

EI-874

SANTINA MERRUSI LOSSO

BIRTH DATE: NOVEMBER 2, 1902

INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 7, 1997

RUNNING TIME: 1:00:00

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PhD

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: HIGHLAND PARK, NEW JERSEY

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 2/1998

TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

ITALY, 1913

AGE 11

PASSAGE ON "THE ANCONA"

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

LEVINE: Okay. Let's start here by my introducing Santina Merrusi Losso.

LOSSO: Now, married, yeah.

LEVINE: Losso, right. And you came from Italy in 1913 when you were eleven years old. And today, at the time of this interview, you're ninety-four years of age.

LOSSO: Yes.

LEVINE: And I'm here in Highland Park in Mrs. Losso's home.

LOSSO: Yeah.

LEVINE: And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, if you would start, Mrs. Losso, by saying where you were born in Italy.

LOSSO: Oh, I was born in a small town. Well, it wasn't small. It's a providence of Genoa. Well, that, and there's a small town in

between that. I don't know if you, well, it could be Cavari[ph], they used to call it. But we most, Genoa, I think, is a big city.

LEVINE: Well, you said Borzonasca.

LOSSO: Borzonasca. That's the town where I came from.

LEVINE: Right. And that's spelled B-O-R-Z . . .

LOSSO: O.

LEVINE: N-A-S-C-A.

LOSSO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Right? Okay. So that's where you were born. Now, when you were you born?

LOSSO: Where?

LEVINE: When?

LOSSO: Oh, when? 1902.

LEVINE: And the date?

LOSSO: Wait a minute. (she laughs) I was, yeah, it was in November . . .

LEVINE: That's right.

LOSSO: Wait a minute. Now I got all fouled up with this. 1902, November the 2nd.

LEVINE: Right, okay. Okay. (they laugh) Now, when you think about Borzonasca.

LOSSO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Borzonasca, however you say it, what are the things that you remember about that town?

LOSSO: We had a business over there. We had a big store.

LEVINE: What did you sell?

LOSSO: Oh, everything. Everything. It was a big store. It was the only big one we had in the town. Oh, we were well-known over there. And, uh, my father used to work, he was a manager in a factory. And my mother raised ten kids. No, five girls and four boys.

LEVINE: Well, now, the store, your father didn't work in the store?

LOSSO: No. He was out on business in a factory. He was like a manager in a big building over there. He was good at that.

LEVINE: And what was his name?

LOSSO: Lino, Lionel, they called him. L-I-N-O. Merrusi.

LEVINE: And, uh, what do you remember about your father from when you were a little girl in Italy? What do you remember him doing, and . . .

LOSSO: Oh, he was a good man.

LEVINE: Did he ever do things with you? Now, be careful, because you're hooked up here. (referring to the microphone wire)

LOSSO: I know. Here's his picture. (she laughs) He was a nice man. He was like a manager in the factory. He was good. And she had

five girls and four boys, my mother. And then, besides, she raised a, yeah, she raised another one outside.

LEVINE: How did that happen that she raised . . .

LOSSO: No, because the woman didn't have no milk, you know what I mean? They don't do it here, with the bottles and everything. They used to raise, help each other that way. See?

LEVINE: So she nursed someone else's baby who couldn't nurse . . .

LOSSO: Also, yeah, yeah. Oh, we all, you know, in the town you're all like that. You help one another. It's not small, because it's got two big churches in there, but I mean we're all known, like. It's not here. Here we only know, I don't even know who lives in here. (she lowers her voice) They're all Jewish people. They all moved in here because they don't have to pay nothing. All Highland Park moved in here. We're about five of us from the beginning, since it was built. It's about twenty-two years old.

LEVINE: Well, now, let's talk more about, uh, about your life in Italy. Did you go to school there?

LOSSO: I went to a Catholic school over there. They only had that. My daughter, she's got the pictures, we take it, yeah, with the sisters and all this, the religious, you know. Very strict over there.

LEVINE: And tell me about the school and about the church.

LOSSO: Well, as I can remember, he had a picture taken, too. Take everything away from me. She loves to have antiques like that. We used to go in the Catholic school. We didn't have, what you call it?

LEVINE: Like a public school.

LOSSO: Yeah, a public school. That's only in the religion over there.
Yeah, she's got my picture there. It was taken with the sisters.

LEVINE: What do you remember about the sisters over there?

LOSSO: Oh, they're nice girls, very strict over there.

LEVINE: What would they be strict about?

LOSSO: The religion more, too, because there's only one thing over there, the religion. We're all Italian, and we're all the same nationality, and everything the same. So we didn't really, they were all good. We had a good, we had a big department store over there, a big store. We used to sell everything that you can remember.

LEVINE: Did you sell food?

LOSSO: Everything! Clothes and material. It was like one store had everything in it. We used to pay rent over there, because these people lived in the next town. Well, that's more like, uh, would be like Highland Park. And they had business down there. They used to go back and forth. And we rented the place there. Oh, what a beautiful place it is! They got big stairs like that, all marbled. Even in a small town! Compared to here.

LEVINE: Now, where the marble stairs were, was that where you lived? Or where . . .

LOSSO: That's where we, we lived in there. We lived on the first floor, like. We'd pay rent. They had four flights. The stairs were that big, all marble. And then we had, like, the department

store. They carry everything. We left so many bills over there.

We used to pay by the, by the month or by the week, you know? And all of a sudden they decided to send us, they'd come here because she had five girls and four boys, and the boys were over here, and one sister. Then they sent for my father to come over from over there, to be here with them, and then they won't let him come back. So we had to decide to sell, we came over, five of us.

LEVINE: Well, now, your brothers went over first?

LOSSO: Yeah.

LEVINE: But did you have, like, aunts and uncles, or did you have any other family over here?

LOSSO: No, only brothers.

LEVINE: So your brothers were, how was it that your first brothers decided to come? Do you remember?

LOSSO: Not that I know. Well, I guess they wanted to make a different way of living, probably, and things like that, because over there, in a small town, what can you do? There's not much business or anything. So they came out, the two of them came out, and we came out in five of us on the boat. I was eleven years then.

LEVINE: Now, how come your father couldn't go back?

LOSSO: They won't let him.

LEVINE: Your brothers?

LOSSO: Yeah. He had four boys. But three of them was here. And they

all work, and one had, like, a house, and he had a saloon business, restaurant, like that. And, uh, that's when they send my father, and he's, he was here, my mother was over there, we were five over there yet. So they decided then we all should come over. We sold everything over there, and then we came over.

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

LOSSO: Louise, Louisa.

LEVINE: Louisa. And what was her maiden name? Do you remember?

LOSSO: Oh, I couldn't remember that now. If my daughters were here, probably. I could think of that name.

LEVINE: That's all right. Whatever you, if you happen to think of it you can say it.

LOSSO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. And did you have Grandmother and Grandfather over in Italy? No.

LOSSO: No? No.

LEVINE: How about aunts and uncles?

LOSSO: No. We were all in the, just . . .

LEVINE: Just the immediate family.

LOSSO: Yeah, just the family. We didn't have nobody there.

LEVINE: Now, were you closest to any particular family member?

LOSSO: Over there?

LEVINE: Yeah. When you were . . .

LOSSO: Oh, you know how it is over there. Everybody knows each other, like here. Not like here, because here they changed. I mean, uh, you know, over there, the people, they're all like in one family. They all know each other, and you live a different life altogether.

LEVINE: Tell me about the church and what kind of holidays did you celebrate in the church?

LOSSO: Did you see that picture I showed you?

LEVINE: Yeah.

LOSSO: Yeah. Oh, they're religious over there. We had two churches. That was the big one, then when we used to call the little church, and we were, like, from here to there on the town. They were up for it, and this was down here. It was a small church. It was nice over there.

LEVINE: Could you describe your first Holy Communion?

LOSSO: Huh?

LEVINE: What was it like when you received your first Holy . . .

LOSSO: What they do here, mostly it's the same thing. Oh, yeah. They were strict over there. Too bad they got all those, I never thought of asking for those pictures. I had all the pictures taken with them. I got that one up there. That's when we came over, the five of us.

LEVINE: Oh, great. Now, were you, um, was that a big day for you, when

you received your first Holy Communion?

LOSSO: What?

LEVINE: Was it a big day when you got your First . . .

LOSSO: Oh, in Europe, yeah, they celebrated.

LEVINE: What did you wear? Do you remember what you had on?

LOSSO: Oh, yeah. I had a veil, just like here. Oh, yeah. The religion goes that way, from the pope on, there's everything, the same way. Yeah. Oh, it was nice over there. I had pictures taken there with the sisters and the whole class, because there's only religion.

LEVINE: How big a class was it? Was it a lot of children, or . . .

LOSSO: Oh, yeah. It was about twenty-five of us in there. Oh, yeah. See, she got all those pictures. That one up there, she loves the antiques and things, like to remember. This, the other one up here, she works for my son, he's in the (?). She don't give a thing what goes on. She don't like what she does.

LEVINE: It's a difference, a difference in personalities.

LOSSO: Oh, she's just a, and then any little thing everywhere, she's altogether this. And you won't even think she belongs two sisters. They hardly even talk to each other.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, how about what did you do when you were little? Did you help the, did you help your mother or father do certain things?

LOSSO: Well, we had a store there.

LEVINE: And what did you do? Did you do anything in the store?

LOSSO: Well, I used to go to school. I used to go to school and then, you know, because I was young yet. Boy.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you did? Did you have a girlfriend, or did you . . .

LOSSO: Over there, a small town, you know, we all know each other, you know, together. Oh, that's the beauty of it, yeah. Oh, we had a lot of . . .

LEVINE: What do you remember about it that makes you feel like it was a really nice place to be a girl?

LOSSO: Well, compared to this, you know, a big city, country, whatever it is, it's altogether different over there.

LEVINE: Yeah, tell about it.

LOSSO: We did different, the whole town know each other. We, like one family. I mean, we all get together, holidays or anything like that. It's all, it's altogether different, like, well, here's got a lot of denominations, you know, that you can't expect that, but over there we were like that. We knew everybody who lived in town, because it wasn't that big.

LEVINE: And everybody was the same as far as being Catholic . . .

LOSSO: Oh, yeah, we all respect each other. They're all nice people, really. Oh, I could get used to over there. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Tell me about . . .

LOSSO: I came over here, I had to go to school. I, yeah, I went up to

the sixth grade that time. That was a graduation, like, those years here. Well, I came in New York, and I lived there ever since. I came here in 1929. I got married here.

LEVINE: Can you remember the kinds of food that your mother made when you were a little girl in Italy?

LOSSO: Oh, Jesus, compared to here. And I do my own, yet, like I'm used to it. I got all the utensils here. And, you know, my mother thought, she never, oh, yeah. But she used to work down in a big city and, uh, and she used to be the cook there for the priest, for the church. And one time she took me down there, I was about nine years old. And me, I wasn't used to being among those, you know, the priest and all that, you know? And I got, well, we were respected, though. We know how to be with them, they'll tell you, you know. And then when, oh, no. Then she, my mother was a very good cook. So she went to another city, it's a bigger city, Menelia[ph], they call it, and there used to be the church, and the priests where they used to live. She used to be the cook there. So she invited me down there one week.

LEVINE: What was it like?

LOSSO: Oh, it was beautiful. Because we were never out of town, you know what I mean? We had no cars or nothing. We always lived there, and all the people. We went over there, and me, I was about nine years old. (she laughs) I wasn't used to being among priests and all those things, you know? Well, she had her own, she used to work there, though, she'd help out. Then one day they took me, I was nine years old, they took me to the big city because it's got the waterfront and, you know, the ocean and everything. Oh, it's beautiful. But the priests don't go among

the other people. They go all away from there, and there are all rocks. Me, I was young, I never saw the ocean before in my life.

They took me down there. I went down there for a week, like a vacation, you know? And they took me by the arm, they took me there. Oh, I was afraid to see all that water, we never saw it.

He took me by the arm over here, and he dunked me up and down to get used to the water.

LEVINE: Oh!

LOSSO: But they were nice, though. They, they're more strict than they are here, though. You know, they respect you. Well, I stayed there about a week, like a vacation, you know, something like that. And I used to like it because it was a big city. We used to go here and there. She used to cook, and then my mother was a good cook.

LEVINE: What kind of meals did she make? Can you remember anything that she cooked when you were little?

LOSSO: I make it here, the same thing. I got all the, you know what my mother thought of it when she left Europe? She thought she was going to the end of the world. She brought five mattress. I got one in there. A wool. She brought everything, we had the store there, too. But we left so much money there. They used to pay by the week, or the month, you know? We didn't care. We had to come, and we just lived in this beautiful building. It was, the stairs were that big, all marble stairways. They had balconies, they had, too. But these people, they were well-known. They just had business in the city. Camarin[ph], they used to call it, see? And they used to go back and forth, you know. They used to rent where we lived. There was a beautiful. And, uh,

what else can I tell you?

LEVINE: Well, tell me what your mother cooked?

LOSSO: Oh, God, I can remember everything. She could cook anything. But this, then they're here. Here they got more seasoning, more, I still do my own cooking my own way.

LEVINE: Can you tell me something you cook that you learned in Italy?

LOSSO: Well, we make ravioli. You know about that?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LOSSO: I got the rolling pin here yet.

LEVINE: You mean you make it from scratch?

LOSSO: Oh, yeah! Like the dough. I see sometime on Sunday there there's a lot of Italian people, but they make, they got everything extra that they need. We used to make it with what we had, see? She had, my second brother, he opened a place up in Woodcliff Lake. Oh, it was a beautiful, it took the whole square block, and it had columns like this. It was a, what you call that, like rich people, millionaires. He had the whole square block. Gates that high, you know? He used to go up there on Saturday and Sunday, you know, to pass the weekend, because we always work, and, uh, she has a grand opening, my brother, the people that they know you. And she made these ravioli.

LEVINE: Do you remember how she made them?

LOSSO: Oh, sure. I got the rolling pin in there, all cut out, the way they stamped them and the way they make them. I made them for my daughter, what was it, a couple of weeks ago, somebody's birthday

or something.

LEVINE: Could you describe how you make them?

LOSSO: What you put in?

LEVINE: Yeah.

LOSSO: Oh, um, now, wait a minute. Well, it's like, Bessie here, there's an Italian woman, she cooks the same way we do. On Sunday that's all it is, cooks. The flour, and eggs, a little salt, you know, we make the dough. Then, you know, you make, softened it, you work it and make it nice and smooth. Then when it's about that big you put flour on the board. My daughter's got the board. And, uh, and you make, not long ago I made it, but I can't do it no more, because I can't stand so much on my feet. And my, uh, her son helped me out, because I get a backache when I work, and as much as I try to do it, I can't do it. And, uh, oh, yeah, well, it's regular dough. It's not anything special that you make a pie or something, eggs and, you know, and things like that. And then we roll it out. We got the long rolling pin, it's about that big, the straight one. Then we make the dough and make it big. Wait till I show you the other one! Then we make the filling.

LEVINE: What do you make for the filling?

LOSSO: Oh, Jesus. What the hell do you put in there? Spinach, eggs, cheese, and sausage. Yeah. And meat, beef we put in. We cook all that stuff, you know? And then when it's cooked, we make the dough first, we make a big one, and we divide it in half, just turn it. Then we spread it all over, you know? And this piece, you put it over, and you put the rolling pin. Oh, well, you put

the filling in it. Then we put it over, then you go over. I'll show it to you before you go. They go with this rolling pin in squares, it makes the squares, with the filling popping up. And there's a line there where the rolling pin goes, you know? And then they puffed it. It's got, made purposely for that. And then you roll it with a cutter, you know. And they cut it all like this. Oh, she made it for me open, I don't know how many she made. She got sick up there. We got a big, it was up on the hill, like, and they had the Woodcliff Lake. They got the lake in the front there, and these people was a millionaire that had it. They had all the homes for the waiters and the people that worked there. Then he had another little house in the front. Too bad I never took those pictures. I knew I had them someplace. And, oh, it was, it had big columns like that in the front. Oh, it was a beautiful place. He was a millionaire. And on the side there they had all houses, little houses, for the people that worked there.

LEVINE: I see. Before we talk about this country, is there anything else about Italy that you remember, when you think back to that time, and . . .

LOSSO: Well, see, we never were now, really, to go out in different cities and different, I was small then. My father worked, and then we had the store there, and, uh . . .

LEVINE: Remember other things that your mother packed when she was coming here?

LOSSO: Oh, she thought she was coming to the end of the, she thought she was coming to the end of the world. I never saw, I got a mattress in there. It's all wool. I had it remade. It came, it

was about that high. She brought five. She thought she was coming to the end of the world. Oh, my God! All the stuff that she brought over, all the utensils and everything. We had a store there, too, but most of it we left there, the money, you know, they used to pay by the month there, you know, write it out? And, uh, oh, she brought so much. I don't know what she thought. I got all of her stuff here.

LEVINE: Oh.

LOSSO: That she used to use, and then some of them, my daughter has it up there, because I had them in the house and I saw, I came, I couldn't bring everything in here, so she's got half of my stuff up there. (she laughs) All copper.

LEVINE: Copper pots?

LOSSO: Oh, over there is everything copper. Yeah. Oh, she, she used to be a good cook. So she had it, and my brother had the grand opening.

LEVINE: Well, uh, tell me, then, when you were leaving, do you remember saying goodbye to people in the town?

LOSSO: Oh, yeah. We left all the money over there. They had, you know, pay by the month . . .

LEVINE: People owed you from the store.

LOSSO: What were we missing, though? Because we were never out. We were brought up in there, and that's where you lived, like. It was like Highland Park, the same thing. You're used to it, and that's it.

LEVINE: You remember traveling to Genoa, when you left your little town?

LOSSO: Yeah, in there, a carriage, then, with the horses to ride. In those days we had no automobiles. Yeah. We went there.

LEVINE: And did you stay . . .

LOSSO: And I got scared because I never saw, I never saw the water, the ocean, and then, uh, the ship besides, oh, Jesus, what a ship we had.

LEVINE: Tell me about the ship.

LOSSO: You know, they had sections, like they would have here, first, and then there's four in the cabin. That goes like this, back and forth. The ocean was so rough! And we had the trunks under there, came in through the window, the round window there. Oh, Jesus. Oh!

LEVINE: So you were in a cabin?

LOSSO: Yeah. Oh, they had their own, you know. You buy whatever, yeah, we're on the second class.

LEVINE: Oh, you were . . .

LOSSO: The first class is rich people, like here. They got everything modern, you know? But we came over, it was on the second class. We were five of us.

LEVINE: Do you remember if there was a steerage on your ship? Were the people in the bottom, like, living in like a dormitory?

LOSSO: Yeah, there are two, three floors there. Oh, yeah. It was pretty big at that time, that ship. Not like they made them

lately. Yeah. Oh, we were, we had, the water came in and out, was going like that. The following week it sank, that ship.

LEVINE: Really!

LOSSO: We came here on St. Patrick's Day.

LEVINE: That's when you arrived. Do you remember coming into the New York Harbor?

LOSSO: Oh, yeah. Now my daughter's telling me she brings stuff down there on display and all that, and, you know, she doesn't realize. She goes for things like that. My other daughter's not interested in those things. She doesn't, but her, she loves it.

LEVINE: So when you first came into the Harbor, did you see the Statue of Liberty?

LOSSO: Oh, yeah. Oh . . .

LEVINE: Did you know what it was?

LOSSO: Well, not those days, because I don't even remember if we were taught in school, because it was a religious, you know, everything more likely that way, too. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: And did you have to, do you remember going to Ellis Island?

LOSSO: Oh, and we docked here, sure. This is the one I got.

LEVINE: Well, that's when you became a citizen.

LOSSO: Yeah.

LEVINE: But before that, when you first came over, do you remember like,

um . . .

LOSSO: Oh, Jesus, it was like a stable over here. It was all little, like a room. Everybody went one room or the other. Oh, my God, the way we came in, when we saw that, we were like animals. Put us up in those. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Now, it was you and your mother and one brother . . .

LOSSO: No, yeah, the youngest one, my older sister. There's a picture up here.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

LOSSO: And, uh, we were five of us coming over. Yeah. Wait a minute, my youngest brother, me, and two sisters, and my mother, yeah, we were five of us.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, uh, do you remember if there was any problem at Ellis Island? Was there any problem with anybody being sick, or . . .

LOSSO: No, no, we did. Oh, we came in there like animals at that time. All little . . . (she laughs) Little boxes to put separate people, all those people coming in, you know, at that day.

LEVINE: Did you have to stay overnight at Ellis Island?

LOSSO: No. Then my brothers got me. They came. They took us, and he had a home, and we went in there at the beginning.

LEVINE: Do you remember being examined at Ellis Island?

LOSSO: Oh, yeah. They make you through.

LEVINE: Your hair, looking at your eyes?

LOSSO: No, they don't go for that. They just, where you come from and things like that, more. They don't . . .

LEVINE: Questions.

LOSSO: Yeah. They don't, as far as I remember anyways.

LEVINE: What was it like when you went there? Was it crowded?

LOSSO: Oh, the whole boat. Oh, my God, there's three, three flights in there, in the boat. So many people. We were like, to me it looked like animals, like a bathroom. All boxes, like that, we called them boxes. Ellis Island, those days. And now she tells me she bought things, this and that. "Gee," I says, "I would love to see the difference it is now." What they remodeled it again now. Oh, God. Everything was new to us, because we were never out of the town, you know? And everything seemed so, my brother, not the young, the youngest one was with us and, uh, the second one. Oh, he was crazy after me. He had a house, and he had a saloon in New York.

LEVINE: Where in New York? Do you remember?

LOSSO: In 26th Street, between Eighth and Ninth.

LEVINE: Between Eighth and Ninth, on the west side. Uh-huh.

LOSSO: He had a saloon, and he had a big room in the back. He used to make a restaurant out of it. And he had a house with two floors, so we lived in one of them. The other one was rent, oh, no, my sister, yeah, was there. We were five girls and four boys, my mother.

LEVINE: Do you remember, who picked you up at Ellis Island?

LOSSO: My brother.

LEVINE: Which one was that?

LOSSO: He was a second one. The older one, he had four children, he couldn't make it, but he took it. Oh, he was crazy after me. When he saw me, oh, boy, in New York he took me all over to see this and see that, you know? Oh, he was crazy.

LEVINE: And what struck you in particular when you saw this new city?

LOSSO: Well, we weren't used to those things, and everything seemed so, it's a big city anyway, New York, no question about it. And everything, oh, God, I couldn't believe it either. Oh, well, I was about eleven years old. I mean, you know. I have a picture there. Yeah. Then we, uh, we used to live in that house, and he used to own it, and my other sister used to live upstairs. We stayed there for a long time. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: What was it like seeing your father again after all that time?

LOSSO: Oh, yeah. Well, that's why. They didn't want to send him back to us. So they decided, all together, that we should come over here, because they liked it here, sure, better than over there. But it was sad over there. We knew all these people. The whole town know each other. And then you got to leave, you know. It was, and we didn't know where the hell we were going. (she laughs) To come in this country too, you know, all the things, we're going to go with a boat, the following week it went down. It sunk, that boat. Oh, dear. There were, it was all right. Me, I was young yet. I got the picture up there. I was sitting on my mother's lap. I was a baby. Oh, that was years before.

But, uh . . .

LEVINE: So did you go to school when you stayed with your brother on 26th Street?

LOSSO: Oh, sure. Then we got our own apartment after.

LEVINE: Right in that neighborhood?

LOSSO: Yeah. We went to Chelsea School.

LEVINE: And what was that like?

LOSSO: Wait a minute. Ninth, Eighth or Ninth Avenue. It's a big school, it was. And I went up to the sixth grade there.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: What was it like learning English when you first went to school?

LOSSO: Oh, that was tough. (she laughs) That was really, but they got a lot of patience, a lot of, like it would be like today. They try to learn different languages and all that, you know? It takes time, you know. But I, and it wasn't far from there either. The school was on 28th Street. I went up to sixth grade there.

LEVINE: Did the children tease you at first when you first came over?

LOSSO: No, over there they're different. No, even here they were, they weren't like, oh, God, I said, Jesus, what is she today? I says, my kids, even when I was up here that I bought a house, they used to go from one block to the other, on that same block. They never moved out of that place there. They go here, what they do,

I can't stand it. Did you look on TV, the way they get dressed and all this? Oh, Jesus.

LEVINE: So were your teachers nice to you?

LOSSO: Huh?

LEVINE: Were your teachers nice?

LOSSO: Oh, we were in Catholic school.

LEVINE: Oh, you went to Catholic school in Chelsea?

LOSSO: Oh, yeah. Oh, not here. Oh, no. Over there.

LEVINE: Over there. Uh-huh.

LOSSO: No, over here, it's still there, that school. It's on Ninth Avenue and 29th Street. It's still there, that school. No, I went to public school there, yeah. And finished the sixth grade. Yeah.

LEVINE: And then what did you do after you finished?

LOSSO: Then we worked.

LEVINE: Where did you work?

LOSSO: I used to work for Lord & Taylor.

LEVINE: Were you selling things in the store?

LOSSO: No. I sew. I even sew today. Everybody in the building come here, do this and do that for me. The heck with these people. You learn something, but here they're different. They don't teach those things. Even in school, they don't. I don't know.

LEVINE: What did you, what did you sew for Lord & Taylor?

LOSSO: Well, I used to go in the factory, and come home for lunch. They used to make the Eighth Avenue subway, up and down the stairs there, the wooden stairs that you have to, we used to walk all the time, back and forth for lunch, four times a day. So first I used to work in the skirts, the Jewish people and, uh, well, I was there quite a while. Everything by hand. They used to charge snaps, one penny. We used to hand in . . .

LEVINE: You got one penny when you put on a snap?

LOSSO: That's what they paid you. I used to hand my env-, there, never open the envelope. They give you the little envelope, whatever you make, you had it in. If they give you something, all right. If you don't, that's it. Of course, they pay board, you . . .

LEVINE: You mean, you gave the envelope . . .

LOSSO: To my mother.

LEVINE: To your mother.

LOSSO: Yeah. You know, they had to live, too, and they use it a different way. When we were, well, I was working. Then the four girls, five girls, we had a, we rented a place, it was a doctor's place. It was a beautiful house. And we lived on the first floor, and they had eight rooms in there. We had a big dining room there, my God. She . . .

LEVINE: Where was that?

LOSSO: In New York.

LEVINE: In Manhattan? In the west side, by, uh . . .

LOSSO: 26th Street.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LOSSO: So we . . . (she laughs) See what they do those days? We had a big, uh, apartment, and we were all four boys, and all the girls and one boy there at that time. And we needed all the rooms we could get. And, uh, it was a doctor's place there. I used to babysit for them. He was a nice Irish guy. And we used to live in their house and pay rent. I don't even remember how much we paid. It was easy to take care, though. It was eight rooms. And what we used to do, when we used to work, my, we had a big dining room table. See, they don't do like that they do today. All the boys sat over there, the girls went out with, and we sat on this side. And you used to talk and work at the same time. We didn't waste no time. We did our work.

LEVINE: You mean, you did the homework, what they call home work?

LOSSO: No, crocheting or whatever you had to do by hand.

LEVINE: You mean for the family?

LOSSO: No, no.

LEVINE: For yourself.

LOSSO: Yeah, yeah. I mean for us, like. You'd be surprised all the stuff I got here yet that we made from over there.

LEVINE: Well, how did you learn how to sew and how to crochet?

LOSSO: Oh, over there that's the main thing in Europe. That's the first thing the kids learn when they get older, old enough to hold a

needle. Oh, they teach them early. No, I gave there in the saloon.

LEVINE: Well, who taught you? Who taught you how?

LOSSO: Oh, well, my sisters were older than me, you know. And we used to work, the three sisters used to go. One of them had to go in a different section, and you used to work for Jewish people, way up in those big buildings. And, uh, we used to come home for lunch, go back, four times a day. We never eat outside. We used to go out, lunch hour, go in the Woolworth in the big stores, just to get out a little bit. I mean, we were all the way up there, the big buildings there, even then, in New York, it was a lot.

LEVINE: How long was the work day? Did you start at nine o'clock?

LOSSO: Yeah.

LEVINE: You broke for lunch . . .

LOSSO: Yeah, nine o'clock, and come home about four or five. It depends how much work we had to finish. We used to work for all the people, they used to go to, in Florida. We used to make the woolen coats, the white flannel coats. We used to make the facing all by hand. I worked . . .

LEVINE: So you did the handwork?

LOSSO: Oh, I worked for Lord & Taylor. Oh, that was a beautiful store. Oh! All the rich people used to go there. Then my daughter, my sister, the older one, she worked in the corset, to make them. And I still have one in there. It's got all bones in it, to keep your shape. Here they go for exercise. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Well, people, a lot of people wore corsets.

LOSSO: Yeah. I still got mine in there. I feel good when I wear that. Your body stays straight, you know what I mean? And you can work better, gives you more strength, like, to hold you. Here they're so sloppy, some of them. Oh, like even the Jews, oh, Jesus. The way they are again. They all like me, everything. Everybody comes to me, do this for me. I gave it up. I says, "I'm not going to do nothing for nobody." Because I'm a good nature. If I can help, I'll help. I don't ask for nothing, for no money or nothing. But lately, you know, the Jews, oh, sure, I says, "Oh, no." I have that machine. I says, "No, no." I says, "I can't do it any more." Why should I do it? They wanted to pay me. I says, I don't want to be bothered like that. I mean now, since I fell, I'm in here over a year that I haven't been out.

LEVINE: Right, right.

LOSSO: So, uh, I can't do it. I do, I'm waiting to open that machine.

LEVINE: So were you . . .

LOSSO: I got a lot of sewing to do.

LEVINE: Were you working for Lord & Taylor when you met your husband?

LOSSO: No. We worked for him. He used to make the corsets and different dresses and things like that. We used to go for alteration there, too, to fix it.

LEVINE: Well, where was your husband? Was he in Manhattan, and he was working?

LOSSO: Well, no. We didn't let him work then. We were so many in the family, the girls and the boy. We didn't allow them to go to work. He was older, you know. And he used to stay home. Then my brother had a house on 26th Street. He had two floors, and he had a saloon and the restaurant in the back. And he used to stay with them and help them out, do different things, you know.

LEVINE: Do you remember the name of the saloon or the restaurant?

LOSSO: The name?

LEVINE: Yeah.

LOSSO: Oh, Jesus. I don't think it even had a name. (they laugh)
Out of all . . .

LEVINE: Now, how about your husband, the man you married? When did you meet him?

LOSSO: Oh, I met him up here in Summerville.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Well, how long did you stay in Manhattan before you came to New Jersey?

LOSSO: Oh, I came here, I got married. '29.

LEVINE: Did you know your husband before you moved to New Jersey?

LOSSO: He died in '52.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. But before you moved to New Jersey, had you met your husband in New York?

LOSSO: No. I met him here.

LEVINE: Well, how come you came here? How come you came to New Jersey?

LOSSO: Because I, he lived here on Fifth Avenue, he had a house here. And he comes from Venice. And, uh, he used to come down on a Sunday. He wasn't that natured to go here, go there. He was quiet. And I met him up here in Summerville. My brother had a boarding house, a big house, he used to rent it, you know? And then on Sundays we didn't know where to go, we always went up there with the bus. And I met him up here.

LEVINE: Did you like him right away?

LOSSO: Well, no, I didn't meet him. He came in New York a couple of times. But he wasn't the type that likes to go here or go there. He's a home type. And me, I was the opposite. I was a lively, oh, I enjoyed myself. He used to come home, come down once a week, on a Sunday. But where can you go? He didn't want to go anywheres. He used to live up here on Fifth Avenue. The house is still there that his uncle made it, and he used to boarder there. And I met him up my brother's place. Then we fell for each other. First thing you know he wanted to, he was thirty-six. He was old already, yeah. Well, he went through the war, and he went, he traveled a lot when he was young. Oh, he had his time. That's when you get a certain age, then you, then you sit down, you cool off.

LEVINE: And how old were you when you met him?

LOSSO: Well, I married him in '29.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. So you were, uh, twenty-seven.

LOSSO: Yeah. And he went up on my brother's place. We used to take the bus to go up there on the weekend with my older sister, you know?

Because the others got married, too, but they were all down there, in New York. I got one sister there, there's a picture over there, that one there. She's going to be a hundred and two years old.

LEVINE: Wow. And is she in good shape?

LOSSO: Oh, yeah. She lives in New York. She lives in the apartment, they got an elevator. And my nephew has a big butcher sale, butcher. He carries the first grade meat. When you eat his meat and eat the kind of meat they got here. So we used to live, all of us together, when we were younger yet, I wasn't married, the others were married, on 29th Street on the west side, yeah, no, not 29th, that's when we were younger, but when they got married, on 44th Street. First we lived on one end of the town there, the block, and then we moved down there when my sister got sick and we took care of her, you know. Then she passed away. It has elevator and everything.

LEVINE: What did your sister have?

LOSSO: Oh, I couldn't even tell you, I tell you the truth. I was, I was working. I was the youngest one. The others didn't, they didn't do anything. I was more lively, like, take care of her, call the doctor for this or for that, you know? Things that you have to know. And, uh, her husband, he died before she did, too. He had a wholesale butcher store, and he left it to the son. First grade meat. You taste that meat, oh. Then I go down there, buy stuff, and . . .

LEVINE: Oh, that's good.

LOSSO: Oh, they, and now my sister was there once, near Eighth Avenue,

and there there was a more modern apartment with an elevator. They had a lobby like here, but it was small. And we lived on the other end. There we had to walk six flights of stairs, two flights on each stairs. You know, the marbles like this from holding onto the railing and woke up in the same.

LEVINE: Did your mother and father, were your mother and father happy they had come to this country?

LOSSO: Well, it was hard for them to get used to it, from a small town to here, they don't know anybody. You know, like . . .

LEVINE: Did they become citizens, your mother and your father?

LOSSO: No, no.

LEVINE: But you became a citizen. Tell me about that. When did you become one?

LOSSO: Now, wait a minute. Where did I have that paper?

LEVINE: Yeah, it's right there. Did you . . .

LOSSO: Oh, that time there were so many people down there. Well, now . . .

LEVINE: Did you go to classes?

LOSSO: Huh?

LEVINE: Did you go to classes?

LOSSO: No. No, we learned in school, though. I mean, I had to go to school, you know. We learned everything in there. That's the whole story, welcome to the U.S.A. And, uh, we were shocked. We didn't know, we never saw anything. And to come here, there was

all those people coming in, what a jam. It was all like little boxes going in the room, like, you know? And we stood there before they got all organized. My, God. Now they rebuilt the whole thing.

LEVINE: Right.

LOSSO: My daughter told me that. "Oh," I says. "I want to go down there." Even, even the Statue of Liberty.

LEVINE: Do you . . .

LOSSO: She bought something in there, too.

LEVINE: Do you remember any things that your mother or father tried to teach you, things that they wanted you to, ways they wanted you to be, or how they wanted you to act, or . . .

LOSSO: Well, over there they stay after us, you know. It's not like here. They do whatever they want. We went to school, well, I was nine . . .

LEVINE: Did you try to teach your children some of the same things that your mother and father tried to teach you?

LOSSO: Here they don't want to learn here. That's the whole problem. (she laughs) Maybe some of the cooking, yeah. But they go with the books here. They do everything different. It wasn't like we were over there, you know, they train, and you got to stay under. We were, well, the town was nice and big enough. Never had a fellow over there. And there were two girls, two of us. We were jealous, one for the other. (she laughs) I was lively when I was young. Oh, I had my, the only thing, he wasn't. He traveled the world, before he got married, and he

went to the service. He died in '52. And, uh, he used to know more a lot about everything, you know? I'll go, and me, we weren't brought up that way, see? And, especially in the small town, we all know each other. And, well, we had our good times, though. You know, family get together. We all know each other, see? That's the part of it.

LEVINE: That's what I was going to ask you. Did you, was there a community of people from Italy in this country that your family associated with, or spent time with?

LOSSO: Not that, we didn't know anybody, because we had my brothers here before. One of them was married, and he had four boys, and they were small. The second one, he never had children. He couldn't have any. Maybe she was, I don't know. That's when he built the house up in Summerville, he turned it into a boarding house during the summer. He never had children. Then my brother, he got married. Yeah, he has one boy. I never know what he looks like. I never saw him. Since we lived in the city, here and there they all went, you know what I mean? We weren't brought up that way. We were more close together, you know? But, uh, they were all nice people, though.

LEVINE: Tell me what it was like for you, since you came here, you were eleven years old, and then you kind of started over again. Do you think that made a . . .

LOSSO: That's because everything was different than we were brought up over there, you know? (she laughs) Oh, my God.

LEVINE: Did you like it at first?

LOSSO: Well, I was young. It was hard for me to get along with the

language.

LEVINE: Yeah.

LOSSO: You know? But I made it. I finished up to the sixth grade, those years, we finished. No, I didn't mind it. Oh, then you always find people in New York that can talk the same as you do, you know, friends. Oh, I had, my sister just wrote to me. We were very close friends. She lived on one block, I lived on the other. And she's in the hospital. She's very bad. And her sister keeps writing to me that she's bad, that she can't, she always thinks. We always used to be two girls, and that's it. We all were, well, the other one, too. Only my brother, he, uh, that had the business, he had that big house, that colonial house up on the hill, the big columns, they must have been a millionaire, German. He told that place. It was about a block square, beautiful. And, uh, we used to go there on a Saturday and stay overnight, you know, for Sunday. We didn't know where to go in the city. I mean, you worked there during the week, where can you go, places? We were friendly, yes, but we didn't know too much about it, anyway.

LEVINE: Did your mother and father learn to speak English?

LOSSO: Oh, I went to school.

LEVINE: Your mother and father?

LOSSO: Oh, no, they didn't.

LEVINE: But they could speak . . .

LOSSO: Well, they could make out, though. I mean, we did everything for them, you know? Like my mother, when my brother had the grand

opening up there, that big house, he was a millionaire that sold it. It was up on the hill, and they called it Woodcliff Lake, and the lake is right in front there. It was a beautiful place.

It was a German millionaire, he sold it. So my brother bought it, it has big columns. He had a grand opening.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about, tell me about you. What do you feel that you've done in your life that makes you feel good, that you feel satisfied that you were able to do?

LOSSO: Oh, yeah, well, I started work early. Oh, no, first I started work in the button shop up in Connecticut, Waterbury.

LEVINE: You, what did you do, move up there?

LOSSO: Well, I had a sister up there. She was married, and she had twins, and she had a husband and everything. They, that's where they, just about a block away. We made the silver, the sterling silver.

LEVINE: For buttons?

LOSSO: No, not the button. The knives and forks.

LEVINE: Oh, oh.

LOSSO: I moved to Waterbury. I used to go seven o'clock in the morning to go to work and drill buttons, the holes, fourteen years old. I used to get up, I walked. We had no cars, we had nothing those days. I used to get up at five and I walked to this, until about four or five o'clock at night.

LEVINE: So you worked on a machine that drilled the holes in the buttons. And then, then you left your sister's house and came back to

Manhattan?

LOSSO: Uh, well, how did that happen? Her husband, she had twins, and I always wondered, because we got twins, you know? I never knew, it didn't dawn on me that she had two girls, they were twins, it runs in the family, you know? And, uh, well, I stood up there. I was raised more up there to go to work and make something while the mothers, they were in New York, and I lived with her. She had a house there, you know? And then she had the twins. I was there when they were born. And her husband didn't live long. He was a good singer. He used to sing in the church choir. Oh, God, what a voice he had. He lived up there, and then she moved, then, too. The girls grew up and got married, and she moved back to New York.

LEVINE: Well, then you moved back to New York, too? Uh-huh.

LOSSO: We used to get up so early in the morning and go to work. Oh, Jesus. Like here? Seven o'clock I was working already till four or five o'clock at night, and no transportation, in Waterbury, Connecticut. That's where they came. The others all worked in the city, I mean, my younger sisters and my brother, too. My brother died young. I don't know what, I was young then. I didn't know why he, he died. It's so odd. Because we used to live up here, and I used to, he had a house up here, and my, my husband was a mason up here, and they got a lot of construction. He's a good man. Oh, God, he was away when he passed away. I read the letter the other day. He didn't even know about it. Oh, he felt so bad. He says, they were like brothers.

LEVINE: Who?

LOSSO: My husband and this guy here that has the business. He always used to come up there to my brother, you know, in the summer. That's where I met him, in the boarding house up there. And . . .

LEVINE: When you say . . .

LOSSO: You know, down, when you're in the city and you're new, you're afraid of people. You don't know who they are, what they, the family, you know? This way they used to go up there every Sunday, you know? We used to go and get the bus and go up there. That's the only place we used to go. All right, in the summer we used to go down the shore, on the beach, with my girlfriends. I had my time that time.

LEVINE: Did you go to dances?

LOSSO: Oh, the clothes, oh, I had such a beautiful gown. It was all beaded, all in scalloped on the bottom.

LEVINE: Well, where would you go?

LOSSO: Huh?

LEVINE: Where would the dances be? Where did you go?

LOSSO: Oh, that was in a big hotel in New York. It was all in beads. Oh, God, oh, I used to have good clothes. I got so darn many clothes in there that I don't know what the hell I'm ever going to do with them. I'd start to take all the other stuff out, and here there's only two closets you can put them in.

LEVINE: When you think of yourself now, do you think of yourself, how do you think about Italian and American? Do you think of yourself

as some of each, or how do you think about that?

LOSSO: Well, I have nothing again. I mean, what can you say? I mean, after all, we, from over there, we just came here, and I lived part of my life in New York.

LEVINE: Right.

LOSSO: They . . . (she laughs) But most is dead over there in the section and all that. And I have a nephew. He's got a wholesale butcher store. He's got two boys, and he works with them. In that picture over there, she's going to be a hundred and two years old, there. Yeah, she's going to be, if it ain't three now, probably.

LEVINE: Well, what is it like for you now in this time in your life? I mean, you're ninety-four years old, and your children are grown. How is life for you now?

LOSSO: Oh, I don't, I don't, no, I don't, since I fell up here with the bus on the, used to be before. We were waiting for the bus at the Food Town, I had my bags on the floor there, and, you know, the plastic. And everybody was running to get the bus. I tripped, and I fell right like this up there on this Food Town, and here they heard me yet. Every time the weather changes . . .

LEVINE: Right on your ribs, huh?

LOSSO: Yeah, my ribs, oh, God. And, uh, and ever since then I've been going a while. Now she won't even let me go on the bus to go. They go up there, they take you back and everything. But what's the use of me going when I can't only carry one bag, because I walk with a cane since then now.

LEVINE: So you stay in the house?

LOSSO: Oh, I'm always, it's over a year I'm in here. The only time I go, my daughter picks me up up there on a Sunday. The kids are there, it passes your time. Here I get so boring now, my age.

LEVINE: Well, what do you do when you're here in the house, like . . .

LOSSO: Oh, I work, five o'clock I'm up in the morning, and nine o'clock is the latest that I go, but I'm on my feet all day. Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: What do you do during the day?

LOSSO: Well, I sew. I did a lot of sewing. And I never buy a box. I cook my own food. Oh, no. I'm not, I can't. A lot of times they want to take me to dinner. I don't want to go. The way I see them, they cook, I don't like it, because you're not allowed to have, like, we were brought up on wine. Now I can't drink alcohol. My son gives me heck. He says, "You were raised up on wine." That was true. We never had milk on the table. And I says, "Well," I says, "you get to the age that you can't do. Your body changes. Now you got to go ask the doctor what he tells you to do." (she laughs) And I miss it. That one over there, she drinks. She's going to be a hundred and two or a hundred and three, and she drinks a little alcohol every day, a little Schnapps. And she still drinks, and she's not alone. Now, I think, because last year. No, it wasn't last year. It was at the end, at the beginning of this year. She went out shopping. She always did. She got, my sister's apartment there, she loved the way it was. They got an elevator in it. It's a good apartment. So that one day she came home, and she goes in. They have a little, a lobby that size, with three marble stairs,

they go up, and then they got the buttons, like here. And she goes, my sister used to live there, but she passed away, so she moved in there. Her furniture's all there, yet, the way it was.

And, uh, so she used to go out and do all the shopping. But the world it turns today, now I see her with all these college kids.

Some of them, they had the graduation, they got a place to go. But a lot of these younger ones, they go through, they're hanging. So she came home from shopping and has her purse like that, like ours, it's got the buttons. And her husband died a long time ago. And she came in, she was fooling around with her bag trying to get her key there, oh, she was trying to say, "I'm going to call my husband." There was a big guy standing in back of her, a colored guy. Oh, down there it's worse. She was held up twice already. So she says, uh, he says to her, she says, "Oh, I'll get my husband," this and that. When he heard that, he says, "Give me everything you got in your bag." She gave him fifty dollars. "My life is worth more," she says.

LEVINE: Absolutely.

LOSSO: I won't live down there now. Oh, God. Not in New York. Oh!

LEVINE: Okay. We're just about finished with the tape. Is there anything you would like to say before we finish about coming to this country and living here.

LOSSO: Oh, yeah. I was glad to get here. See, everything, it's a new world for us from over there to here. Everything is, the only thing, it was the language, because we were brought up with one language over there, and it was kind of hard, even to go to school. But I made out pretty good, though, there, you know? Everything was, it came out the way we really expected it to.

LEVINE: Okay. I think that's a perfect place to end. I want to thank you very much. (Mrs. Losso laughs) I've been speaking with Santina Losso who came from Italy when she was eleven years old in 1913, and at the time of this interview you are ninety-four years of age, and it's May 7, 1997, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off.

LOSSO: Okay, thank you.

LEVINE: Thank you.

LOSSO: Thank you.