

EI-821

CONCETTA (CONCETTINA) ELIA MICELI  
BIRTH DATE: NOVEMBER 7, 1912  
INTERVIEW DATE: OCTOBER 12, 1996  
RUNNING TIME: 46:20  
INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.  
RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME  
INTERVIEW LOCATION: THORNDIKE, MASSACHUSETTS  
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 10/1997  
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL SIGRIST, 9/1999

SICILY, 1919                                      RESIDENCE: CANACATTINI BAGNI  
AGE 7    US RESIDENCE: SPRINGFIELD, MA  
PASSAGE ON "THE AMERICA"      PORT OF EMBARKATION: MESSINA?

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Present also in the room is Mrs. Miceli's daughter, Fran Rutkowski. 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.

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Saturday, October 12, 1996. I'm in the lovely town of Thorndike, Massachusetts, which is near Palmer, Massachusetts. Indeed, the mailing address is Palmer. It's a beautiful cold, crisp fall day outside. And I'm here in Thorndike with Mrs. Concetta Miceli. And Mrs. Miceli came from Sicily in 1919, correct? And she was seven years old when they came to the United States.

MICELI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Good. Um, I should also say for the sake of the tape

you may hear a refrigerator going, and you may hear the heat register thumping not too far from us.

Mrs. Miceli, can you give me your birth date, please?

MICELI: November 7, 1912.

SIGRIST: November 7, 1912.

MICELI: 1912.

SIGRIST: And where in Sicily were you born?

MICELI: I was born in Canicocini Barni[ph], Syracuse.

SIGRIST: Syracuse. Uh-huh. And, um, did you live in that same place until you left?

MICELI: Until I left.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Can you tell me your, say your full name for me as it was when you were born.

MICELI: It's the same. It's Concetta. They call me Concettina.

SIGRIST: Concettina.

MICELI: Concettina Elia.

SIGRIST: And spell Elia for me.

MICELI: E-L-I-A. That's the way they pronounced it.

SIGRIST: Elia is your maiden name. Elia.

MICELI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did you have any other names?

MICELI: No.

SIGRIST: Just Concetta Elia.

MICELI: That's right.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you know anything about the day you were born? Did your mother ever tell you a story about the day she had you?

MICELI: Well, she says I was a beautiful child, and my father thought she had put lipstick and rouge on my cheeks ( she laughs ) to make me prettier. And I remember that she says she tied a rope on the post of the kitchen table, and she made a, like a hammock for me, and I spent quite a time there. So it was interesting.

SIGRIST: When you were a little girl, what do you remember about the town that you grew up in?

MICELI: Oh, I remember it was a beautiful place, and they have a lot of trees. They had olive trees, and we went to see where the, uh, where they were packed down. There was a huge, round circle, and there were horses inside, and one of those, uh, device that the horse (?), they were going around, and that crushed the olives and made the oil. And then they had those prickly pears all around, so we enjoyed it because there was apples, oranges, and it was a beautiful place. Sicily is a beautiful place.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the house that you lived in?

MICELI: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was it made out of?

MICELI: I remember the stone, and I remember my living room had a marble floor. It had a square marble floor, red, black and white. I thought it was beautiful. And one side my grandmother lived in, the other side we lived there. We had a couple of rooms there.

SIGRIST: And do you remember any of the furniture that was in the house?

MICELI: No, not too much of the furniture. I remember my

mother having an old, old sewing machine, but not too much of the furniture. And we had, it wasn't very, I remember it wasn't very cold in Sicily. It never got real cold. And we had a little, like a pan. We put coals in it, and we'd light that up for heat. We had no heat at all. And we had to go out in the brook and wash the clothes.

SIGRIST: How did your mother wash the clothes?

MICELI: On the brook, on the stone, with hard soap. So, uh, she was happy to come to America. She wouldn't have to scrub so hard.

SIGRIST: How did you light the inside of your house?

MICELI: It was, it was nice.

SIGRIST: How did you light? Light?

MICELI: Oh, the light.

SIGRIST: What kind of light?

MICELI: Oh, we had candles. And . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember where they came from?

MICELI: No, I don't.

SIGRIST: What about water in the house?

MICELI: We had to carry all the water in. I remember my grandmother, she went down to the pool there and she would bring one of these jars, big jars, and she would wrap a handkerchief on her head, and she would put the jar on her head. And she never spilled it. That amazed me.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

MICELI: My father's name was Michael Masselli.

SIGRIST: Michael. And what did he do for a living in Sicily?

MICELI: Well, he was a carpenter. So, uh, he came to America first. He wanted to better himself, so he came to America, and he stayed here. He liked it, he worked, he sent some money, and we came over.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of your father in Sicily?

MICELI: Very little.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about him being there?

MICELI: Well, I remember him going to work, and the family,

and, uh, and not much.

SIGRIST: What was your father's personality like?

MICELI: Oh, he was a great man.

SIGRIST: You smile when you're saying that. Tell me, tell me some of the things, some of the things that he liked to do.

MICELI: He'd always buy me things, and I was the youngest one, naturally, I was spoiled. He'd always bring something, and he was a very, very nice man.

SIGRIST: Do you remember one of the gifts that he brought you once?

MICELI: He brought me a doll, and I thought it was beautiful, from America. He brought a few things from America, so.

SIGRIST: So he was, was he going back and forth?

MICELI: Back and forth.

SIGRIST: Oh. Uh-huh. What do you know about your father's family background?

MICELI: Oh, my father, my father's mother, I remember her.

She was a very lovely person. They said I look like her.

SIGRIST: Was she the grandmother that lived with you?

MICELI: No.

SIGRIST: No.

MICELI: That was, that was my mother's grandmother. And I . . .

SIGRIST: Mother's grandmother, or mother's mother.

MICELI: Mother's mother.

SIGRIST: Mother's mother. Well, what do you remember about your father's mother?

MICELI: Well, she was, she was, uh, she had arthritis, and she was always cold, always wrapped, and always sitting by the coal. She, and I didn't do too much about her because we were busy, you know. We hardly went to see her.

SIGRIST: Did she live in the same town?

MICELI: The same town.

SIGRIST: She lived in the same town. Um, do you remember your

father's father?

MICELI: My father's father? no, he died before, uh, before I was born.

SIGRIST: I see. Did your father ever tell you any stories about his own childhood and things that happened when he was growing up?

MICELI: Not much, because he was mostly in America. Yeah, we haven't seen, he stayed, he was here in America, he left to go to America when I was born. I was a year old when he left, so I really don't remember it much, you know?

SIGRIST: Then when did he come back?

MICELI: He came back, he came back when, before I was born.

SIGRIST: No, I mean, after he left the year after you were born, then he must have come back, because you said he brought you things.

MICELI: Yeah. He came back, he came back. He came back to America.

SIGRIST: Yes.

MICELI: Then he, uh, he asked my mother if she would come,

you know, and live in America. She never, always said no. She was afraid to come to America. They say that you're going across the water, she says that probably things would happen, and she was contented to stay here. So finally he says, "Well," he says, "I think you should, and now the family is." So then we all came, the three of us. We were three children, three girls.

SIGRIST: What were the names of your sisters?

MICELI: One was Pauline. She was four years older than I was. Another one was Lucy. She was eight years old.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. So you were the youngest, as you said.

MICELI: I was the youngest.

SIGRIST: And what was your mother's name?

MICELI: My mother's name is Anna, I can't Formica.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

MICELI: F-O-R-M-I-C-A.

SIGRIST: That was her maiden name?

MICELI: That was her maiden, her maiden name.

SIGRIST: Tell me what your mother's personality was like.

MICELI: Well, she loved us. She had all the girls, and she loved her daughters, and she's always dressing up with new style clothes. She was a dressmaker. So we, we were proud of that. We always had a new dress when we went to, went to school, and my father was very pleased that she was able to do that.

SIGRIST: Is there a dress, one dress that sticks out in your mind that she made for you that you really liked?

MICELI: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe it for me?

MICELI: It was a yellow dress, and it had puff sleeves, and it had a lot of ruffles on the bottom. Well, we thought they were pretty nice.

SIGRIST: And when you were a little girl, how did you wear your hair?

MICELI: Oh, just parted straight.

SIGRIST: Long?

MICELI: Medium length.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. And did you wear hats or anything on your head when you were growing up?

MICELI: Well, they didn't have many hats in Sicily. Not too many. It was very warm there, so.

SIGRIST: Right.

MICELI: We never bothered with hats. I was only seven years old, so I really can't remember that much.

SIGRIST: Right. Well, you're doing a good job so far. You said that your mother washed the clothes. What were some of her other chores around the house in Sicily?

MICELI: Well, cooking.

SIGRIST: Yeah? What kind of food did you eat when you lived in Sicily?

MICELI: Well, we almost ate a lot of, uh, pasta, you know? 'Cause there wasn't much meat. And, uh, it was hard to get good milk, you know. We got, it was hard to get, we drank a lot of goat's milk there.

SIGRIST: Where did it come from?

MICELI: Oh, I don't know. It must have been raw milk, you

know.

SIGRIST: Yes. Was it your goat, though, or did you buy the milk? Did you have a goat?

MICELI: No, we didn't. We bought it.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. And, um, you ate a lot of pasta. What, what else do you remember your mother cooking?

MICELI: Soups and roasts, chicken. That was the main thing, was chicken. And we had very little beef there.

SIGRIST: What did you drink?

MICELI: I don't know. I remember water, and milk, and everybody used to drink wine. So once in a while I put a little bread crumb, bread, pieces of bread in the, uh, in the wine, and . . . ( she laughs )  
Because I didn't like the taste of wine, so I was trying to get used to the wine. But I liked it with the bread. So I drank a little wine.

SIGRIST: Do you, do you remember like celebrating a holiday in Sicily? Like how did you celebrate, maybe, Christmas in Sicily?

MICELI: Christmas, we'd have, uh, they made dolls, my mother

made dolls. And it was mostly fruit. We had a lot of fruit and nuts. They used to have it in a shoe, and I remember all the fruit. Not too many gifts then.

SIGRIST: What about, what about the religious side of Christmas? What did you have to do?

MICELI: Well, I remember going to church, but I don't remember much.

SIGRIST: Do you, was there a church in town where you were?

MICELI: Yes.

SIGRIST: And what kind of a church was this?

MICELI: It was a Catholic church.

SIGRIST: Catholic church. Um, how often did you go to church back then?

MICELI: Oh, we went quite a bit. It wasn't too far from us. We'd go every Sunday, naturally, and we'd go every other day, or we'd always, I remember going to, to the church.

SIGRIST: And was there was way that you practiced your religion at home? Did you say prayers at home, or

something like that?

MICELI: At my mother's house?

SIGRIST: Yeah. When were you, when you were at home, how would you, would you pray, or . . .

MICELI: Well, we would pray. We would all get around the coal in the evening when there was coal, and we would pray. And we'd read our Bible.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a prayer that your mother might have taught you when you were a little girl?

MICELI: No.

SIGRIST: No. Um, you mentioned you lived with your grandmother, your mother's mother. Correct?

MICELI: Yes.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about living, of course, she had the other half of the house, correct?

MICELI: Yes.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about living with your mother's mother? What sticks out in your mind about her?

MICELI: Well, I remember she used to bring in the water, we

were low on water, she always had water. We'd go in her house and take, steal some of her water. And she said that we were young enough to get our own, and she was too old, and she's taking care of herself. ( she laughs ) And I remember my grandfather, my grandfather, my mother's father, he would go up in the farm and he would bring me some walnuts. He always had something to bring me when he went to the orchards. So not too much. Then we left.

SIGRIST: Before you left, did you go to school in Sicily?

MICELI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything about that?

MICELI: Well, I just remember that it was downstairs from my grandmother. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: From which grandmother?

MICELI: My father's mother.

SIGRIST: Your father's mother. This was the woman with the arthritis.

MICELI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes.

MICELI: And her daughter was my teacher. So, uh, I'd go upstairs after, after school, and stay with her for a while.

SIGRIST: Could your mother read and write?

MICELI: Yes.

SIGRIST: She could. Uh-huh. Were there any things that she taught you as a little girl at home, maybe things to do or how to do things?

MICELI: Yeah. Well, she taught me to crochet, and a few little things. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Now, your father's in America. Where is he living in America?

MICELI: He was living in Springfield.

SIGRIST: And what was he doing in Springfield.

MICELI: He was working for a contractor, building homes.

SIGRIST: And he wanted the family to come to the United States. Your mom didn't really want to come.

MICELI: Yeah. She didn't want to leave her mother.

SIGRIST: Didn't want to leave her mother. What do you think finally made your mother give in to come?

MICELI: Well, my father says he got sick and tired of going to Italy to see her, that he wasn't coming any more if she didn't come. ( she laughs ) So that took care of that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything about the process of getting ready to leave Sicily, what you had to do, or what your mother had to do before you left?

MICELI: Well, we just had a few things to pack, not many clothes. The necessary clothes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what those things were specifically that you took?

MICELI: Oh, well, we took little dolls for us to play, and regular clothes. Sweaters, mostly. We didn't have overcoats, because it wasn't cold enough in Sicily. It was always very warm. So we came just a sweater.

SIGRIST: You brought sweaters with you.

MICELI: We had just, just sweaters and no coats.

SIGRIST: Do you remember having to be examined or anything

before you left Sicily?

MICELI: Yes. Before I left I had a cold, I had a fever. And, uh, my mother wrapped me up, and she gave me medication and some pills. She wrapped me up, and she says, uh, I couldn't see where I was going, because she didn't want me to catch cold. It was cold that day. And she says, "If you come out of that blanket," she says, "you know, we'll have to leave you here at Grandma's. If you have a cold, they won't take you. They won't take a sick little girl." So I stayed very quiet, wrapped up. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: What did you know about America when you were in Sicily? How did you think about America?

MICELI: Well, they told us that it was wonderful, a rich country. They says you'll find money on the ground, and you didn't wash your clothes, you bought new ones, or you go to the cleaners, but you didn't have to go in the creek and wash them. So that pleased my mother, but me it didn't matter to me. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Do you remember having to say goodbye to your

grandparents?

MICELI: Yes. That was the hardest thing to do.

SIGRIST: When did you do that? Was it, like, the day you left, or . . .

MICELI: Yeah, the day we left, 'cause we lived with her, you know.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about having to do that?

MICELI: Not much. I don't remember much about leaving.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you had to go when you left your town?

MICELI: I don't know. It was Messina[ph]? I really don't know. I tried to find out from my sister, but they don't know. I wish I'd asked my mother before.

SIGRIST: Where do your, do your, are your sisters living?

MICELI: One is living.

SIGRIST: Yeah?

MICELI: But I don't think she remembers.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Where does she live now?

MICELI: Who?

SIGRIST: Your sister who's living.

MICELI: My sister, she's in a nursing home now.

SIGRIST: Where? Where is she?

MICELI: In Springfield.

SIGRIST: Oh, nearby.

MICELI: Yeah. We all came from Italy, the three of us.

SIGRIST: Um, okay. So you went, do you remember getting on the ship?

MICELI: Oh, it was a beautiful ship.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the ship?

MICELI: Yes. America Vespucci. I don't know how you spell it.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. And, um, do you remember, do you remember where, you said you didn't remember where you got on the ship.

MICELI: No, where it was docked, no. I don't remember that. All I remember, it was beautiful, all lit up. And I

thought, well, we were going to a beautiful place.

SIGRIST: Had you ever been on a boat before?

MICELI: No.

SIGRIST: No. Do, um, but you were excited when you saw it.  
( a telephone rings ) Oh, we're going to pause just  
for a moment. Now we're resuming. So you came on  
the America. It was a big, beautiful ship.

MICELI: Yep.

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep on the ship? Do you remember?

MICELI: I remember sleeping, out of the porthole, it was like  
a bunk bed, and I was on the top, and I was, I could  
see the water, 'cause I was sleeping. All you could  
see was the water. You couldn't see anything else.  
And, uh, that beautiful boat wasn't beautiful any  
more. I was, I was seasick all the way down. ( she  
laughs )

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the room where you, where you  
were sleeping?

MICELI: Oh, I don't remember much. I remember there were a  
lot of people.

SIGRIST: Were there a lot of people in one room?

MICELI: Yes. A large, large room where we all had, like, bunks all the way. It was, quite a few people.

SIGRIST: And, um, were you the only one to get sick in your family?

MICELI: Yes. My sister would go on deck, and they would go play shuffleboard, and I envied them because I was always sitting, always sitting down, wrapped in a shawl, and watching them, and I envied them. And every time I tried to get up, then I'd rock, and I'd heave so much. And, uh, so that wasn't so nice for me.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, I realize you were sick, but do you remember eating on the boat anywhere?

MICELI: Yeah. We were eating downstairs. But the food didn't taste good. It, uh, when you're sick like that, the food don't appeal to you, but we ate what we should eat anyway.

SIGRIST: Did you, um, receive any kind of treatment for your seasickness?

MICELI: No, at that time they didn't have anything.

SIGRIST: You just kind of had to ride it out. Yeah. Do you remember how long the ship took?

MICELI: Oh, it took fourteen days. It had to stop, and it seems every place to, to supply with the coal. And, uh, it really was, it was too long.

SIGRIST: Do you . . . Oh, I'm sorry, go ahead.

MICELI: So I remember every time we, when we came to America, every time there was a little island where they had to refill the, uh, when they had to get more coal, they would stop, and there were little islands, and I remember that they were selling the fruit. So we never seen bananas and pineapples. So we would, we would, uh, we'd tell them we want fruit to eat, you know, we pointed to them. So my mother would put some money in the basket, and the rope would bring, the rope, so they could get their money and put the fruit, and then we got the fruit. So we thought, we'd never had bananas or pineapples in Sicily, so we thought, "Oh, well." It was, so, I remember the island stopping by.

SIGRIST: Yeah? Did you see anything else on, while you were

stopped, that you had never seen before, or . . .

MICELI: Well, you know, I was mostly laying down. I was sick all the way. So . . .

SIGRIST: It's a long time to be sick. ( they laugh )  
Fourteen days.

MICELI: No, I wasn't sick fourteen days, but I don't remember much. That's all I remember. It seems a lifetime!  
( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Do you remember when the ship came into New York?

MICELI: Oh, yes. It was Christmas Eve. It was so beautiful!  
It was fairyland. But, uh, we were frozen. We only had sweaters. And we had a little snow. And before we, before we left the ship, I remember there were people all wrapped up in blankets, and they were watching their, we had a little snow on the boat, and I'd never seen snow before, and they were washing their face with snow, hands and face with snow. So, uh, but it was very, very cold, and when my father came, he, he was there, and when he came and he saw us with just sweaters, and we were frozen, so he had his coat, so he wrapped me, I was the youngest one, and he wrapped his coat around me. ( disturbance to

the microphone ) My father, he's going to take care of me. And I says to him, "If I knew it was this cold, I wouldn't have come to America." ( she laughs ) So, so he, when, then we stopped at the store.

SIGRIST: Did you, when the ship docked, did you have to go to Ellis Island?

MICELI: Yes, we went to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about what happened there?

MICELI: Oh, there was a lot, a lot of people. We were standing in line, and they were, uh, I don't know if they, some examination, and I heard somebody say, I heard somebody say, "Well, gee, if you're sick," he says, "you can't, uh, you'd have to be deported again." And I was telling my mother, because I was heaving, I says, "Am I sick, Ma? Do I have to go back?" She says, "No, you're not sick." ( she laughs ) So, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember how long you had to stay at Ellis Island?

MICELI: I don't remember. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Do you, where did you meet your father? Where did he

meet you?

MICELI: Um, Ellis Island there.

SIGRIST: That's where he wrapped you in the coat, and made you warm.

MICELI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about seeing your father, because you hadn't seen him for a little while.

MICELI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah. How did that make you feel to see him?

MICELI: Well, great, to see my father. It was great. A nice, a nice man.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what he looks like in words?

MICELI: Well, he must have been about five, about 5'8", he had a beard, and, no, he had no beard, a little moustache. A nice looking man.

SIGRIST: Did he look different to you when you saw him in America than he had looked in Sicily?

MICELI: No, because I was, I was a year old when he left. I wasn't old enough to remember him. A year old, you

don't remember, when he left I was a year old, so I didn't remember.

SIGRIST: Does anything else stick out in your mind about being at Ellis Island, seeing things, or anything that you had to do?

MICELI: What we'd do, we docked in, was we were coming to America, we could see Ellis Island, and we could see the Statue of Liberty. Oh, that was a beautiful site. It was a beautiful building then at Ellis Island, and that's all I remember.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: When your father came and got you, where did he take you?

MICELI: He took us right away to New York, and buy some clothes. And a good thing the stores were open.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you were wearing when you met your father?

MICELI: When I met my father I had socks, and a sweater, a warm sweater. But that was enough, it wasn't enough to keep us warm. So we took the, we took the trolley

car, and we went to the stores, and he bought me, he bought all three of us a green coat. Well, he was just, the sleeves were long, and the coat was long, and I says to my father, "I don't like this." He says, "Well, that will keep you warm. We will shorten it when we get home." ( she laughs ) So it was really coldish, you know.

SIGRIST: And where did he finally take you? Where, did he take you to Springfield?

MICELI: He took us to Springfield.

SIGRIST: How did you get from New York to Springfield? Do you remember?

MICELI: There were trolleys, different trolley cars, I think.

SIGRIST: I was just wondering if you remembered any, if anything stuck out in your mind about the trip going to Springfield.

MICELI: No, I don't remember much.

SIGRIST: Well, what do you remember about arriving in Springfield? What happened?

MICELI: Well, we, we, we lived with a woman for a while until

we, my father got the place. So we, I don't remember too much. It was, before, uh, four apartments in one. So we had one small apartment, one side. And, uh, about two years later we, my father started building a home.

SIGRIST: Oh, his own home. He was building it for his family.

MICELI: He was going to build for his family.

SIGRIST: Right.

MICELI: But, uh, but he wasn't even, he bought a home. He bought a home. Not build a home, he bought a home.

SIGRIST: I see, I see.

MICELI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You lived with a woman for two years?

MICELI: No, we lived about two, three weeks.

SIGRIST: Oh, and then you went to the apartment.

MICELI: And then we went to the apartment. And we lived in the apartment about, oh, about, uh, ten years, and then we bought a home.

SIGRIST: I see. Can you tell me, were you put into school

when you first got here?

MICELI: School?

SIGRIST: Yes. How long were you here before they put you into school?

MICELI: They put me into school after about two, three weeks.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. And what do you remember about that?

MICELI: And I remember they put us in a, they call it a dunce class. They're all ages there. And, uh, all, they were singing, and, uh, so, I couldn't sing with them because I didn't know, I just, I just stood there and listened to them. But we were playing ring around the rosie, so I did join in and, uh, I was still kind of shy. I didn't want to join in on anything. It was just a strange place for me. And we couldn't talk. And some of the kids would treat us badly. They'd kick us, you know, and try to get us to talk, but what could we say to them? So a little slowly we learned to, to, uh, talk English. We'd listen to them. We had no one to teach us how to pronounce the words. So we really had to pay attention and listen to them when they were talking.

SIGRIST: Do you remember some of the first English words that you learned, when it all made sense to you as you . . .

MICELI: Well, I remember that every time, I didn't want to recite, because they all laughed at me, so that made me very shy. So I remember I would say "dat," D, instead of "that," T-H. I would pronounce it in D. And naturally we'd get the whole class laughing. So I never wanted to talk to them. And I remember my mother sending us to the store and get, uh, buy some pies, and I didn't know how to pronounce them. And I'd say, "Cust pie," C, instead of "custard pie." See? I was trying to, you know, I couldn't pronounce it all, so they would laugh at me. Naturally I felt ashamed. They says, "Where'd you come from? Italy?" So I, it was pretty tough learning the language, and we had, I had to listen pretty, you know, I had to listen quite a bit.

SIGRIST: Did your father speak English, having been here for . . .

MICELI: No, no. He was always with Italian people, worked with Italian people.

SIGRIST: Did your, did your mother, once she got here, attempt to learn English?

MICELI: Yeah, she did learn pretty good.

SIGRIST: How did she do that?

MICELI: By us teaching her, because my father didn't have time, because he was working, my mother was home. And so, by talking, well, we learned in school, I would try to teach her. And she caught on. So she done okay.

SIGRIST: Talk to me a little bit about your mother's life in those first few years when you arrived here in New York, in Springfield, what she was doing and how she, how she spent her time.

MICELI: Well, she, uh, after I don't know how long it was, but after, she went to work.

SIGRIST: Did she? Doing what?

MICELI: She went to work. She was a dressmaker. She went to work in Springfield. They called it Asinof.

SIGRIST: Asinof?

MICELI: Asinof.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

MICELI: The Jewish. A-S-I-N-O-F.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

MICELI: That was on Dwight Street, I think, in Springfield.

SIGRIST: On Dwight Street in Springfield.

MICELI: In Springfield, yeah. And she worked as a dressmaker. She was a dressmaker. And so she earned some money to, uh, to buy furniture and, you know.

SIGRIST: How did your father feel about your mother going out and getting a job that way?

MICELI: Well, she didn't work too long, just enough, he didn't like it. Just enough to, uh, to get some, you know, buy things that we really needed, because we didn't have much furniture when we first started.

SIGRIST: Now, you had a sister, is it Pauline, who was eight years . . .

MICELI: Four years older.

SIGRIST: Is she the . . .

MICELI: And Lucy was the oldest one, fifteen.

SIGRIST: She was fifteen when you came.

MICELI: She was fifteen. Then we went to school for a while, and when she was sixteen, when she was about eighteen, she went to work in, where my mother.

SIGRIST: At this dressmaking . . .

MICELI: This dressmaking, yeah.

SIGRIST: And what did she do with the money that she earned?

MICELI: Well, she gave it to my mother. And, uh, see, the first year my mother went to work, we, she was older, so she took care of us. My older sister, eighteen, fifteen years old, she took care of us.

SIGRIST: So Lucy took . . .

MICELI: While my mother went to work.

SIGRIST: I see. So Lucy took care of you while your mom had the job.

MICELI: Had to go to work, yeah. And then my sister, the oldest one, eighteen years old, she went to work with my mother.

SIGRIST: How long did your mother work for the dressmaking place?

MICELI: Oh, she must have worked about, about a year.

SIGRIST: About a year.

MICELI: Yeah, 'cause she, she had a family, she had to stay home. Just enough to get along.

SIGRIST: Did your parents have any more children once they came to the United, once they were reunited?

MICELI: Yes. They, they had, uh, four years later my sister, her name was Lydia.

SIGRIST: Lydia.

MICELI: And then I had another sister, Rita. She was two years younger, two years younger, and then I had a brother.

SIGRIST: And his name was?

MICELI: And his name was Salvatore.

SIGRIST: Salvatore. So they had three children once they got . . .

MICELI: Down here.

SIGRIST: So they came with three . . .

MICELI: Two girls and one boy.

SIGRIST: I see. Tell me a little bit about the Italian community in Springfield and, um, you know, how they related to each other. Was there a large population of Italians in Springfield at that time?

MICELI: They were, where my father stayed, there were quite a few people there. But, uh, they, they got together.

SIGRIST: And what would they do when they got together?

MICELI: Well, we would tell stories. They would tell stories about, you know, how it was in that land, and how much better it was here and, uh, so I don't know too much about it.

SIGRIST: I was wondering if there were, like, Italian organizations that your parents belonged to, or . . .

MICELI: No. No, my father didn't belong to any of them.

SIGRIST: When you, when you were here in America, when your father wasn't working, how did he like to spend time for himself, for his own enjoyment?

MICELI: His own enjoyment, he had a hobby, and he was a cabinetmaker, and he would make us toys, and a wagon, all little toys. And he made, he made me a lot of toys for my dollhouse, he made a dollhouse, and he made the little chairs and the figures, so he gave us that for presents. So he was always, he was always with his tools.

SIGRIST: Did your father or mother ever want to go back to Sicily to live?

MICELI: No, not to live, no.

SIGRIST: Did they ever go back to visit?

MICELI: No, they couldn't afford it.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go back to visit?

MICELI: No, my sisters did, but I don't know why I didn't. I was going to, and then I hated to leave my family that long, and, so I wished I did go, because now it's really too late. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Did you become a citizen?

MICELI: My father had the citizen papers for the family. So we didn't have to get our own.

SIGRIST: Even your mother?

MICELI: Even my mother. And the law changed right after that, that we had to get our own, so we were just in time to, we were citizens when we got here, because he was a citizen, he took the citizens for his family, because he knew the family was coming here. AT that time, it was okay. But right after that year my mother says they changed, they changed the law that you have to get your own.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, let me just ask you a couple of quick questions, because we're almost done. When did you get married?

MICELI: I got married in 1935.

SIGRIST: 1935. And what was the name of the man that you married?

MICELI: James Miceli.

SIGRIST: Miceli.

MICELI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And where was he born?

MICELI: He was born in, uh, New York.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. So he was American born.

MICELI: He was American born.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. And how did you meet him?

MICELI: Well, I went to work, and they were, I went to work when I was sixteen years old.

SIGRIST: Doing what?

MICELI: The tailor shop. My mother had us in there in the tailor shop. And, uh, there were five, five, six girls there. We, uh, we were all working at one table. Handwork, you know, not the machine, till I was sixteen. I was fifteen when I left. I figured I might as well leave school. I was no good in school.

I was the oldest one there, because I lost too much time learning English, they put you back, and, so, I was old enough, and I figured I was too old for all the other children, so I quit when I was fifteen.

And I went to work, and they gave us table work, and there were five girls there, and they, one of them was married and had, uh, she was married and she had a party, and she wanted to invite us to the party.

And, uh, and so they invited my husband, and he was there, and they invited quite a few people, and he was there, and, uh, I got to know him, but it was, so then I wasn't interested in him then, you know. So then he, he came, he came to visit me at my house, wanted me to go out. He asked, he asked, he asked a woman there if he can, you know, if she would, uh, if I would, uh, if she would tell me to, to ask me if I would go out with him. I'd say no, and he kept right on pestering and pestering her. So finally she brought me over to her house, and he was there, and, well, we got acquainted, and he brought me, we went out to the movies, and he seemed a very nice person, so I got, I got to know him, and I thought he was, I liked him, and he was very nice, and, so that's . . .

SIGRIST: So you got married.

MICELI: So that's how it was.

SIGRIST: You got married in 1935, you said. And how many children did you have?

MICELI: I got two children.

SIGRIST: And their names?

MICELI: The name is, uh, Frances.

SIGRIST: Who's here with us.

MICELI: Frances, with us, and Michael.

SIGRIST: And Michael. And, um, did your children show any interest in learning about their Sicilian background, and learning the language, maybe, or . . .

MICELI: Well, not too much, no. They, I suppose they would like to go see Sicily, but I don't know, they never seemed interested.

SIGRIST: When you think about yourself in terms of what nationality you are, how do you think about . . .

MICELI: Well, I'm proud to be Italian. It doesn't bother me if she's Italian. It doesn't bother me at all, so.

SIGRIST: Do you think of yourself as being Italian, or do you think of yourself as being American, or as an Italian-American?

MICELI: Well, I think I'm an Italian-American, because I wasn't there too long, and I remember more this place than I do over there. So I really can't say.

SIGRIST: What advice do you have for young people about how to

lead a long and happy life?

MICELI: A long, happy life? You have your children, be with your children, go, do all the games with your children, and spend a lot of time with them, and be good parents to them. Listen to them, and try to compromise what they want to do, and . . .

SIGRIST: That's good, that's very good. Mrs. Miceli, thank you very much. You've done a great job. You have a good memory. You remembered a lot.

MICELI: I don't know. I get flustered. ( they laugh )

SIGRIST: I know you were nervous when we started, but are you still nervous?

MICELI: Yeah. I'm kind of nervous. Because I made a mistake, he didn't build the house. I was saying, you know, build the house.

SIGRIST: But you corrected yourself. It's okay. ( they laugh ) Well, this is Paul Sigrist signing off with Concetta Miceli on Saturday, October 12, 1996, in Thorndike, Massachusetts. Thank you very much.