

EI-835

JOHN CARAMIA

BIRTHDATE: JANUARY 27, 1925

INTERVIEW DATE: DECEMBER 14, 1996

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 71

RUNNING TIME: 1:27:26

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

RECORDING ENGINEER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

INTERVIEW LOCATION: RIVER EDGE, NEW JERSEY

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

ITALY, 1944

AGE: 19

SHIP: THE SESTRIERE

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

NOTE: Interviewee's accent made this a very difficult tape to transcribe.

LEVINE: I'm here in River Edge, New Jersey at the home of Mr. John Caramia, who came from Italy in 1944, when he was nineteen years of age. Today Mr. Caramia is seventy-one years of age, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Let me ask you a few questions to begin with, and then you can tell your story.

CARAMIA: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Which I think is quite unique. If you would give your birth date for the tape?

CARAMIA: Uh-huh, January 27, 1925.

LEVINE: And your—your—the place—I'm sorry, the place in Italy where you were born?

CARAMIA: Taranto, Italy.

LEVINE: Taranto?

CARAMIA: Taranto, T-A-R-A-N-T-O.

LEVINE: Okay, and did you live in Taranto all the time until you came—

CARAMIA: Nine—yes, nineteen years.

LEVINE: Okay, great. Now, before you talk about coming here, which is—is, as I said, unique. [feedback] So much for the good machine. [Laughs] Before you talk about that, perhaps you could talk about life in those first nineteen years. You—you were in Taranto. Could you describe what it was like? Was it a village? Was it a city?

CARAMIA: No, Taranto's a big city. The city now is two hundred and sixty thousand habitants, but at the time there was only a hundred and fifty, and—well, from Taranto very few people came to United States, because it was an industrial town and it was not needed to immigrated to United States. Most of the people who immigrated to United States is from rural area, which no—no progress and no—no future to look forward. But a big town like Taranto, which was very industrial, people never needed to, and I never heard of United States, particular, pointed out as a country. We—because during the Fascist party, they did not really instruct or issue books about the—the form of government in the United States. You know, we only know geographically, if we had some education, that America, North America, South America, but not the subdivision of the nations in North America. That's the reason why I know very little about the United States.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CARAMIA: Very little.

LEVINE: Did you—did you know personally anyone who had gone there and returned to Taranto?

CARAMIA: Uh, no. No, when I came to United State, I didn't know nobody.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CARAMIA: I had no—no friends, nobody. No relatives that ever came here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What was your father's name?

CARAMIA: My father's Martino—Martin.

LEVINE: Martino, and your mother's name?

CARAMIA: El—Antoinetta, Salamina. [PH]

LEVINE: Salamina?

CARAMIA: Salamina Antoinetta Caramia.

LEVINE: And how—Antoinetta was her maiden name or her—

CARAMIA: No, no, Antoinetta Santantanya. [PH] Yeah, Antoinette.

LEVINE: Antoinette.

CARAMIA: Antoinette, yeah.

LEVINE: What was her maiden name, do you remember?

CARAMIA: Salamina.

LEVINE: Oh, Salamina was her maiden name.

CARAMIA: Salamina Caramia, yeah.

LEVINE: I see, and let's see. And did you have brothers and sisters?

CARAMIA: Yes, I have three brother and three sisters. Now, I only got left one brother and two sisters.

LEVINE: Left.

CARAMIA: I got left.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Are they here?

CARAMIA: No, they are in—no, nobody ever came to United States.

LEVINE: Only you.

CARAMIA: Only me. I'm the only.

LEVINE: Wow, and where did you—

CARAMIA: Black sheep of the family.

LEVINE: Where did you fall in the—in the birth order [unclear]—

CARAMIA: I'm—I'm the second youngest.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CARAMIA: I'm the second—second youngest of the seven.

LEVINE: Well, what was your father doing for work, when you were in Italy?

CARAMIA: Well, he was—he was blacksmith, in a shipyard. Yeah, piping blacksmith. He used to shape up all pipes in the navy yard, shipyard, you know. He was a plumber.

LEVINE: I see, and your brothers, what—

CARAMIA: Well, he was an electrician, one of the brother. That we all worked in the same shipyard. Yes, and one was too young to work. He was still young when I first came to United States. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CARAMIA: He was not working.

LEVINE: Ah, did you have grandparents who were around—

CARAMIA: Oh, no, they—they died before the war. One, my grandfather on my father's side, he died during the bombardment. The bombing of the town, during the allied bombardment and he was blind. He couldn't go to any—any shelter, so he died under the—under the bomb.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. But you knew him growing up?

CARAMIA: Oh, yes, definitely I knew him.

LEVINE: Do you have—do you remember any experiences with your grandfather when you were a boy?

CARAMIA: With my grandfather?

LEVINE: Before the war?

CARAMIA: Well, we—we—we used to go visit him quite a bit, you know. Since he was blind, you know, we didn't have much of a running, you know. But

they were poor—poor people. They were not too—they were not professional people, so they lived the best they could.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. Do you remember any customs that they had or that your mother and father had in Italy that are different than—than people have here?

CARAMIA: Well, no, I don't recall specifically any particular customs, no. Whatever, they lived, very good nature people, you know, and just dedicated to the big family. They were dedicated.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you have children yourself?

CARAMIA: Yes, I have one.

LEVINE: One.

CARAMIA: One, he's a—he's a—well, he just retired as a naval—naval commander from the navy. He just retired last year.

LEVINE: Now, can you think of any attitudes that your mother and father maybe had that they tried to pass onto you and maybe you tried to pass onto your child?

CARAMIA: Well, there were—there were—there—well, they were too busy and the school I went to, which was a technical—technical school, the—was too far away from my hometown, from my own, that they never really went to see any teachers or anybody. But it was all on my own, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh—hmm.

CARAMIA: Was all on my own. Most of my—my years I spend in school and church. The church was my shelter because the family was too big, too noisy to do homework or to do any—so.

LEVINE: So you would go to church to do it?

CARAMIA: Oh, yes, I used to go to church. I spent most of my life up to nineteen years old as a church member, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember any ceremonies or any observances—

CARAMIA: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Religious nature [unclear].

CARAMIA: Oh, yes. We used to—we used to go to Christmas—we used to go to Christmas. I used to serve as a—I used to sing at the church and I used to serve as a Master of the Ceremony in Pontifical Mass and I was a subdeacon many times when the priests were not available to—

LEVINE: And what would you do as a subdeacon?

CARAMIA: Oh, no, I used to—I used to serve as the Three—Three Priests Mass, you know, high mass, I used to serve, yeah. And I knew the—I used to read Latin. It became second nature to me to read Latin and be—

LEVINE: Now, was your whole family very religious or was it more you—

CARAMIA: I was more—more. They were too—too dedicated to the family. Had no time because they—they used to do a lot of work. They used to have a—a laundry business in order to survive, you know. My mother used to do the laundry and my father used to work in the shipyard and—and that is the reason. They were not—they had no time to really—

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. Do you remember anything, like any kinds of rituals around birth or death or marriage or any other kind of, you know, life situation? Were there any particular kinds of ceremonies or rituals?

CARAMIA: Well, we used to—well, since I—I used to go to church and I used to be [unclear], I used to go for—with my—my—my parish. I used to go to give the last—last unction, the last right to people used to die. That's—and I always been available because I used to live practically in the church and the priest. I used to—

LEVINE: [unclear]

CARAMIA: I used to be the priest's aide or the chaplain, military chaplain aide I used to be and I used to go from one ship to another, from one navy—navy yard to another. Wherever there was some—some funeral of dead people came from the war, and that's what I was. Yes.

LEVINE: Did you ever consider becoming a priest yourself?

CARAMIA: Ah, no. No, actually they tried to make me, but I—I was not—I was not really deep into—to become a priest, you know. No.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CARAMIA: Yeah.

LEVINE: How about school, did you have any particular favorite teachers who encouraged you along the way?

CARAMIA: Oh, yes. Well, there were several teachers. Most of my teachers, since it was a technical high school, they were all—all engineers. All engineers. When I left senior high school I went to the navy yard, shipyard where they had—I had two years of college engineering, college. That's where I started my—my career in a marine, naval business.

LEVINE: Do you know what—what it was about that—that career that—that led you to want to do it?

CARAMIA: Well, it was—well, it was because my father used to take me to the shipyard every time there was a launching of a submarine or ship, you know and there was an excitement that made me really love toward the navy. It was a navy port, you know. There was the biggest naval—naval—naval installation in Italy, so ships and sailors was part of our life, the marine business, the navy—navy life was.

LEVINE: And can you remember the build up before the Second World War? Do you remember any kinds of things that were happening in and around Taranto at that time?

CARAMIA: Well, since it was a naval—the biggest naval base in Italy, there was always activity, which gave us an indication of preparation for war, and all—all of the min—naval minister. All, Mussolini used to come and visit very—very often to—to inspect the naval base where all the ships were.

LEVINE: And what kinds of preparations were going on at that point in the navy yard?

CARAMIA: Well—well, preparation in a way that they used to build a lot of ships just to prepare for when the eventual going into war.

LEVINE: And then when the war actually broke out, what—what personally did you experience of it?

CARAMIA: Well, I was part of it, but we didn't know any difference between any country we were into war with. You know, we—we didn't know it. We had to follow everything, the—the boss used to tell us to do it. Now, we had no—no—really, we had no ideology to go into the war. No, none of us had intention to go into the war. None of us, no. [unclear] We lived in a navy town, but still we—we were not prepared for—no,

we know that we—we weren't strong enough to go into the war. Everything was a struggle, just to maintain war effort. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Were—were—was food and were there other usual supplies of things, were they—[unclear]

CARAMIA: Well, everything was all right until the third year of the war. The third of the war everything became scarce. Was very hard to find, yeah, and we had to go in the farms, many miles away and my mother had to go up in the mountains just to get food to—to feed us, you know. My mother had to walk miles just to get some food so that we can get some—something to eat. Yeah.

LEVINE: So what—how about your telling the story of how it was you happened to come to America?

CARAMIA: Well, I was a student into—into the navy yard, or shipyard, Taranto. We used to build submarines for the—for the navy and I was a second year engineering school there and I was able to pass a test so that I could get my junior engineer license to go onboard the ship as a junior engineer. [unclear] we used to call engineers in Italy “motorista” and—and at the time I was bragging about that I was successful in getting my license, and the captain of my school noticed that and he invited me to—to go to ship trial, ship trial for engine of the ship. The ship's supposed to have gone out in the morning and come back in the afternoon. So I was invited to attend, just to—as an observant student, and then when we—when we left the hometown and the ship trial was over, the ship was ordered by a British Corvette that was following us, make sure that the ship was not going in the hands of a German, in case the Allied would have retreated. So we went up in—into—it was order—the ship was ordered to go to the nearest Allied port in Sicily and I didn't know about anything. It was a shock for me because I was expecting—they were expecting me back in the afternoon. Instead we wind up in Sicily—in Sicily. When we arrived the following day in Sicily, one of the crew young men was—got sick and they had to replace him and since the captain asked me if I want to go back home or stay on the ship as a crewman? So I decided in a few seconds I had to make the first decision to become a seaman, a maritime man. So I did say yes to stay onboard the ship and started my—my maritime career.

And so we didn't know where the ship was going. Everything was secret. We didn't know—the destination was unknown. So a few days later, we—we wind up in convoy with other American ships and our convoy was one of the biggest convoy returning to United States, empty, you know, after unloading all the supplies for the invasion of Italy.

LEVINE: Do you know why it was you just—you made that decision that you made?

CARAMIA: Well, became an adventure. I've—since I started, well, I have weighing in the back of my mind, if you don't jump on the train while it start moving, you lose it. So I—I accepted the—even was a degrading. I became a kitchen's helper. I became just to stay onboard the ship and become an adventure, you know. We didn't know—I didn't know how the long the trip. I thought the trip was going to be only for a few days. [Laughs] But wind up—the last time I saw my father was supposed to have seen each other again in the afternoon. I didn't see him again thirteen years later. [Laughs] Thirteen years later. [unclear]

LEVINE: So you—so when that ship that the orders from which were secret, when you then teamed up with a convoy of ships—

CARAMIA: Yes, we—

LEVINE: You were in the Atlantic?

CARAMIA: Yeah, we were in the Atlantic and we were attacked by—it was Easter Sunday and when we crossed Gibraltar, Gibraltar was Easter Sunday and right after Gibraltar all the convoy was attacked by German submarines. We lost quite a few ships. Good thing my—my ship was all right, yeah. My adventure would have been over in a few days.

LEVINE: Now, this convoy—

CARAMIA: I would have been—

LEVINE: What—what made up the convoy, the ships—

CARAMIA: Well, they were made of all Allied ships.

LEVINE: All Allied ships.

CARAMIA: Most American ships because American was the—the most supply of ships, you know. We had a very good industry to—to build ships in the United States that no other country could ever build. No. New York—New York City alone had almost fifteen shipyards and—and they used to build ships in—in few days. Unbelievable. Yeah, when I used to be an inspector for the navy, I used to see the label on a ship commissioning, and a destroyer was commissioned within three months from the time it was started to the—to the commissioning. Three months. A cruise, five months. Aircraft carrier, nine months to

build a huge aircraft carrier. So that's just how—how strong was the United State industrially.

LEVINE: What—what—whereas in Taranto the shipyard you had been working in, what would be—what would be a normal time from the time—

CARAMIA: Oh, it was very slow because we didn't have the material. You know, Italy didn't have much miners to—of steel. They had to depend to the Germans and then when Germany occupied Hungary, Polish, then all the steel used to come from those countries. And then when they occupied France, we used to get the steel from France, but the steel was all burned, you know. It was not the first quality steel, so it was not resistant to—to the pressure of a high sea, you know. It was very—very bad material and so everything in Taranto was depending on it, from the North Italy for machinery, material.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CARAMIA: Yeah.

LEVINE: And the name of the ship that you were on?

CARAMIA: Sestriere.

LEVINE: Sestriere? That's S-E-S-T-R-I-E-R-E.

CARAMIA: Right, right.

LEVINE: And what was life like aboard the Sestriere during that voyage?

CARAMIA: Well, it was very tense because we—nobody knew that the ship was—was going to a long—the ship was going for a long voyage. So everybody—most of the crew was from North Italy and North Italy was occupied by the German and their children, their wives, they were under the occupation and there was quite tense among the crew—crew. As a matter of fact, some of them, the crew, when we came to United State they were not allowed to get on shore because of national security—for national security. I was one of the—the few young men. I was the youngest on the ship. I was always the youngest. I was the—the youngest at Ellis Island. I was the youngest on ship. [Laughs] On ship, and all these people had their family because them to be senior on a ship, had to have some affiliation with the past government, the past party, you know. So the United State authority did not allow them to—to—to be free to walk around in the United State. So very few people were given the—the free pass to go ashore.

LEVINE: What became of those that went ashore?

CARAMIA: I have no idea because after I left the ship, I don't now. But I don't know what happened to the ship. I don't know what happened to the crew because I left the ship about three—I think it was three or four weeks after we—we came to United States, yeah. Actually, I left the ship because it wasn't my willing. I [unclear]—we were interrogated by the United States authority and at the end of the interrogation, because they were all representative of a military force. They had the Coast Guard, the Navy, Air Force, Secret Service. There was FBI there. Immigration. There were—there were eight people there, four in military uniform and four in civilian. Each one had an interpreter and then after they found out my background and my—and my good willing to stay in the United States, they request me for a volunteer for special service in the United States. I couldn't figure—I say, "Yes, I volunteer for special service." I didn't know what I was volunteering for. [Laughs] I didn't know what was expecting from me, you know, and—

LEVINE: Was this at Ellis Island [unclear]—

CARAMIA: No, no, this was soon as the ship arrived in port. Nobody was allowed to leave the ship, unless they went through this security clearance.

LEVINE: And so when—when you volunteered for special service, what actually did that mean for you?

CARAMIA: Well, that—that—well, that meant that I had to be interviewed by several high officers, you know, because I volunteered because I want to—I fell in love with the United State. Three days after, I didn't know that I was in the United States, but after a few days I found out what—

LEVINE: Do you remember how you found out you were in the United States?

CARAMIA: In the United States? Well, because when arrived in port, we arrived in port, the officers, they were not allowed to tell the crew the whereabouts. So the pilot came with a New York tugboat. You know, the pilot house, the pilot? And when he came onboard the ship because the pilot becomes the captain of the ship, as soon as he arrives in port, and he told us that we were in Bayonne, New York. In Bayonne, New York. That's when we found out and then as soon as we approached New York inside the bay, we saw the signs of the—and somebody pointed out to me, "That is Brooklyn. That is Staten Island," but I didn't know the difference between. I didn't even know. I didn't even know Brooklyn was a part of the United States. [Laughs] We know we were in North America, but we didn't know that we were—

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How did you feel when you were told that that's where you were?

CARAMIA: Well, I was—I was happy just to be close to—to land again, you know. Close and safe to land after three times attacked by German submarines, you know.

LEVINE: And when you were attacked, what happened? Did the—did the—did—was there any damage—

CARAMIA: Well, when we were attacked by German submarines, each ship was ordered to go at full speed on their own—on their own risk. Each captain was given full speed and try and onboard the ship everybody used to get on—on the main deck and the people who had a lot of experience during the war, they used to line themselves on deck, kept a distance one another with the knives. They had the weapons. They had because they didn't want nobody near them when they jump on the ship or when the ship—if the ship gets torpedoed, you know. Everybody kept a distance and nobody—because the people, when they go into war, in case of emergencies and panic, they tended to—to grab any—anybody or anything to save themselves. The meantime, it's impeding other people to save themselves, you know. Everybody—every life was for them on their own, you know, and after the—after the—the attack was over, you know, everybody used to go back in the—in the cabin playing card again. Everybody was friendly. The tension was over. The tension—

LEVINE: How did you handle the tension? I mean, can you think of any experiences like onboard?

CARAMIA: Well—well, everybody was tense. Everybody becomes self sufficient. Nobody—everybody on their own, you know. Even the officers because they couldn't tell any single crew man in case of emergency what to do, what not to do. Every mind was their own. It's very—very tense, you know, but everything becomes friendly after the attack was over.

LEVINE: Now—

CARAMIA: And then there were—and the ship would resume their—their speed and duty assigned because each ship has their assigned position in the convoy. The Italian ship, because it was—we were considered enemy aliens, we were right in the middle of the convoy, you know, on the center line of the convoy. And—

LEVINE: About how many ships were in the convoy?

CARAMIA: In that particular one, I was told there were about two hundred and forty, and we—we had a lot of destroy escorts. The destroy escorts used to—used to go in between ships back and forth, just like, what they call? Sheepdogs? Sheepdogs and try to protect—try to protect the convoy, you know, from submarine and just to find out, with the sonar try to find out if there was any submarine infiltrating into the convoy.

LEVINE: Were your—was your ship mainly or altogether Italian people on it?

CARAMIA: On the ship, yes. On—on the Italian ship was because it had an Italian flag. We were all Italians, all Italians.

LEVINE: And were there—

CARAMIA: But all the ships, they were all—all the different allied ships, British—British, Indian, but most of the ships, they were all built in the United States with a different crew because it was very hard to get a—a seamen to get onboard the ships. Very hard to get maritime men, and it was very hard. That's the reason why at Ellis Island there were many, many seamen, illegal seamen, because the United State was trying to induce them to go onboard the ship because it was very hard to get seamen because we had more ships than people. We had more ships than people and they couldn't get no—no ships to sail without a crew. So that's why they retained—many people just stuck to the, they didn't want to sail during the war, you know. They didn't want to put their life in jeopardy. Ah, but all this—all these people, they were at Ellis Island at the time. They were all deported after the war. Some—some people at Ellis Island, they were all there for—for years. Interned.

LEVINE: Interned as enemy aliens.

CARAMIA: As enemy—not enemy aliens. Alien, yeah. Aliens, interned. There were a lot of—

[END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1]

[BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE 1]

LEVINE: Okay, this is Side B now and we were talking about the people who were interned at Ellis Island—

CARAMIA: At Ellis Island.

LEVINE: During World War II.

CARAMIA: Yes. They were all—all German interned. All people refused to—to go onboard the ship, go back and sail for United States. They were—ah, well, a lot of German born in United State were interned because they were poor security risks. Anybody who was suspect to be anti-American, they were interned at Ellis Island. That's my—that's what I heard, you know.

LEVINE: And some Italians were also interned, weren't they—

CARAMIA: Oh, yes, because this many seamens, they refused to sail for the American ships, and they were taken to Ellis Island, and many of these Italian seamens were taken from a—the ship was confiscated by United States, and they were taken to—the crew was taken to Ellis Island, and the United State utilized the ship. That's one of the two big cruisers, which would come to [unclear – Italian], they were in Panama Canal at the time of the breaking of the war, and they were confined there, but then the crew, what they did, they sabotaged the engine. The engine they sabotaged so that they couldn't—the ship couldn't be moved. So when the United States took over the ship and they found out that the ship was not able to—to work, so all the crew was interned into Ellis Island and they were there almost four years from the beginning of the war to the end of the war.

LEVINE: And they were offered to go on American ships?

CARAMIA: Not—not those—

LEVINE: Not those.

CARAMIA: Not those one there. Not those one there because you considered security risk—

LEVINE: Then you wouldn't be offered to go on an American ship.

CARAMIA: You—offered to go, yeah.

LEVINE: But who was offered? Who was offered a—

CARAMIA: Well, many sea—illegal seamen that stayed in the United State, you know. You see, each seamen was allowed to—each trip I used to make onboard the ships, after I joined the Merchant Marine.

LEVINE: But you were—you—just to backtrack a little, you were told that if you signed up for special service—

CARAMIA: Yes. Yes. I—then I was for three—three weeks after I was interviewed in Washington, DC, and my interview was a—is Walter. It was Captain Walter and then later on I found out that Captain Walter, he was the General Walter. General Walter was the United Nation because I had been following him because while I—I was being interviewed, he was my interpreter and before I was interviewed by high up. I think it was a General from the OSS, if you familiar with the OSS?

LEVINE: Yeah.

CARAMIA: Office of Strategic Service. I was interviewed with them. OSS became the CIA, and General Walter at the time he was the only captain, very slim, tall, and he spoke to me in Italian, French, Spanish. He spoke to me. He was really terrific.

LEVINE: What were they asking you? What were they talking to you about?

CARAMIA: Well, they were more particular for if I was security risk or not, more than anything else. If I was loyal to betraying to fight for on the side of Americans, you know. And after I was interviewed, that was two weeks after I arrived in the United State, I was—I was—I was sended to—to a special camp. I was sended for three weeks I was there and my—my job was to speak Italian because these people who had been trained to be trapped behind the line. See, these people, these Americans, they were Ital-American. They spoke good Italian for the Germans, but they didn't speak good Italian for the Italians, so they wanted Italian—because I couldn't speak a single word of English. They wanted somebody—somebody like I had a couple friends of mine there, so they can be trained to speak Italian all the time. Exchange to talk Italian. Meantime, I was being trained in case I was going to be shipped overseas. I was going to be shipped with them, you know.

LEVINE: So you would then be behind the Italian lines.

CARAMIA: I would have been. I would have been, yeah.

LEVINE: You would have been.

CARAMIA: I would have been, but never—never happened that, yeah.

LEVINE: So, in other words, there were other people, other Italian men there, too that you were speaking Italian with?

CARAMIA: They were all American Italian people. American born of Italian descent, you know.

LEVINE: And how did you—how did they learn from you?

CARAMIA: Well, they spoke Italian.

LEVINE: Just from listening?

CARAMIA: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, they had to talk to me. They had to communicate with me because the—the training was them to familiarize with all the—all the Italian language, you know. The Italian idioms, you know. Make sure if they get trapped or—because they had to communicate with many people, especially with the partisans. Their job would have been to communicate with the partisans—help the partisan because the partisan, they were fighting the Germans, and we were supplying them with money, with weapons and make sure that they—they were well trained to utilize the weapons that we were supplying them, and supply enough money, you know, and secrecy, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CARAMIA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Can you—can you think of a few of the idioms that they didn't know that you knew just because you had grown up—

CARAMIA: Well, right—well, right now just the common talk among people and among the Italian, you know, even the rough language. You know, just to make sure that the people can—can recognize that they were Italians, you know. Yeah. They were all children of Italian parents, yeah. But—

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did—did you get to know them?

CARAMIA: Oh, yes. Oh, I—I communicated with them for three weeks, you know. Three weeks, but then—they used to call it Italian Village. The Italian Village. It was in Fort Lee, Virginia. It was in Fort Lee, Virginia. They called it Italian Village, this Italian Village. It was an assimilation of a being in Italy. All these people, they were costumes, dressed up like Italian with Italian suits and Italian shoes, Italian shirts. They were supplied with all Italian products that they cannot be identified to be an American. See.

LEVINE: Do you remember them telling you at all how they felt about that? How they felt about being Americans going back to Italy—

CARAMIA: Well, they were—they were recruited. They had no choice.

LEVINE: They had no choice.

CARAMIA: They had no choice. They either go—because they were treated very good. They were treated very good. Each one, they had a lot of more privilege than any other GI, you know. Yeah. Because every one who served under the OSS during the war, they—they were rewarded after the war because they were the key of the—because they were—they were—they—they were the frontrunner of the American troops. They were way ahead of the troops.

LEVINE: I see. How about the—just the idea of sort of divided loyalty of—of, you know, going behind Italian lines—

CARAMIA: No, I don't--

LEVINE: Italian Americans.

CARAMIA: I don't think so. They were all American. They were selected American loyal GI, you know. They were—that's why I was selected to be one of them. I was—as a matter of fact, that's another mystic behind my career, that I had a high security clearance that not even an American had. I don't know where they started because I worked on nuclear submarines. I used to go from one nuclear submarine to another, and we'd—because I had the highest security clearance. I don't know when, how they got—I—how did I receive that high security clearance, I still don't know. Maybe from the beginning of the when I set foot in the United State and they gave me clearance to—to come to United State or stay in the United States.

LEVINE: So, ah, let's see. Did you have any contact with either German or Japanese people who were detained?

CARAMIA: No, never. Never. No, not on Ellis Island, no.

LEVINE: No. So what was your particular contact with Ellis Island?

CARAMIA: Well, I had just come back from a trip, from a ship and we seamens, we were allowed thirty days of leave every time we'd take a ship out. Every trip we were allowed thirty days shore leave and I always used to come back and I had a few days left and—and somebody must have accused me of being illegal alien, you know. And—and—but the person who accused me to be an illegal alien, you know, because during the war, they were very strict. There was no way about. Once you get accused, you're taken to Ellis Island. If you're not illegal in the United States, they kept you there. There was no way out, and as a

matter of fact, Secret Service, FBI, everybody used to go from building to building, just to check people who were with draft card, draft dodger, like that. They used to go from one car, subway to another. We used to—oh, yeah, they used to go from subway—from one car to another just to check everybody who looked draft age and ask them for identification. Oh, yes. I remember once I was working an ammunition box factory on 11th Street between Broadway and—and 6th--Broadway and 5th Avenue on 11th Street. I was working at night. I happened to be on the second level and two civilian, without ask any permission, right away they went down at the lower level. My foreman, he knew something about me, but he didn't know the detail about me, Sam. He was a Jewish fellow because the owner was Jewish and he—he—he gave me some money and said, "Go, go get yourself a coca cola and buy me a pack of cigarettes," you know. And so he said, "Take your time." So I went across the street and I didn't know what was going on, and then when I come back, I went down on first level, everybody's looking me. I said, "What happened?" I didn't know what was going on because the FBI came around and check everybody's identification. Anybody who was draft age, they ask for identification, and they were very strict those days. The security was terrific. Yes, that's what happened during the war.

LEVINE: So in other words you had—you had agreed to be in the special services.

CARAMIA: Well, that's—yes, and then see the story, when the three weeks, after the invasion of France, they were having problem with the France invasion. They needed every—any able body needed in France. The Italian front was going perfect. It was going well, so they didn't need—so they cancel all the Italian program they cancel because they didn't need any more dropped behind the line of the Italian program because the American were advancing. Monte Casino was all taken and they were advancing, everything was fine, but they needed soldiers in France because they were having a lot of problems. So they canceled the Italian program. I was supposed to have been incorporated into the—in the American Army, but then they took a physical examination and I—I was found 4F. I had a punched ear drum. I didn't know I had a punched ear drum, and so I was discharged three weeks later, while all of the Italian that I was with, they were all in France. They were sent to France. Well, that's what I heard. I didn't follow them, so I didn't know. I didn't know much about what was going on. I didn't know the language, so—but from the newspaper I could tell that that's what happened. The Italian program was canceled and every—everybody was switched to the French front.

LEVINE: And what—how—when was that in relation to—

CARAMIA: Then I was discharged. I was sent home. I didn't know what—I didn't know my status anymore, you know, from—my first identification was enemy alien, and the second identification was allied alien. From allied alien, they took my allied alien, so—and then I was—in February I was taken to Ellis Island, you know. And—

LEVINE: That was when you had the thirty days?

CARAMIA: Yes. Yes, it was in the thirty days.

LEVINE: So in other words, you—you—

CARAMIA: I was—

LEVINE: How does that fit in with what was going on in France?

CARAMIA: Oh, nothing. That's a—

LEVINE: That's a different time?

CARAMIA: Different—different story altogether, yeah. Once I got detached and got discharged from the Army, and all the document—when I went to Ellis Island, all my documents were taken away. I had no single piece of paper to show that I have served or anything else. As a matter of fact, I still cannot get a [unclear] that I served three weeks.

LEVINE: Well, how—what happened? Did somebody approached you or you just—

CARAMIA: On what?

LEVINE: When you went to Ellis Island?

CARAMIA: No, they just—well, somebody accused me to, but he didn't know my address. I was in a furnished room. He didn't know my address, but he knew the person I used to go and see. He gave the address of the person I used to go and see, and this person that I used to go and see, he was a very powerful political man. He was—he was the advisor of Roosevelt in Italian Affair. As a matter of fact, he was part of the OSS, but nobody seems to know because he helped the OSS because he was a priest. He was a priest, but he was the highest political man that Italy want to see him as the leader, and he was in Brooklyn, and this man gave the address of Don Luigi Sturzo. That's his name, Luigi Sturzo and when Luigi Sturzo find out, he say, "None of my men could have done that," you know. He was very amazed, you know. He said,

“Somebody else had to accuse you, or give my address.” You see, and as a matter fact, when I was taken to Ellis Island, he send me first a telegram and then he send me a letter that he say he was going to use the powerful political machine known to him, and never used before. So I found out that—I found out from the secretary that he called Roosevelt personally and Roosevelt contact Caruso. Caruso was just a month before he was made Commissioner of Immigration and [unclear] it was just a month before, and I got a document to show that Caruso called up immigration and released me from Ellis Island. Oh—

LEVINE: Now, how did you know—is it Sturzo?

CARAMIA: Sturzo. Yeah, Luigi—Luigi Sturzo. Yeah, L-I-U-G-I, S-T-U-R-Z-O.

LEVINE: How did you happen to have contact with him?

CARAMIA: [Laughs] That was another mystic thing that—how this person in Italy we used to know him to be the most powerful man, but nobody knew where he was. They knew he was in America, but in America, American’s a huge country. But after I—since I came to the United States, just a few days after I arrived, some—some Italian took me to—to his house because they saw my condition because I had no clothes with me. I had—I had wooden shoes, pair of coveralls. I had no money, nothing with me. No. The way I came, no didn’t. I was not prepared for it. So he saw my condition and he took me home and they had a block party. As soon as I found out that I was there, everybody wanted to talk to me. Everybody wanted to know me, you know. They wanted to know what was going on in Italy because for years they had no—no contact whatsoever with—and they happened to be an Italian neighborhood there.

LEVINE: In Brooklyn?

CARAMIA: In Brooklyn. So I had—they had a party there and everybody gave me shirts, suits, and two people—two men, they got—they got together. They got me in a car and they took me on 86th Street.

LEVINE: In Manhattan?

CARAMIA: No, 86th Street in Brooklyn over to the—and they bought me a pair of shoes. They bought me a nice McCann brown pair of shoes. Still I remember that. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CARAMIA: And then when—when they took me back to the—to the place, to the—to the house, there were a lot of other people there waiting for me. You know, including the—the parish—the pastor and a missionary. He was with—a missionary, he was drafted in the war, and he's the one who knew about Luigi Sturzo. Just a coincidence. In a few days, I knew exactly like God was guiding me. Nobody knew in Italy where he was and me, a person that from nowhere, from nobody. I had no—no political connection whatsoever, just in few days, I had—I met Don Luigi Sturzo, and Don Luigi Sturzo happened to be very influential individual, very powerful and happened—and threw him, he want to see me because I was somehow he—he liked me because I was sincere with him, you know, and we—when the fascist party was overthrown, we organized the—the Christ Democratic Party. We organized, the young people from the church. We started to [unclear] all over—all over the town, you know, and we started to organize the Christian Democratic Party, and that's what he—he got to like me and he want to see me. More—he want to hear more from me, and that's why he—he was ready to help me. Yeah, and that's—that's the reason, and I was so lucky. That's another mystic power that unusual. Yeah, the person from nowhere, no place just meets this powerful man, which I receive a lot of help from. I received.

LEVINE: So how long had the Christian Democratic Party been—been going on before you left?

CARAMIA: No, just before this. Since the fascist party was overthrown. That was in September, September '43. September '43 to April '44. So that's what the Christian start to born, you know, started to pick up and the more—the more it was well known, the more people started to organize and they were—they were looking toward this man here because he was the founder of the Italian Popular Party because the founder of the Christian Democratic Party was killed by Mussolini. He was killed but then we, the youth—the Christian Youth Organization combined with the other two parties, the Partiti Popolari and Christian Democratic Party. All the three we—we formed the Christian Democratic Party and that's the reason why, why I belonged to the youth organization. Yeah, I was one of the leader.

LEVINE: Was that dangerous?

CARAMIA: No, no. It was dangerous because we were lucky that the allied came in our own town without any fighting. Without—the fighting started as soon as they started to go north, south of Anzio, or south of Salerno. South of Salerno. That's where the—but we—we were all right because there was no fighting. The allied entered into my own town without a shot, yeah. We welcomed them.

LEVINE: And is there anything more you can say about Ellis Island, about your experience there or what it was like then? Were there lots of people around? Were there—

CARAMIA: Oh, yes, it was very—very crowded and over crowded. As a matter of fact, they had to add an extra—they had two bunks. They had three bunks and because I was one of the last one to get there, I had to get—and the youngest one, I had to get the third one. The top bunk. [Laughs] Oh, yes. Two cases which was very outstanding was a man that he claimed that he was born in the United State, but he spoke so many different language so well that they could not pinpoint—they couldn't believe that he was born in United State, and that's why he was interned at Ellis Island. There was—there was another case of a young man, a young man that he was born in New York. He—he went to buy a Carnation container milk for the baby. He had a just baby born. He had a baby daughter. So he went down the corner to buy the container without any documents, you know. On the corner he met one of his—his friends, and the friend, he was in the Merchant Marine and the friend said, "I'm moving tomorrow. Let's have a drink," you know. "It's very dangerous assignment and God knows if I will come back or not," and one drink led to another. From a container milk, they wind up both onboard the ship and when—the next day they found both themselves on the—in the open sea. So this man, he had no intention to go at sea, but as I understand, it was nine months later the ship came back to United State and right away—

LEVINE: He was seized—

CARAMIA: He had no document things. He was taken to Ellis Island, and the wife had to go to Ellis Island to release him from Ellis Island. Bring some documents. That's the two outstanding things that I can—I can never forget, you know. There's so many different—

LEVINE: Were there people there that you had contact with who had been there a long time?

CARAMIA: Oh, yes. Well, most of the people [unclear-ship's name] [unclear], they were all because I'm an engineer, so—they were all—I used to—because they used to teach me things that I didn't know about the ships, you know, because they had a lot of experience. So I used to be with them, you know, most of the time. Yeah, we used to walk up and down all day long. They had—we had nothing else to do, unless play cards or play soccer. [Laughs] We used to play soccer with the Germans.

LEVINE: Oh, really? The Italians against the Germans?

CARAMIA: Italians against the Germans, yeah. All the interned.

LEVINE: What was that like?

CARAMIA: Oh, well, it was exciting. Something to do. Something.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CARAMIA: And I was young. I used to play soccer, too.

LEVINE: Well, you couldn't really communicate all that well.

CARAMIA: Well, in Italian, yes, but nothing in German, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

CARAMIA: No, we had no—no German. I didn't know nothing of German, no.

LEVINE: And did the Japanese have a team, too?

CARAMIA: No, I didn't—I never knew they—the existence of the Japanese in Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Yeah, see, they were interned, also.

CARAMIA: They were interned, also. They had that—they must had different area. They must had a different area because not in my area. Not in my area. I don't recall any Japanese in that area.

LEVINE: Well, how many—how long were you detained there?

CARAMIA: Nine days.

LEVINE: Nine days, and—

CARAMIA: Nine days, from the fifteenth to the twenty-nine, I think. Yeah—no.

LEVINE: The fifteenth of?

CARAMIA: The twenty-fourth, yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember—

CARAMIA: Yeah.

LEVINE: What month and what year was that?

CARAMIA: It was in February. February 15th—

LEVINE: You're hooked up.

CARAMIA: Yeah. Yeah, okay, I am. February 15th.

LEVINE: February 15, 1945?

CARAMIA: '45, yes.

LEVINE: Yeah. Oh, right, February 15th to 23rd.

CARAMIA: Yeah, the twenty-third, right.

LEVINE: That's what you have written here.

CARAMIA: Yeah. February the 23rd. It was on Friday. I remember distinctly it was on Friday because at [unclear] they telling me to go home, you know, and I didn't—I didn't want to go back to Ellis Island on Friday night. [Laughs] So I went to Brooklyn. I said, "Well, I'll go pick up my belonging and Monday." On Monday, I said, I was free, might as well. Well, I was released on my recognition, reconnaissance.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CARAMIA: But I never knew the real—they never gave me any document, any paper. I didn't even know my status after that. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh.

CARAMIA: I didn't know my—I didn't know my status after that. So on Monday morning I went to Ellis Island and I picked up all my belongings, personal belongings, but all the documents were lost. The Italian people told me that the Ellis Island authority took all my papers and then when I questioned the authority, they told me that they didn't do it. I was wondering what happened to all those documents. I didn't care after that. I was—I was so glad—I was so glad to be—

LEVINE: Free, yeah.

CARAMIA: Free. [pause]

LEVINE: So then, you mean the documentation that you had when you arrived at Ellis Island, you no longer had when you left Ellis Island?

CARAMIA: No. No. I had no document whatsoever left with me, not even the telegram and the letter that I received from Don Luigi Sturzo that he say he was using the most powerful political machine that's never used before, just to help me out, you know, because he took me very at his heart. He took me, yeah, because I described to him what happened during the fascists because he was in England at the time. He was in England for many years and there was Roosevelt took Don Luigi Sturzo to United States with a special plane because he had a heart problem. A special plane, he—and they put—well, he want to live with one of his friend in Brooklyn. So he was in a very private house, but the private house was—he had—several times I used to go to visit him, general. High rank general, they used to go to visit him because he was—he was the Consul for the Italian government. You know, he was the future of the Italian government. He was actually he formed the first Italian government. The first Italian government was formed in Brooklyn. It was under his leadership. Under his tutor, yeah.

LEVINE: And what became—this is now Don Luigi Sturzo.

CARAMIA: Sturzo, yeah.

LEVINE: Sturzo.

CARAMIA: Don Luigi Sturzo, yeah.

LEVINE: What happened? He formed—the first Italian government was formed and—

CARAMIA: Yes. Well, see, everything was on the United States approval or disapproval. Nobody—see.

LEVINE: Nobody knew at the time.

CARAMIA: Nobody knew, but what everything was through United State government approved. Everything was in consultation, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

CARAMIA: Yeah. See, now, I'm telling you. There were—

LEVINE: Wait—I want to—

CARAMIA: Is this working?

LEVINE: Yeah, it's working fine. I think we should pause here and let me change the tape.

CARAMIA: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: So it doesn't run out in mid sentence. Okay, this is—

[END OF SIDE B, TAPE 1
[BEGIN SIDE A, TAPE 2]

LEVINE: This is the beginning of Tape 2 and I'm speaking with John Caramia on December 14, 1996 and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, well, it would be nice to have some of this material on file, you know, relevant to your particular story.

CARAMIA: Yeah.

LEVINE: [papers rustling] So I see you have your name on the Wall of Honor.

CARAMIA: Yes, I do. But I was lucky in that, too.

LEVINE: Well, see, in other words, after you left, you went back to Brooklyn and then—and then what? What did you do then?

CARAMIA: Well, since I had nobody here, I joined the Merchant Marine. Well, I was—I went back on the ships. I started to say, I went back and forth.

LEVINE: Okay, so now you were in the American Merchant Marines.

CARAMIA: Merchant Marine. On the—yes.

LEVINE: And where were you sent? Were did you go back and forth from?

CARAMIA: Well, many different part of the world. Cuba, Italy, Germany, France. As a matter of fact, on one of the ship I was ten months coast wise between Georgia and the Gulf of Mexico because we used to—we used to distribute gasolines. Gasoline from—from one port to another. We used to go from Bay Town, Texas, through Jacksonville, Bay Town, Texas, Tampa. Bay Town, Texas to Savannah, Georgia. We used to—the ship that I was on, it was a tanker, just to distribute gasoline.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CARAMIA: And just—but it was under United State.

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh.

CARAMIA: It was the United State because we had the gunnery people onboard the ship. They were all Italian—ah, American sailors.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Now, how—and when you went some place else, were you also distributing gasoline?

CARAMIA: No, no, no.

LEVINE: [unclear]

CARAMIA: No, no, other—different ship, different cargo. Like for instance, we went to Cuba, we'd pick up a load of brown sugar and we took them to England. Another time I went to Maryland, pick up a load of grain and we took them to Italy because, you know, all those. Every time I used to take a trip, I use different ship, a different cargo. But the first—the first ship that I was on was James Rumsey. James Rumsey was a liberty ship.

LEVINE: How do you spell that, the ship?

CARAMIA: R-U-M-S-E-Y. Rumsey.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CARAMIA: Yeah, James Rumsey and there we went to—we were supposed to go to France and then we had developed a problem with the engine, we wind up to Liverpool. We unloaded the ship. We unloaded. They fixed the engine and then we come back here. That was another lucky, on my side. You know, because we could have gone to France and get into trouble, but that's another lucky trip.

LEVINE: Yeah. So—just to get back to Ellis Island, just a couple of questions. When you were eating at Ellis Island—

CARAMIA: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: Was the food—was it like German food, Italian food?

CARAMIA: Oh, no, no. They were American food, regular. It's like being in the army. There was no difference, the food they were serving me in Fort Lee, Virginia and Ellis Island. Everything was almost identical, even the plate and the—tray, they were all just like military camp. Military, armed force, no different, you know.

LEVINE: I see, and were you treated well there—

CARAMIA: Oh, yes. We—nobody had any complaining about the food because most of the cooks in the—they were all cooks, they used to be onboard the Italian crews. The cooks, so I had to be. Just had to supply them the good—the good food and they used to cook, but mostly they were all interned people working for the—yeah.

LEVINE: Now, how long did you stay in the Merchant Marines?

CARAMIA: Well, I stayed up to 1948. Four year—yeah, four years. Four years.

LEVINE: And then what? Then what did you do?

CARAMIA: Well, and then I came—I went to—the immigration sent me a letter that if I did not apply for my permanent visa, I should do it. So I got off the ship. Oh, I got off the ship because they passed a law—now, at the begin of the war, there were more ships than crew. Then by 1948, there were more crew than ships, so what happened, the union made a law that every officer onboard a ship had to be American citizen. So I was not an American citizen, I had to get off the ship. But meantime, the immigration sent me a letter to—I got it here.

LEVINE: Were you discharged then?

CARAMIA: Well, every trip we get discharged. Ever trip the Coast Guard give you a discharge paper that completed that particular cycle of a trip. Every—every—

LEVINE: I see, so you were—it wasn't like you were in the Merchant Marines for a period of time, like you might be in the Coast Guard or in the Army or—

CARAMIA: No, no, no, no, no, no. No, that was a volunteer—it was voluntary service. Yeah, but it was beneficial to me because anybody who served under the American Flag, all during the war they were entitled to a visa. See, all the visa that was not used at that nationality during the war was allocated to people who served in the Armed Force or under the American—or served, and I was lucky to be benefit by that, you know. As a matter fact, anybody who served under the United States flag could have become citizen within ninety days. Instead, in three weeks I would have been there ninety days, Fort Lee, Virginia, I would have become a citizen ninety days. So those are the law of the wartime.

LEVINE: So when did you become a citizen?

CARAMIA: 1951. June—June 1951, and as soon as I became a citizen, I was allowed to work in engineering because they were—you could not get a job in engineering unless you were a citizen because every engineering firm in the United State was involved in United State contracts, you know. All war effort. All defense work, and you had to be American citizen in order to work. As soon as I became a citizen, the following day I was working as an engineer in engineering.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you have to go to classes to learn, you know, the [unclear] to the questions—

CARAMIA: No, no, no.

LEVINE: The history of this country or—

CARAMIA: No. Oh, no, it was not because I learned quite a bit on my own. Yeah.

LEVINE: But because you had—because you had served the American government, I guess you were—you were made a citizen without all that—

CARAMIA: Oh, yes. I had to go through that. Yeah, three years after.

LEVINE: Oh, you did do that.

CARAMIA: Instead of five, three years after.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Were you—were you tested?

CARAMIA: I don't recall.

LEVINE: [unclear]

CARAMIA: I don't—she was asking me a couple question and soon as they found out that you were fluent—well, I had a little more knowledge of English at the time, and it was easy to pass the test and onboard the ship I had plenty time to study.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And, okay, so then you became—you were able to work as an engineer.

CARAMIA: Oh, yes. Yes, as soon as I became because I passed the test with the Coast Guard and the—and I became a marine engineer. I became—

LEVINE: And then where did you work at that—in that—

CARAMIA: Well, I worked in the—in the naval architect marine engineers outfit, you know, company. One of the biggest in Manhattan and I was—I was very lucky because they—I learned quite a bit because they were assigned to—to design a nuclear—the first nuclear submarines, the Nautilus and I worked on the 571. I worked on the 575, which was the Seawolf. I was working, and from there on I work on submarine for many years.

LEVINE: Did you retire from that?

CARAMIA: Oh, no. No, no. No, no, no, I don't—then I switched to nuclear power plants. I switched in 1969. I switched to nuclear power plants, so I left the marine field at the time because it didn't pay much.

LEVINE: Oh.

CARAMIA: The marine field never paid much, no.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CARAMIA: But I went back almost on my semi-retirement and designed the last ship that the United State ever built here. Yeah.

LEVINE: Nuclear?

CARAMIA: No. No, this particular one was not a nuclear. No.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CARAMIA: Nuclear. I was senior supervisor in Portsmouth, New Hampshire for the first missile nuclear submarines. I was senior supervisor there and because security clearance. Many—many couldn't go onboard the nuclear submarines unless they had security clearance, and I had to do all my work because very few people—I still don't know why me and the American born, they were not allowed to. No.

LEVINE: Well, what was the last ship that the Americans built that you worked on?

CARAMIA: The FFG-51. The FFG-51, yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, looking back on—on all of this, how—how do you feel—how do you put in perspective your Italian heritage and beginnings with your—

CARAMIA: Well, somehow—somehow I blended into because I lost contact with all the Italians and all my contacts in all my engineering field, they were all Americans. So even if I still retain, a heavy Italian accent, I still—I don't know myself to have an accent. Other people tell me. [Laugh] Because I never bothered—you know, I never bothered to correct it. Nobody paid attention to it. When you work among professional people, professional people, they don't really bring out the—

LEVINE: No.

CARAMIA: As long as you do your job and—and they respect you for what you know and what you do, you know, they don't care about the accent because many scientists are foreign born, much, much heavy accent than I. Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: So you—you said that you go back to Ellis Island—

CARAMIA: Every 22nd of April, if I can, whenever I can, if the weather's perfect and just I love to—to [unclear] around. You know, I love to watch the people goes there.

LEVINE: Because that's the day that—

CARAMIA: Yeah, the day I arrived in the United State, fifty-two years ago.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CARAMIA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, how—what does it mean to you to be here, in this country?

CARAMIA: Well, it's—it's like winning the lottery ticket. [Laughs] You know when I was released from Ellis—Ellis Island, 70 Columbus Avenue at that Friday, like I won the lottery, you know. I didn't know—I was so happy, I didn't ask them for document. I didn't ask nothing. They just tell me to go home, you know. My interpreter was a Russian. My interpreter in Washington, he was an American which spoke Italian, French, Spanish, and the—and the one at Ellis Island was Russian. [Laughs] [unclear] Another story, but I was assigned to a—to an American ship. I was supposed to have gone to Boston. So I went to Boston. When I got into—to the port, I found out the—the name was Bostonian. The name Bostonian. So I looked at the ship, had a Panamanian flag. When I went onboard that ship there, then I start to walk front and I saw an old cabin, had all Italian tags. All the cabin name, they were all in Italian. It was an Italian ship. It was taken by United States, all right, and I was looking for somebody spoken Italian. I looked all over the

ship. There was not a single Italian onboard that ship, and that ship was given to a Danish shipping corporation and that ship had Norwegian, Sweden—Sweden and Danish because Danish ship corporation. I didn't know how they understood among themselves, but everybody knew—everybody knew their jobs. Italian ship, Panamanian flag onboard and I was the only Italian on board. [Laughs] Imagine that, this wartime, anybody who was willing to—to work for the United State. See, that's what might have happened to the ship I was on, I arrived on. They must have taken the ship over, United State. United State took the ship over and replace with the American crew because many of these crew officers, they were not allowed to—they had poor security clearance. I wouldn't be surprised, was taken like all the ships. Like that tanker I was on for ten months, was an Italian ships, but built in Sicily, in Palermo it was built. But they had all Danish, Swedish and Norwegian crew. No American—well, the American, they were all the gunnery people. They were all American sailors, they were. They had the guns onboard the ship, you know. For ten months I sailed on that ship there.

LEVINE: What—what—when you look back on it all, what do you feel—

CARAMIA: [unclear] I started some adventure, yeah. I started as an adventure [unclear] back there. I'm still laughing. I'm still smiling. I'm still—because I started like an adventure and I continue that way and I thank God, God has been helping me, has been pushing me toward this—this stage of the game, you know. I still feel the—the hands of God behind my back, still guiding me. That's the way I feel, yeah, because I made no effort. It's just I was being guided because I was a good boy when I was young. I lived in a church for nineteen years. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CARAMIA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Is there anything else that you would like to say about your immigration experience or anything else that maybe we haven't discussed?

CARAMIA: Well—well, the immigration now became very ticklish nowadays. At the time, they needed immigrants, but now the immigrants, too many. It's now I've blended with the American. I have the same feeling of the Americans that we have to think about the Americans first. I'm an American nationalist. America for America for Americans, you know. That's the way I feel about it, you know, because we have to look because we don't know. Many of these aliens nowadays, they're not loyal to United State. They're loyal to—to make money. To better life without country [unclear] toward the United States.

LEVINE: Do you know what it was that—that kind of cemented your loyalty to this country?

CARAMIA: Because I was—I was requested. I was asked to, and I fell in love when I saw the grandeur of the United States, especial when they loaded the food onboard the ship. You know, it was so clean. It was so palatable, you know, and there was so much, you know, that compare what I left Italy because when I left Italy, they practically had no food onboard the ship, you know. They had no food, and—and when—when they served our first meal onboard the ship, we could eat as much as we could. That was a very because—

LEVINE: That's the—the time when you went out first?

CARAMIA: When I—when we arrived in the United State, when the first—that's when I fell in love with the United State. The amount of food that was given to us. You know, all cigarettes, all you can eat, milk, all kind of—the way the fruit was served to us, you know, because we didn't have any—any fruit. For weeks we didn't have any fruit, just enough bean, lima beans. We ate lima beans for almost three weeks. [Laughs] So—so I was glad and I fell in love with the United State, and my loyalty was because I can't complain. I was been—I been treated terrific. I was very well respected by any company I worked for. They still—I was elected a member of the first associative of navy, Society of Naval Architecture, Marine Engineers. Then I was elected a member and I was given many assignment that no other people could. I can't complain. Many times I used to get trapped. I'd get assignment to a job which I was not at the level. I felt that it was—I was not capable, but then they told me, "Don't worry about it. You take care. You do it." Up to day, I have to confess for the first time, I don't have a single piece of paper that I ever went to school. I never—I don't have a single piece of paper that I ever went to school, and nobody ever questioned that. Nobody ever questioned.

LEVINE: Well, you obviously knew what you were doing.

CARAMIA: Even that's the reason why I can't believe the security clearance. Usually they go investigate schooling, background. No—

LEVINE: Well, just because you don't have the paper doesn't mean you weren't investigated.

CARAMIA: No, no, everything—I was investigated behind because I—they never gave me any documents that I was really—you know, but beyond the door, they had me really investigated totally.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CARAMIA: Otherwise they would not have assign—assigned me to jobs which—
which required very good security clearance.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now—

CARAMIA: I—I don't know when this started. Could have been the first day I set
foot on the United State and I volunteer, you know. That's why I'm
very grateful to America, you know.

LEVINE: I wanted to ask you what your wife's name is.

CARAMIA: Lena.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

CARAMIA: Barbari.

LEVINE: B-A-R-B-A-R-I?

CARAMIA: I, right. Barbari.

LEVINE: And your—you have one child?

CARAMIA: One child, Larry. Lawrence. Lawrence, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CARAMIA: He's in—he's in Washington. Well, in Washington area because he
has been in the military for twenty-one years.

LEVINE: Oh, so he kind of followed—is he—is he an engineer?

CARAMIA: Oh, yes, he's an electronic engineer. He graduated from RPI. He
graduated. He followed my footstep. Yeah, well, footstep in a way,
engineering. Marine engineering. He's an electronic engineer.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CARAMIA: And he's in Springfield, Virginia, and he's in charge of personnel in the
Navy. Navy personnel.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Yeah. Okay. Well, I think I've covered everything. I mean,
I'm sure you could go on and on—

CARAMIA: Oh.

LEVINE: Because your story is so rich. Is there anything else you can think of that you'd like to say—say before we close?

CARAMIA: No. I think I going give you this.

LEVINE: Yes. We'll put some of this information on file in your file.

CARAMIA: Yeah, this—this the man who was the—the power behind the first Italian government and that was with the approval of United States.

LEVINE: Right.

CARAMIA: Government. You know, nothing was—because the first governor of United States was through him.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. Well, this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I've had the privilege of talking today with John Caramia, who came from Italy at the age of nineteen, unbeknownst to him where he was going, arrived in the United States in 1944 on April 22nd, and today is December 14, 1996. I'm here in River Edge, New Jersey, and I am signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]