anyway.

LEVINE: Okay. What was your mother's name?

TESIO: Anna, Anne. Anna Riva.

LEVINE: Anna Riva. And, uh, and you mentioned something earlier about your father. Your father, you really didn't grow up with either.

TESIO: No. He didn't want me, and I don't have no-no, NN, no name. See? It means, (?), no name from the father. I'm just my mother's child.

LEVINE: I see.

TESIO: Yeah, that.

LEVINE: And the aunt who raised you when your mother . . .

TESIO: My aunt I stay at, my aunt took care of me until,

because my mother, when she came to America, and she came to look for work, and then she came, she came to America and left me. I was nine years old. Then she came back to Italy. I was all going to be eighteen. And then she came to stay in Italy. And her sister, that was my aunt, she says, "What are you going to do here?" And my mother, she was a dressmaker, but they used to do everything by hand, you know? So she says, "What are you going to do over here?" And she says, "I'm going to be a dressmaker." In Italia, a (Italian). "I'm going to be a (Italian)." "You know, it doesn't pay for you to stay over here because," she said, "you've got to work all year, and then they tell you they pay you when they cry their crop from the country. They don't pay you when you're working, to where they said they pay you when they can the crop, like the pear and the fig, whatever they brought, and then they pay you." So, like that. So she didn't have too much money, and says, "It's better that I go to America and I send for my daughter." Because that my aunt say, "TAke your daughter, go to America, and call for her." So being there, I think, my mother, she got to come to America to request, because I have no father, see? And she says, "You cannot go to

America because you've got to come to, you can, your daughter can't come to America with you now, because," they said, "she's born in Italy, you don't have you husband, and we've got to have security from the state that she's not eighteen, and that says." So she came here and send the paper when I was born, so, like that. And after the paper was (?), I was there, I have to learn English.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. But before you talk about when you were here, tell me, what was your life like, like a, when you were a little girl growing up with your aunt, and what did you do? Did you go to school?

TESIO: Oh, no. I went to school, but when I was a grown up girl. No, not to, school then, because there's no school when you were only a young girl.

LEVINE: I see.

TESIO: So, but I went to school when I came to America.

LEVINE: What do you remember that you used to do when you were a little girl in Italy?

TESIO: When I was a little girl, I babysitting. They bring the baby, you look at the baby, and you rock one, and

you rock the other. I didn't do anything until I find the job, until I was an American citizen.

LEVINE: I see. When you were babysitting, where were the mothers of the babies?

TESIO: The mother of the baby, they were working.

LEVINE: Where?

TESIO: Uh, whatever they was, the house that is around here. So, anyway, I worked there, they brought the girl, and I was babysitting for the children. I had take of five children. The mother was working and bring the children. And being that I liked children and I was good with the children, they always had me there. So they stayed with me pretty good, and then they were starting to, I was smarter than them, you know? They always want to do something. "I want to look down, I want my mother." They want to look down to see, and I said, "You can't do that. You can't go down." So I promised something. I tell them, I says, "I promise something." For the idea to call, I go down. "I want to go to the bathroom." I says, "Okay. Everybody go to bathroom. And I got something in my pocketbook that your mother never give it to you." And so then

oh, they were happy. So I had the little crack, the little something, the candy, so they were good. They says, "Oh! I hope that," they tell to the mother, they says, "I hope you're going to go, you're going to go to the meeting, because my mother, my Maria, she tell me stories that they make me laugh." And because sometimes it wasn't true, and they knew it. I was telling the story that I was born and the father didn't want me, and I was a poor girl, and I live in the mountain, whatever I say. They says, "I think you're making it up." (they laugh) The children, they were smarter, they were. But then they were good. So when I was there in there, I (?) that I take care of the children, and that they all like me, and I was, and I was paid for it, you know, to take care of the children when they, when they have the meeting, so somebody's got to take care of the children, because they always running down, so, whatever they was, their religion, they got a big singing, they put the candle, whatever they do. So I was taking care of the children, and they want to look down, I said, "No. I got something good in my pocketbook. Then when we come back from the toilet, I'm going to give it." But I have, I have the knickknack, or the little

something. Oh, that they were happy. And I took care of children. I was much more than babysitter. I earned my living like that until I find a job, that it was different, you know. But, anyway, I had to start something in the country.

LEVINE: Sure. Well, what do you remember, Mrs. Tesio, about church?

TESIO: Oh, the church. I was always a Catholic. I love church, yeah. When I was a young girl I was singing in the choir. Yeah. I was singing (she sings) "Ave Maria." I was singing in the choir, yeah.

LEVINE: Can you remember any more of the songs you sang in the choir? Maybe you could sing a little more for us.

TESIO: Yeah. (she sings Ave Maria) That's it.

LEVINE: Beautiful. Tell me about the church that you went to. What did it look like?

TESIO: The church over here?

LEVINE: No, in Italy.

TESIO: Oh, in Italy I lived to the church. I don't know, in Italy, I was in two places. In Italy the church was,

uh, over here, the La Madonna Church, over here.

LEVINE: Yeah, but in Italy, when you were little.

TESIO: In Italy, I don't know if it was the Asunta[ph]. I don't remember well. I just . . .

LEVINE: Do you remember what it looked like?

TESIO: It was a nice church, but in Italy was different than here.

LEVINE: How was it different?

TESIO: Yeah. No, a little different, but a church is a church. I used to sing the church, I used to sing Ave Maria. I used to sing Sava[ph] Regina, you know. A church is a church, but it was a big difference. It was a small town over there.

LEVINE: Yes.

TESIO: And over here is a big town, you know?

LEVINE: Did you go to confession when you were a little girl?

TESIO: Oh, yeah. We have to go to confession. One special, once a year, in Easter time, you've got to receive communion and say that you were a good girl, and you

did what you did wrong, and what you, you've got to obey, you know, they tell you all what to do. And I, oh, sure, I belong to church. Oh, a lot. I love church. When we sing (she sings Ave Maria). And then there is (she recites in Italian). Oh, yeah. I was very Catholic, because then when I was a young girl, I took sick. My mother was not there. I took very sick. Something in here, I need a little operation. There was something growing. Anyway . . .

LEVINE: Growing in your ear?

TESIO: Uh, no. Right out.

LEVINE: Outside your ear.

TESIO: And they had to draw that with, not cut it, because you're going to have the scar. I have good doctor, though, in the place, they said, "We don't cut it, because you're going to have the scar." But they drew that, that something that I have there. So, anyway, I was cured, and I was a happy girl.

LEVINE: You were.

TESIO: I always liked to sing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember feast days or holidays? Do you remember any holidays or feast days?

TESIO: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. We had La Madonna, we had La Madonna Sunta[ph], and we have the other holiday that we had, Corpus Domine[ph], that, the Corpus Domine[ph], we had the procession in the church, and they carried the cross. Oh, yes. I did belong to the church very much. I was very churchgoing. I love it. And I love to sing anyway.

LEVINE: Was your aunt also a religious person?

TESIO: My aunt, she was religious, but she couldn't do that, because she have children to take care. Because when the mother come to America, they didn't bring the children until they find a place in America to take the children back. So sometimes I was babysitting, but then when I grow up my babysitting was through, and I went to work.

LEVINE: Well, now, so your aunt had other children that were living with you?

TESIO: I have only one child, Olga. I am, my child, my third, then I got married. I got married, I think I

got married on Ellis Island, something.

LEVINE: Do you think so?

TESIO: I think, no, at the Madonna church, at Madonna church over here. And then when I got married I married, this man was Piemontese[ph], and he came in this country more or less the time that I came. So we were friends, but then he was a man, he lived with the family, because was a young man, he needs somebody to dry the clothes, to wash. So then when I met my husband there, yeah. But, anyway, my life was good but, eh, it was a good life.

LEVINE: Tell me, when you were a little girl in Italy, and you were with your aunt, what was your aunt's name?

TESIO: My aunt, in Italy?

LEVINE: Your mother's sister.

TESIO: My mother's sister. Oh . . .

LEVINE: Who took care of you when your mother was in America.

TESIO: My mother's sister, (?) the name. One was not married. I don't remember the name of my mother's sister, my aunt.

LEVINE: Did you have cousins that were living with you?

TESIO: Oh, no. I have cousin when I was with my aunt, she had two daughters. But then my mother came and picked me up, and I didn't see them any more, because I came over here. And I know one girl, I know when she got married, I know because I was here already. The first girl that born there.

LEVINE: Do you remember those cousins? Do you remember things you used to do together?

TESIO: My cousin, no. My cousin I have, I have two cousins, but I don't know, I don't remember that much the name. One is, and now one, one that is here, that's my daughter. I don't remember that. I was a young girl.

LEVINE: Sure, you were. Do you remember anything else about, about Italy, about Torino[ph]. You said you lived in two different . . .

TESIO: Oh, Torino[ph], I was born in Torino[ph].

LEVINE: But you lived in two different places.

TESIO: I, yeah.

LEVINE: When you were in Italy.

TESIO: When I was in Italy my mother, when I was born my mother was sick after, and she could take care of me, and that time used to be a nurse by the breast. And my mother was sick, she cannot do that, and then she went back to Italy, and me I went to the place where they take care of children that got no mother and father, and that's it. I went there, and I was there, I was happy, very happy.

LEVINE: How long did you stay there?

TESIO: Oh, I stayed there until my mother came back from Italy, came back from California, and came to Italy to stay, you want to stay there. And when she came home she says, "I want to stay here with my daughter." And me, I didn't know her too much, but I love my hand. So, but anyway when she came back and she want to take me here in America, and so then when we come to America, what she's gonna do? She says, "Gonna be with me, because I got a home, I got a room with the bathroom, we got bed that it could be." So she want to take me here, from there, take me here. And I came here, I was seventeen years old, seventeen and more,

something like that. By eighteen I was here already.
I was in California already.

LEVINE: I see. Now, do you remember leaving the town that you lived in?

TESIO: Oh, yeah. The town name is The Valley of St. Nicholas. (Italian) Provinica de Navara[ph]. And then whatever it is. Then it changed, it was not provincia after that. It was Italia, provincia de Navara[ph]. (Italian) because another town came, provincia de Navara[ph] or provincia de Vercelli[ph].
That was the town that I was born in Italy, anyway.

LEVINE: Do you remember when you, when you were leaving to come to America?

TESIO: Oh, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: What do you remember about leaving?

TESIO: I left my cousin. I have two cousins, because then is the good, the first cousin, they were first. So, and then we went sometime with my hand, she had all the children to take care, and she used to scold me, (she laughs) you know, that I didn't use my brain. How can you use your brain at seventeen and (?). And I

used to run, whatever it is. So, but then I have this cousin, and he saw me one day, I was with my hand, and I don't know what I did something wrong, and she was nervous. She scold me there. And then my cousin is, "When I'm gonna be, get money that I could do it, I take you back where I'm going, I was marry you, but we are first cousins, we can't do that." So, but, anyway, so she came, and left there, and then I come back with somebody else that my mother for me call, she call for me, and these people, they were coming there in Italy. They says, "When you come," she know them. She says, "When you come back, would you take Maria? She's a good girl." (she laughs) Yeah, she's obeying. So then they took me. Says, okay. We take care until we reach the island, and then there's got to be somebody to wait for her, because I was not eighteen-year-old, she's only seventeen, and there's not to be, she got to be eighteen, she'll be on her own whole, you know, her own self. And that's what I did, I wait for them till my mother came, and I went in the Ellis Island. I was there for three days.

LEVINE: In three days . . .

TESIO: Oh.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, before we talk about Ellis Island.

TESIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: When you were leaving, do you remember saying goodbye to your aunt?

TESIO: Oh, not to my aunt. My mother, when I live in Italy, I say to goodbye, but then I have to go to this place in Torino[ph], that part from Piamonte[ph], then in Torino[ph], then I say goodbye to everybody, all the girls, they were crying, that they came from Italy the same part of the country, not the town, but the same, come from Piamonte, and one was crying because she left a sweetheart, the other one's crying they (?) something, whatever. But, anyway, so we make it together. We used to walk together on Sunday, take a walk, and cry for one and cry for the other. But then I was happy. I said, "Now, I know that," I says, I put in my head, I says, "I know back in Italy I could never go, because my mother is here," and the father, I didn't have the name of the father, because he didn't want me anyway, he was no good. So then I says, "I better learn, and I know I'm gonna be here." So I went to the evening school to learn everything

what I should know. Then after I took the American citizen paper, because my aunt said, "Until you're five years over here, and then you require for your paper, and then you have it." So I wait for the five year, and I took my paper, my citizen paper. And then I learn singing. I used to like to sing. Ah, go to church, sing Ave Maria, and sing everything (?). But I was happy to be here.

LEVINE: Well, now, the first time you went to school, you were in America?

TESIO: Yeah. Oh, no, in Italy I went to school, to the third class.

LEVINE: Oh, and what was . . .

TESIO: Because when you're young you've got to go to school. Before they put you in kindergarten, I could go, not in kindergarten, because I was already, uh, the year past for the kindergarten. So I went in one first class, and then I was good, reading the paper, I am reading, and I used to like the paper, I used to like to study. That make me cry, and I always read the one that makes me cry. So then I learned, I learned (?), and then one day we have to have a meeting, and we

have to sing God Bless America, and I know it, and I stand up, was my time, and it was my turn, so I got up, and I said, (she sings) God Bless America, land that I love. From the mountain, to the prairie, to the water, white with foam, God Bless America, my home sweet home. When I (?) I sing it a couple of time, and they gave me a paper, I was a citizen girl.

LEVINE: How did you feel about becoming a citizen?

TESIO: Oh, my God, I was in the glory. (they laugh)

LEVINE: How did you feel when you were coming to this country?

Did you want to come? Were you excited? Were you sorry to leave?

TESIO: No, no. When I come to the country I left my people, my, a young girl there, and I was not. But then little by little, one by one, they had people here, and they come. We meet again, a little bit, yeah? And I was happy. But then I went to school to learn the American flag, yeah, to sing America, God Bless America. I went to English school. Then when I passed, they gave me the test. I pass, and that's it.

LEVINE: What do you remember about evening school?

TESIO: Oh, school? Over here?

LEVINE: Evening school over here.

TESIO: Oh, I love, I love.

LEVINE: What was it like? What was the teacher like? What did you . . .

TESIO: There was a teacher, and then was standing up, and so we had to tell what she tell, you remember she wrote on the blackboard, you know, the board there. I says, "Oh, sure, I know that. Oh, sure, I know." And we used to stand up, and says, "Now you sing God Bless America." And I learned that, and I put it down, because I like to sing. I like to sing.

LEVINE: Yes.

TESIO: So then I was there, and I passed. There I was, and then I took the American citizen paper, after five years that you're here, and I took the test, and then I passed, and here I am. And I like it. And I (?) back, and I says, "Well, when I took the test," I says, "I no back to Italy. My mother is here, my father there, I don't want the father." And I says, "I know that I never go back, and I want to be here in

America." And I took, and I signed for to take the citizen paper, and when I received the citizen paper, I was American citizen. And I'm glad that. And I love to sing. And I love to babysitting. And then to earn a little money, my mother, she didn't have the job for a while, to earn money, I babysit. When they have the meeting for the Catholic, or, you know, the other, there was another religion, and they, when they have the meeting, there's a big meeting for them, it's the, I don't remember the name of that. And so, and they put the camera, they put the light, and they sing, and then I take care of the babies. And they always want to go and see what the, I says, "Want to go to the toilet?" I says, "Okay. We all go to the toilet, and then when we come back, I got something good in my pocketbook." I have those knickknack, I have those little candy. And they come back willingly. I was glad for that. It was only for a couple of hours, but I learn, I, for the beginning I have much more to (?) babysitting. I was a good babysitter.

LEVINE: I bet you were.

TESIO: Because I love children, and I know that I took good

care of them. If a couple of hours a day, but that's the way. And then I went to work, I find a job that I went to work, and I went to work for a place (she laughs) to a place way downtown, that I don't know anything by downtown in New York. So I work in one place, there was no more work, so how, because I was the last one to come in, and I went out, and then I start to go east, I used to go west, I made the wrong.

So my mother was there, and she was working in another part. So then when she came home, and they asked the neighbor, "Did you see Maria?" They says, "Yes. She came home, and she says she's going to go back to get the money, to get the pay where she was working, because she be out of work." And she says, "Oh." So she wait for a while. I was not, I was not coming home. She went to the police and report that I was lost. And thank God for that, because me, I went to the place that you never go by yourself, a girl, a young girl, and then went and found it, so she brought me home. And I told my mother, "I wish I was back to my town, I was back to Italy where the people, they all looked alike." (she laughs) And I cry, and I cry. And they says, "Okay." She gave me something to drink, and they put me down, and the day after my

swelling leg, all the excitement. But then I said, "No, Maria, you've got to be here and love it and be good, and sit." So I learned my God Bless America, and I'm glad that I'm here. I'm very happy. I'm happy.

LEVINE: Good.

TESIO: And my mother went back to Italy. She died there. I was sad for that, very sad, yeah.

LEVINE: How old were you when your mother died?

TESIO: She, I was not even, she went back, she left me when I was, I don't know, she went back to Italy, and then she was there, she had to go to an operation, so it's a long time, too.

LEVINE: Were you a young woman? Were you in your twenties?

TESIO: Oh, she was, not all, no, not all. And then after that when somebody came here, they took me back to my place, and I went to see, because when I went to the cemetery . . . (break in tape)

LEVINE: Just a second. Okay. We're going to resume here. We just negotiated Mrs. Tesio's lunchtime. Okay.

Mrs. Tesio, you mentioned that you, you thought the name of the ship you came on was the Verona.

TESIO: Yeah, I think it was Verona.

LEVINE: Verona. What do you remember about the Verona, or the passage coming here on the ship?

TESIO: Oh, the passage come, I was in the third class, you know, the poor, they pay less.

LEVINE: What do you remember about third class? What was it like?

TESIO: The third class, it was good. We eat all together, six in the table. I am, you know, there's a law, they said, they came to pass me, they says, "Maria, you got the table." And me, I was crying, because I came from the other side and I didn't know anything. And they said, "You want to sit at this table, there's somebody, maybe you talk." So I says, "Anyplace, anyplace." So I went to sit at the table, and there were people, they come here in this country, back from Italy, or whatever, their mother or somebody called for them. So I was there, and one day (she laughs) one day was my day, it was my day to clean the table.

So they bring a big something, and you got everything. It's good. The food was good, and I was young, I was hungry. So, anyway, so one day it was my time to clean the table, and it was a terrible journey, you know, the voyage was, everybody was sick, one was (?) here, and over there. So, anyway, was my time to throw all the food down in the ocean, and the fishes, they are there waiting for it. I throw that, and the handle, and the handle stay on my hand, and the pot . . .

LEVINE: The pot went in the ocean.

TESIO: The pot in the ocean. So I was so mortified, you know, I have that pot there, and the man, he laughed. The man that was serving the table, he says, "Don't worry. Don't worry, Maria. We got another pan." (they laugh) So then, anyway, we have a very, very hard ocean trip.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: You mentioned you were crying when you first went to sit at the table for dinner.

TESIO: Well, I was crying. I left the people there, I know the place there, and over here I was crying because, well, I been in an old place, and then I said, "Well, I've got to put in my mind that I never go back there, and I stay here." My mother was here, I says, "I know I never go back." And I says, and I was crying. I left a friend there, I had a couple of cousins, they saw me crying all the time, you know, because my aunt, she had a lot of children to take care, and me, I was the big one, you know, in Italy when you're ten years old, you've got to be a woman.

LEVINE: What do you have to do when you're ten years old if you're in Italy and you have to be a woman?

TESIO: You've got to take care of the children, yeah, you know, make them quiet until they have the meeting, and then there's one that she was a poor girl, she was not normal, you know, she was (?) there, and take care (?), you know, they don't bother her, they leave her alone, and if you're good, I give you something that you never had it. I always had the knickknack or the little candy, and they were happy for a couple of hours, and the people came to take their own children, and they tell us that, "I want Maria again, because

she's the babysitter that I ever like."

LEVINE: Ah. What else do you remember, Mrs. Tesio, about the trip, about the trip on the Verona?

TESIO: Well, they planned the trip, it was a hard trip. It was a hard, very hard. We came from there, then we got to chance. Whatever they play, then we (?). And it was rough. And the wave covered the boat. So for three days we didn't get up from the, the place that we were sitting, because you got a place to sitting with the blanket that you cover yourself. You live, you lay down dressed up. I took off my best blouse. The skirt was a heavy skirt, it was a heavy skirt with, woolen, you know. I lay down and I stayed there, and then when they could pass over the boat, you know, that the wave was a little over, they pass and give you a piece of bread or a nice muffin, whatever it was. It was a bread that I like it. So I like everything. Then I was happy. Then (?).

LEVINE: Did you see the Statue of Liberty when you first came?

TESIO: Oh, yes. And then they changed, so we passed by the Statue of Liberty, and after that, so then I was home, but then, the Statue of Liberty, I went again.

Another time when I was there with my son-in-law, we went there, yeah. And I remember what is the writing, now I don't remember that. But oh, my God, for the poor people, they come to this country looking for this. I know the way that it was written.

LEVINE: And does that mean a lot to you?

TESIO: Huh?

LEVINE: Do you, does that mean a lot to you?

TESIO: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah.

LEVINE: That writing on the Statue of Liberty?

TESIO: Oh, yeah, I like that, I like it. And I know I was coming here, I had my mother here. And then my poor mother, she was there for a while, but then she was sick, and she didn't speak English too well. And, so she want to go back to Italy because there's a piece of land, you know, for a little something, you know, belonged to them, and they like to have it. And then I was married, I married a man that I met on the boat.

LEVINE: Oh, you met him on the boat.

TESIO: Huh?

LEVINE: You . . .

TESIO: I met him on the boat, and he came in the same boat, but he came for the same reason, he was called, because he was something, there was something on the board or something. Anyway, so he was, I met my man there.

LEVINE: Tell me how you met him.

TESIO: On the boat, on the boat.

LEVINE: What, do you . . .

TESIO: Coming down. He was there, and then after I was there, and I says, "I'm going to America." And he says, "I'm going to America, too." And I, what I gonna do. I says, "Well, I go to, with my mother there." And he says, "You got somebody else?" I said, "No, I got nobody but my mother." And the man, he came because he had somebody, was called, because he went to five school. Me, I only went one, two and three, but I passed them all. Yeah. I was a good student, too. So, all in all, then I know that I was gonna be here, and forever be here. So then when I went . . .

LEVINE: Just going back to the man you met on the boat, who you married, did you like him right away?

TESIO: Oh, I love him because he understood me. He was a, no, I didn't know, I just met him, and so many times that I was there. And then we met again, because we were in the same place when they take people from Europe that they have nobody here, and then he pay his rent, he pay his, whatever it is. And the (?), and I met him, and I met him there.

LEVINE: In New York?

TESIO: In New York.

LEVINE: Where you were living. Where were you living in New York?

TESIO: I live in New York, not in New York, but I live over here, Palisades Park.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. And he lived in Palisades Park?

TESIO: I live in Palisades Park.

LEVINE: No, but when you first came from Italy, where did you live?

TESIO: Oh, when I came from Italy I lived with my mother, but I don't remember the place. I don't know.

LEVINE: Do you remember if it was New York City?

TESIO: New York City, yeah. But, in New York City, when I came to America, then I was there, I says, "I know I never go back. I never go back from where I come. I better learn America." So I went to evening school with the happy people, they come from Italy. I went to school, and I learned God Bless America. So I learned that. And then when I was (?), I say God Bless America.

LEVINE: Tell me first, before we talk about that, when you were at Ellis Island.

TESIO: Yeah?

LEVINE: What do you remember? You said you stayed overnight.

TESIO: In Ellis Island is a beautiful place. I went to Ellis Island, and being that they couldn't come and pick me up, my mother, because the terrible weather, there was a lot of snow, she didn't have the money to pay a car for it, and she came, and it was terrible. So I was there for three days in Ellis Island, for three full

days, and I had the man serving at the table with the (?). We have a good food. We got the tea, that I didn't like tea, but then, you know, after a while you get used to, put milk, and I really enjoyed the stay in Ellis Island. It was very good.

LEVINE: And what happened? Why were you there for three days?

TESIO: I was there because my mother couldn't come. It was a terrible weather. There was a lot of snow.

LEVINE: And she couldn't get there.

TESIO: She couldn't make it, and so I was there for three days. Then for (?) day (she laughs) everybody went away, everybody that I know, one he had the cousin, one he had this, one had that, and I was there by myself. And then I was thinking about what I was thinking about the place. And then one day I had to serve at the table. It was my time to serve the table. I had the big pot, and everybody was sick, all, all. So I had to serve at the table, and nobody ate that the ocean used to cover the boat. Oh . . .

LEVINE: This, now, is on the boat, where you served at the table.

TESIO: Oh, and I was there, and the shaking. So, anyway, so then I, then when I was a little better we ate, and I had to throw whatever we left over, throw into the, throw it down in the boat, and the handle came in my hand, and the thing went under. So I, I was so mortified, you know, and the man that he saw that I did that, he laugh. And I was so, I was crying. He said, "Don't worry, signorina." (Italian) You know, "Don't worry, little lady," he says. "We got another pan." So, anyway . . .

LEVINE: When you were at Ellis Island . . .

TESIO: Oh, that was good.

LEVINE: Then you, then were you helping to serve? How is, how were the dinners there?

TESIO: Very good, very good, very good, yeah. It was just the thing to have to, everybody have the same. It was good food. I was a young girl. I could eat the food, I could eat the pan. (they laugh) It was good. But a lot of people suffer for the ocean, you know, it's rough. It's rough. You couldn cross from to the living room to the dining room. You could not cross to go to your room. You got, you cannot do it. And

they say, "Don't you dare do it," because it was terrible, terrible. And then little by little the ocean calm, and little by little, so when we reach the Ellis Island, then my mother was there, and she took me home where she lived.

LEVINE: Where, what was it like to see your mother when she came to Ellis Island?

TESIO: Yeah, I was glad to see her. Even though that I didn't see my mother for so many years, and I didn't know it. The one that I know better was my aunt, was my mother's sister. She was good, then she see me crying. She was sorry. And (?), I says, "Well, this is my mother. I have to be here." And after, after I be here, and I have to go to, I went to school. I says, "I want to learn this language." So I went to school, evening school. I ate my dinner right away, fast, fast, and go to school, and learn God Bless America. I learned that. And I was happy. And I knew I was going to be here, so I learned English, and after five years you apply for the American citizen, and I passed the test, and I have, and I was a citizen, American citizen. That's when we sing (she sings) God Bless America, land that I love. From the

prairie, to the mountain, to the ocean, white with foam, God Bless America, my home sweet home. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Were you working during the day when you went to night school?

TESIO: Oh, yeah. I, when I came, when I was here I was a babysitter.

LEVINE: Babysitting. And then you went to night school. And you, and your husband, what was your husband's name?

TESIO: When I went to the school? For a babysitter?

LEVINE: When you met your husband . . .

TESIO: Oh, my husband. My husband, I met him on the boat, because he was coming on the same boat. I didn't know, because he come, it comes from North Italy, from another town.

LEVINE: Another place.

TESIO: Yeah, I am more to the mountain. He was more to the city. But we met him, because he was there to this place where they give dinner, they give the food, the man, he have a room where they take the clothes, you

give it to the lady there, they pick it up, they give you clean clothes. He pay, it's a paying place. So I met him there, I met him there, and we were friendly, we were talking about (?). And that's it. We went back, he was a man from pretty, pretty family in Italy. And then the war was coming, 1914 war was coming. And being that he was a young man and the father wrote to him, he call and say, "Don't you come to Italy," because he was gonna back to, he want to go back to Italy, "Don't you come to Italy, because the war is coming." And he was just in the age that he was in. He says, "If you didn't start coming, stay there for a while until you're sure, whatever. But the war is coming." That's it. That's it. So, then I met my husband, because he was living to a house, a young man, he need a place where they washed the clothes, so he live in this house, and you pay so much, it was like a home. You know, you pay so much, and they clean your room, and they clean your clothes, and then you are in a place like home.

LEVINE: And what was his first name, your husband?

TESIO: Oh, yeah. It was, and it was Henry.

LEVINE: Henry.

TESIO: Yeah. Tesio.

LEVINE: Tesio.

TESIO: And my name, it was Maria Riva.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TESIO: So, then he knows, the time in Piamonte, knows what times. So then I says, "Well, I got just my mother here, and that's it. And then I got my aunt in Italy, but she's got children already. So I know I have to be over here." And he came because, and he came here to stay here to learn about America, and then the war was coming, and the people from Italy, he says, "If you didn't make your paper to come back home, stay, because the war is coming."

LEVINE: So he stayed.

TESIO: And he stayed. And then, then I met him, because he was in a place where the people with the, a man alone, you know, they take the clothes, they clean you, they wash you, and they got a room for themselves.

LEVINE: Were there a number of people living nearby who had

come from the same part of Italy where you and your mother came from?

TESIO: Oh, I know a few people, but not too many, see, because he was in another town. I was up, Piamonte[ph], he was down a little more to the city, near the city.

LEVINE: But I mean in America.

TESIO: Oh, in America, I marry, I married America because he boarding to the place, he was living with the place, where they take, where they call (Italian), you know, because they're boarding there. And I met him there, I met him in there, through a friend, through another friend, and he was living there because he had nobody over here, he had no relative. So we met one each other. One day we went to a dinner to this house, a friend that he was the wrong town, so I married, and we met another time, but then after a while, so we see each other very often. And then one day he asked me if I want to marry, if I want to get married, that he loved me very much, that if you want me, I'm gonna be your man. I'm gonna be your husband. And I says, "No, don't ask me. You've got to ask my

mother." So then, then I tell my mother, I says, you know, that man, he asked me, if I want I'm gonna be his wife. And she says, "He should ask me first." (they laugh) He was annoyed, she was annoyed. She didn't, poor woman. She went through a lot of hard, hardship in her life. And she was, you know, she was good, and meanwhile she was an upset woman, yeah. So, but then when I see this man, he was good, and then my mother, she had to go through an operation. She had a breast to remove, and she says, "I don't want to be an operation over here," and then because I was already married, I marry my husband there, and I says, "I want to go back to Italy, because there I could speak my language, and I want to have the operation there." And my husband says, "But don't go there now. It's in wintertime. You know, there they don't have this, they meet in the house. You got to buy the fireplace, you got to, but you can't do that. Wait until comes the good weather, then if you want to go back, then I'll help you to go back, and I put the paper." And on the boat, the Conte de Savoya[ph], so on the boat I know this man, he come from the same part of my country. So when he says, "Well, I put you on the boat, when this man, he knows your part of the

country, and he's gonna help you, when you reach the boat there, he could help you to take the boat, the car, the, whatever, the trunk out, and the thing that you have, he's gonna be a handy man to you." And there I went. I went to this man, and here I went to this house. And he went boarding in the house, he was paying the place, he was not far from where I was living, and so then little by little we got married. Anyway, we got married at Madonna church over here in Hackensack, or Palisades Park, where is that, Madonna?

LEVINE: I'm not sure where that is?

TESIO: Madonna Church. It was here. So, and this I am. And my husband, poor man, he died. He had some sort of a heart, they say he had the heart damaged since he was a young boy, you know? At that time they didn't understand too much about sickness. They give you chamomila, and that's it, and you drink chamomila from morning to night, and they give you something for la quina[ph], quinino dello starto[ph], you know, those little pills that is good for the heart. But then after a while, then one day he died. He went away, he died.

LEVINE: And you have children?

TESIO: I have two daughters.

LEVINE: What are their names?

TESIO: One is over here in Palisades Park, that's Hannah, and the other one is in California, that's Olga. I've got two daughters.

LEVINE: And you have grandchildren, too?

TESIO: They've got children, too, yeah. I went there last, last year, for the summer.

LEVINE: Oh.

TESIO: I went there, I stayed there six months there. And then they had to come back, the man had to come back for business or something, and so the people over here said, "While you're coming back, bring Maria, because at least we know that she's got somebody back there."

LEVINE: Can you compare where you were living, when you left Italy and you came here and you were living with your mother . . .

TESIO: Where I was living?

LEVINE: Yeah. What was the place like that you lived in . . .

TESIO: It was a nice place. It was a country place with the Switzerland mountain there, you see the Swiss mountain where the snow, it was a beautiful place. The valley, the name of the town, Valley San Nicolo[ph]. The Valley of St. Nicholas. And I was there, I was happy, and I learned the language. And I was singing the Piemontes[ph], and I was very happy.

LEVINE: And then when you came to the United States . . .

TESIO: And I come to the United States, I met my husband.

LEVINE: But where did you live? Do you remember what it was like where you were living? Did you like where you were living?

TESIO: Oh, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Was it a, was it a, was it a city?

TESIO: It was a resident, they safe people there, nobody. And it was a place when they, especially men, that he needs the clothes washed and the things . . .

LEVINE: No, but I mean, you, when you lived with your mother. When you came here, and you lived with your mother.

TESIO: When I came here, my mother, she want to go back to Italy, and she want to die there, and she died there. She didn't want to be here. She says, "I'm going to Italy." She didn't speak English too much. She speak with French, but not English. And she never learned it, she never learned to, no, I want to go back. I want to go back to Italy. Then I was married, too, and my husband, he tell her, "Don't go now. It's kind of cool now. You know, they don't have the steam heat. You've go to stay by the fireplace all the time." She says, "No, I have something that I have to do there." I have the little piece of land, she want to leave it to me, whatever. And so we try. And then me, and my husband says to me, he says, "What shall I do?" I says, "Well, if she really wants to go, and if she stays here and gets sick, we've got the blame, we've got the thing that we're gonna be blamed because she want to be here. Let her do (?). We said to my mother, me and my husband said, "Let her be whatever she want to do and be happy." And so she says, "Yes, I'll be happy to go there. And I have this piece of land, I have this piece." For a (?) (she laughs) they looking, you know, they looking for every small

thing. But, anyway, she want to go back, and she did, thank God, and she died there.

LEVINE: Well, tell me, what do you feel proud of? What do you feel that you've done in your lifetime that makes you feel satisfied?

TESIO: Oh, when I was, when I was young I was a sad girl, very sad. I know the father was not a good man to want me. My mother, she was good, but she was sick, and I cry all the time, I cry a lot. And then when I go crying, and I just sang God Bless America. Yeah, I was very sad. But then I learned the language. I went to school in the evening. I have two night that I could go to school, and I says I joined, I joined this country in the way I best I can, and then I got my pride, because I sang God Bless America, and I know the other one, Down In The Valley. (she sings)
Down in the valley, the valley so low. I learned that. (she sings) Hear the train go, boy, hear the train go. And on the train is a ladder for me. Tell me you still love me, when I come to you. Da-da-da-da.

LEVINE: And so you became happier as time went on.

TESIO: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: As time went on you weren't . . .

TESIO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Sad any more.

TESIO: Yeah. No, no more sad. I know here I got a big, my mother, she was here, and then she want to go back, and then marry to my husband, then I got married. And my husband says, "If she want to go back, don't force her to stay here, because if she got sick, we got the blame. She got more sick. Let her do her own will. If she want to go, and then that we know somebody on the boat, they will (?) part of the country, it was the Conte de Savoya[ph], and my mother went in the Conte de Savoya[ph], and went back to Italy, and she died there after. But at least she had her wish. And me, I was here, then I marry my husband.

LEVINE: Did you work after you got married?

TESIO: No. After I got married I didn't work too much, because then I went, I went to work for a while, yeah. I was a babysitter. I was the baby, the best babysitter. The little kid, he says, "You know, when

you've got to put me to babysit then I want to have Maria because she always tells me stories and makes me laugh." And they were smarter than I was. I thought, I always tell the story of myself, but in a different way. And she knew that it was not, was not really, and make me laugh when she says, "Maria, she always tell the same story." (they laugh) But I babysit. Anyway, I earn money babysitting, yeah.

LEVINE: And what about your husband? What did he do?

TESIO: What?

LEVINE: Your husband, what did he do for work?

TESIO: For work, here?

LEVINE: Yeah, your husband.

TESIO: Oh, my husband. When I got married, when I got married, my husband, he was working with the, for the country. He was working on there, he was, I don't know how they call it, he was the man that he brought the paper. He had high school, yeah, and he drew the paper what to do. But then when he want to go back to Italy, he want to go back, and then I said, "No, don't go." And then when he was gonna go back to Italy to

arrange all the affair of the family, what belonged to him and what has got to be free, so he want to go back, from Italy he receive a card, "If you didn't make the stop, if you still time to make the stop of your place, don't come here, because the war is coming." And the 1914 war, it came.

LEVINE: When he was here in this country . . .

TESIO: He worked.

LEVINE: What did he do when he worked?

TESIO: He was working, he was a secretary, because he had high school, and he was secretary of the capital, the captain, my husband, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. In New York?

TESIO: He lives in, whatever it was. In, not New York, it was around, but it was in this state here.

LEVINE: In New Jersey?

TESIO: In New Jersey I think, yeah. He was the secretary of the state, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

TESIO: And here I am.

LEVINE: Yeah. And, now, you've lived to be over one hundred years old, which a lot of people don't live so long as you have.

TESIO: I'm tired.

LEVINE: You're tired.

TESIO: You're tired, yeah. Sometimes at night I says, "God," I said, "give me help until the last minute." I says, "You know, God, you know my way, I'm tired." And then I think it's the will of God, you die when God wants you. And that's what I do. So now I got my heart that is no good, that it boom-boom-boom-boom. But, anyway, I do the best.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Why do you think you lived so long? Why do you think you've lived such a long life?

TESIO: I live, my life, I live a life quiet, not quiet, plain life, plain life. If I could do good to somebody, I did it. If I could help another person, I would do it. I would always try to help somebody. And when they see them cry, I says, "Don't cry, because the pain, it won't change. Every heart, and every (?) it

got colors. That's it." I tried to give good, good spirit, that's it.

LEVINE: Do you think you've learned any kinds of lessons, or do you think you learned different ways of thinking about life in all your years? Do you have any kind of wisdom that you, that you've arrived at over this time?

TESIO: God knows. I always say God knows. That is not my will. It's God's will. I always say that. And I like to pray. I say the prayer every night for the living and for the dead. The poor that die, may they rest in peace. And the one they live, give peace in the mind, because there's a lot of people, they get mad, you know. And I says we got to take the life as it come. If you help yourself, God help you. And if you don't help yourself, God doesn't help you. So we got to learn how to help ourselves, take what it comes, and that's it. And the best we can do, yeah, nothing else. Well, anyway, that's life.

LEVINE: Yes. Is there anything else you'd like to say before we finish? The tape's nearly over. Is there anything else about coming to this country, about leaving Italy

and coming . . .

TESIO: When I come from this county, it was not easy, because I didn't know the language. So I'm willing, willing to go to evening school and learn the language. After five years that you're in this country, when they call the, whatever it is, they give you a test. If you answer right they have, then you be a citizen, and they give you the paper, citizen paper. So when I see that, I says, "I am an American citizen." And I know back to Europe I will never go. I have nobody there. My mother went and died there. So I says, "I know here it is, and I love it. And I love this country. And God Bless America." Well, I sing it all the time.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, I want to thank you, Maria Tesio. This has been a wonderful privilege for me to talk with you.

TESIO: This is a true story.

LEVINE: Yes.

TESIO: When I was here in the beginning, so I was living in that place with my mother. So one day I had to go and

get the pay. My mother was in another place, and I work in another. I work by machine, the electric machine. My mother was by hand, and she was left out the work. So then . . .

LEVINE: Let me interrupt just to say that we're signing off here, because the tape is just about over. I've been speaking with Maria Tesio, who is over one hundred years old, came here at age seventeen in 1914 from Italy, and is very proud to be an American citizen.

TESIO: I'm proud to be an American, yeah. That's why when they gave me the test and I pass, I says, "I am an American citizen. And I will never go back to that town, never." I have nobody. My mother pass away. I didn't have a father, because he didn't want me. So then I didn't have (?) there, and my aunt died. I said, "Here is my home."

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

TESIO: Okay.

LEVINE: Thank you so much, Mrs. Tesio.

TESIO: You're very welcome.