

EI-900

CARMELA URSO CIANCI
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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
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SICILY, 1924
AGE 15
PASSAGE ON "THE CONTE ROSSO"

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, 10/7/1997.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, May 29, 1997. I'm in Manchester, Connecticut, with Mrs. Carmela Urso Cianci.

CIANCI: That's right.

SIGRIST: We've just interviewed Mr. Cianci, Mrs. Cianci's husband. Mrs. Cianci came from Italy, Italy or Sicily?

CIANCI: Sicily.

SIGRIST: Sicily.

CIANCI: Not too far away from him.

SIGRIST: Okay, because we do make a distinction. Came from Sicily in 1924. You were fifteen years old when you came.

CIANCI: That's right.

SIGRIST: Present also is Mr. Cianci, sitting over on the sofa relaxing after his interview. (Mrs. Cianci laughs) And daughter Rose, also. Can we begin, Mrs. Cianci, with you giving me your birth date, please?

CIANCI: April 2, 1909.

SIGRIST: And tell me where you were born in Sicily.

CIANCI: Floridia[ph].

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

CIANCI: I can't, like Florida over here.

SIGRIST: Like Florida.

CIANCI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the town?

CIANCI: It was a small town, but it was a nice, clean town. Nice people.

SIGRIST: Can you describe how, the layout of the town, maybe?

CIANCI: There was a road, I don't know, houses, and the neighbors we'd have, they all were nice neighbors.

SIGRIST: Can you remember your house?

CIANCI: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe your house for me, please?

CIANCI: Oh, it was a, it was a, we went over there . . .

SIGRIST: No, from what you remember as a child, describe your house.

CIANCI: It's like a big room, one big room. And, uh, when my mother left to come in this country, I used to live over there with my grandmother. And that's it. It was a big room.

SIGRIST: What was the house made out of?

CIANCI: Uh, stone.

SIGRIST: What kind of floor did it have in it?

CIANCI: They had a tile floor.

SIGRIST: A tile floor. What kind of roof did it have on it?

CIANCI: Uh, I don't know how they call over here, but it was like tile, too, the roof.

SIGRIST: One room.

CIANCI: One big room. But then there was sections, they divide it. One section was for my sister and I, and one section for my grandmother and grandfather.

SIGRIST: How old were you when your mother went to America?

CIANCI: Six years old.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

CIANCI: Sebastiana. Anna.

SIGRIST: Sebastiana.

CIANCI: Sebastiana.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

CIANCI: Sammartino.

SIGRIST: Sammartino. Can you spell that? Actually, I think I have it spelled. S-, I have it here somewhere. S-A-M-M-A-R-T-I-N-O.

CIANCI: Sammartino, yeah.

SIGRIST: Why did your mother go to America when you were six?

CIANCI: Because my father was over here, and he wanted family over here.

And she left us with my grandmother.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when your mother left?

CIANCI: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

CIANCI: When the, when they took the carriage to take them to Syracuse to get the train, and everybody was crying. And I used to live most of the time with my grandmother.

SIGRIST: What, before we talk about your grandmother, what memories do you have of your mother before she left?

CIANCI: I didn't have no memory at all of my mother, because I used to live with my grandmother all the time.

SIGRIST: I see. What was your father's name?

CIANCI: Salvatore.

SIGRIST: Salvatore. And when did he come to America?

CIANCI: My father came to America, it was six years before I was born, because they had two, my sister Jenny, and my sister Mary, and he was here already. And then when he came to Italy, they had me, and they had my brother, because we were five altogether, so she took three with them, with her, when she came in this country,

and two, my sister and I, we was left to my grandmother. My sister Anna was twenty-two months old.

SIGRIST: So your mother took the three oldest children with her.

CIANCI: That's right. That's right.

SIGRIST: Where did your father live in the United States?

CIANCI: Winsted.

SIGRIST: Winsted, Connecticut. And what was he doing for work in Winsted?

CIANCI: Well, at that time he used to work outside. He used to do any kind of a job outside. I don't know. I don't know my father . . .

SIGRIST: Just a common laborer.

CIANCI: Yeah. I didn't know my father until I was fifteen years old. I never met my father before that.

SIGRIST: Well, we'll talk about that when we get you to America. Um, I should spell, for the sake of the tape, Winsted is W-I-N-S-T-E-D, I believe. Winsted, Connecticut. Talk to me about life with your grandmother.

CIANCI: It was nice. It was, you know, my grandmother was a little, uh, was old, and I had to take care of her. My aunt was with us to

help us out, and they did the best they could to take care of us.

They were very nice, my aunt and my grandmother.

SIGRIST: Your grandmother was whose mother?

CIANCI: My mother's mother.

SIGRIST: Your mother's mother.

CIANCI: My mother's mother.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me in words what your grandmother looked like?

CIANCI: She just, she looked just like me.

SIGRIST: Can you describe how that is?

CIANCI: I don't know. My son got the picture. I had a picture of my grandmother. She was a beautiful lady.

SIGRIST: What was her personality like?

CIANCI: Nice, very good. She was friendly with everybody. And she used to teach me, everything I know how to do today, my grandmother teach me.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me specifically what some of those things that she taught you were?

CIANCI: She . . . (she laughs) She taught me how to make the bread, how to make homemade macaroni, and she taught me how to wash clothes, to do the housework that a woman is supposed to be. And she tell me all the time, "Be careful when you grow up. Be a good girl all the time."

SIGRIST: How did people do the laundry back then in Sicily?

CIANCI: By hands.

SIGRIST: Describe the process.

CIANCI: They had, like, a washtub, a big washtub, and they used to put the water, and we used to wash it by hands.

SIGRIST: Where did the water come from?

CIANCI: We had a faucet.

SIGRIST: In the house?

CIANCI: Well, yeah, but at that time when I was there they had a, I don't know how they call over here, like a fountain. There was, we used to get water from there, and we used to wash the clothes. It was a little hard, but we was used to it. That's the way life was over there.

SIGRIST: Did your grandmother ever teach you any little songs or prayers

or anything like that?

CIANCI: Prayers, yeah. I used to go to church all the time.

SIGRIST: Can you say a prayer for me in Italian?

CIANCI: I can't.

SIGRIST: Not any more?

CIANCI: I can't. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Okay. What were some of the responsibilities your grandmother had in the house? What was she . . .

CIANCI: She would do the housework. She would take care of us and take care of my grandfather. She was cooking. And she'd show me how to do it, and I'd do for her. I'd help her out, most of the time, when she was sick, after, and I had to do everything.

SIGRIST: What was she sick with?

CIANCI: She had some, uh, some kind of a fever. She, I don't know how they call it, but she was sick. She was home, and she didn't feel good, and we had the doctor for her all the time, and that's all. She couldn't do too much after.

SIGRIST: Do you remember her name?

CIANCI: Carmela.

SIGRIST: Are you named after your grandmother? Uh-huh. Tell me a little bit about your grandfather and what you remember about him.

CIANCI: My grandfather, my grandfather was a nice old man, very nice. And he took care of us, he thought the world of us. My sister, my sister Anna and I.

SIGRIST: What were some of the things you enjoyed doing with your grandfather?

CIANCI: You know, over there it was different. They never, you know, it was, they never played with us, they never took us anyplace, but we were home, and he never had a bad word. He was a good man all the time.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

CIANCI: Uh, Tony.

SIGRIST: Tony. Anthony.

CIANCI: Anthony.

SIGRIST: Anthony. Who was the most religious in your family?

CIANCI: Everybody. Everybody, we used to go to church, they used to take me to church. And next to us the nun used to be over there, and

they used to take care of us, they used to take me to church all the time and everything.

SIGRIST: What religion were you?

CIANCI: Catholic.

SIGRIST: Catholic. And was there a church somewhere nearby?

CIANCI: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the church?

CIANCI: St. Sebastian, and St. Joseph.

SIGRIST: But it was one church?

CIANCI: No, no.

SIGRIST: Two churches.

CIANCI: Three. They, like the cathedral over here, we had over there, and, uh, St. Sebastian was on this side, and St. Anthony was on this side, very close to us.

SIGRIST: Do you have a story about something that happened one time when you were at church?

CIANCI: No. We used to get together, the kids. We used to get together, we used to go to church, young girl, young kids, you know. The

church . . . (she addresses her husband) Where are you going?
(voice off mike) The church, it was close to us. Especially
around Easter we used to go to church all the time.

SIGRIST: How did you celebrate Easter in Sicily?

CIANCI: Beautiful.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what you did?

CIANCI: Well, over there, you know, we used to make homemade bread. We
used to make, like, Easter baskets. My grandmother used to make
it, and she used to show me how to do easily. And, uh, it was
nice. That's what they used to do over there, and that's how it
is.

SIGRIST: What about Christmas? How did you celebrate Christmas?

CIANCI: Christmas. (she laughs) Christmas was nice, too. We used to
get a, we used to have a dinner together and, uh, and over there
in the old country they used to light on the corner, the street,
there was four corners, they used to light a big fire Christmas
Eve and they celebrate the Christmas. Like over here they light
the Christmas tree, over there they had a fire in the corner,
like that.

SIGRIST: Were there special foods that you ate at Christmas time?

CIANCI: Yeah. We used to buy, I tell you the truth, my mother used to send the money from here all the time, and we used to buy the meat, we used to buy everything.

SIGRIST: Who did the cooking?

CIANCI: My grandmother and I, and my aunt.

SIGRIST: What was your favorite thing to make, back then?

CIANCI: Back then, we used to cook all the time, different things. We used to make the sauce with the meat and everything, and we used to make homemade pasta.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me how you make pasta?

CIANCI: It's easy to make it. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Pretend I'm, pretend it's a hundred years in the future, and no one has ever made pasta. How would you describe to them how to make it?

CIANCI: We used to get the flour, and we used to put water. Over there we didn't, sometimes we used to put an egg or two, and we used to mix it, and then we used to do the, how do you call it, the one we used to, Rosie, help me, the one . . .

ROSE: You put yeast in it.

CIANCI: The, when you roll the dough.

ROSE: You knead it.

CIANCI: Yeah. And, uh, we used to dry them a little bit, and then we used to cut them, and it was delicious. I used to make, even now.

SIGRIST: Did you grow any of your food?

CIANCI: No, no, no. We used to buy everything.

SIGRIST: Was there a market somewhere?

CIANCI: Near where I live there used to be the, like over here they have the garden, and we used to go over there and buy the fresh vegetables and everything in the summer, oh yeah.

SIGRIST: What about, what did you drink back then?

CIANCI: Drink? Water.

SIGRIST: Water.

CIANCI: Wine. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Where did the wine come from?

CIANCI: We used to buy it. We used to buy it.

SIGRIST: Were children allowed to drink wine?

CIANCI: They don't care. Over there we used to have it. I tell you the truth, when I, I had the Spanish fever, that's the only thing that helped us was the wine. We used to put the bread inside the wine and we used to eat it, because the doctor says he couldn't do nothing for us. My grandmother says, "I'm gonna do the best I can to help her out," because, you know, she had a big responsibility to raise us over there without my mother.

SIGRIST: When you were sick with the fever, how old were you?

CIANCI: I was about ten.

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about being sick?

CIANCI: Nothing. We used to, my grandmother, she take care of us very good, very nice.

SIGRIST: Were there any kinds of medicines that your grandmother would make, homemade remedies for sicknesses?

CIANCI: No, no. No, we used to . . . (she laughs) As I tell you before, the wine used to take care of us. (she laughs) Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you go to school in Sicily?

CIANCI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about that experience?

CIANCI: I tell you the honest truth, I don't remember it too much, but we used to go to school, and we used to have a playground. We used to play together with a friend, and then, and then my grandmother got sick and I had to stay home and take care of my grandmother.

SIGRIST: Could your grandmother read and write?

CIANCI: No.

SIGRIST: What about your grandfather?

CIANCI: No.

SIGRIST: What about your mother?

CIANCI: No.

SIGRIST: No. When, when you were at school, was it a religious school, or a . . .

CIANCI: No, a public school.

SIGRIST: The nuns weren't running the school.

CIANCI: No, no, no, no. No. Public school.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. What kind of games did you play as a little girl?

CIANCI: I don't know. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Did you have a toy that you remember from back then?

CIANCI: No, no.

SIGRIST: Did your grandmother . . .

CIANCI: No, no toys.

SIGRIST: Did your grandmother . . . No?

CIANCI: No toys. No.

SIGRIST: Um, you said your mother was sending you money.

CIANCI: Yes, every month.

SIGRIST: Did she ever write you a letter?

CIANCI: Oh, yeah, every time, all the time.

SIGRIST: Do you remember some of the things that she was telling you about America?

CIANCI: No. She used to say it was nice, and she want us to come here and, you know, be all together and everything.

SIGRIST: Did you want to leave?

CIANCI: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: You wanted, because you were a young lady by the time you left.

CIANCI: Oh, sure, I was fifteen.

SIGRIST: Was your grandmother still living?

CIANCI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes. You said she had gotten sick, though.

CIANCI: Oh, yeah, but she was living.

SIGRIST: She was still living. What about your grandfather?

CIANCI: They both were still living when I left. And when my sister Anna went back at, uh, after a while, I don't know how many years, the first thing she ask, "How is Millie? Is she here with you?" She says, "No."

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you had to do to get ready to leave?

CIANCI: To leave for over here?

SIGRIST: To leave to come to America. What did you have to do before you left Sicily?

CIANCI: I didn't have to do everything. My mother took care of everything after she came.

SIGRIST: Did she come back for you?

CIANCI: She come back, after nine years, they had a law that the parents could go and claim for the children, because at that time there was a lot of, they left the kids to come in this country. So, but the law was for the father, not for the mother, but my father was, he just had gallbladder surgery, and he couldn't make the trip, and my mother made the trip.

SIGRIST: What was it like to see your mother after nine years?

CIANCI: After nine years, because I never was close with my mother. She was like a stranger to me. But then we got close together.

SIGRIST: Because your grandmother had raised you.

CIANCI: Yeah. I living, when I was a little girl I used, I used to live with my grandmother all the time.

SIGRIST: Did your mother look different to you somehow after she had been in America all those years?

CIANCI: I really don't remember. I don't remember my mother when she came, I remember that she left, but when she came to Italy and then, you know, it was different. I don't know.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Do you remember what you packed to take to America? What did you . . .

CIANCI: A suitcase.

SIGRIST: Yes. What did you put in the suitcase?

CIANCI: We put a case of clothes, the underwears and everything, to change.

SIGRIST: Did you take any objects with you? A Bible, or something like that, rosary beads?

CIANCI: No, no.

SIGRIST: No. Um . . .

CIANCI: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Did you have to have an examination before you left?

CIANCI: Oh, boy, yeah. The examination we had, they was so strict, you know, at that time they used to be so strict, and now anybody could come.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you had to go to get the examination before you left?

CIANCI: We used to go, first we used to go to the doctor, family doctor. But then it was, when we was all together, I remember they put us all in one room. My mother was so ashamed because we all had

to take all the clothes off, and she was so ashamed because she says that was really embarrass. And then they used to check our hair, they used to check everything. But now they don't check anybody for anything.

SIGRIST: When you left to come to the United States, you came with your mother.

CIANCI: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Who else came with you?

CIANCI: My sister.

SIGRIST: And what was her name?

CIANCI: Anna.

SIGRIST: Anna. And how much younger is she?

CIANCI: (she sighs) My sister Anna, she was, uh, she was six, I think, when she came with us in this country.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying goodbye to your grandparents?

CIANCI: Oh, yeah. My grandparents, my aunt, everybody was there. It was hard.

SIGRIST: Where did you go to get on the ship?

CIANCI: Naples.

SIGRIST: How did you get from Sicily to Naples?

CIANCI: Train, by train.

SIGRIST: And then how long did you stay in Naples before you got on the ship?

CIANCI: Nothing, it was overnight, I think. We stayed in a hotel overnight. My uncle was with us, Sammartino. And after they see us, put on a boat, he went back to Florida, and we came in this country.

SIGRIST: How long did the ship take to get in?

CIANCI: Nine days.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the ship?

CIANCI: Conte Rosso.

SIGRIST: And, um, did anything happen on the ship that sticks out in your mind?

CIANCI: No.

SIGRIST: Did you see anything from the ship that you had never seen before? I can tell you're getting tired, so, we're running

ourself through this.

CIANCI: No.

SIGRIST: Nothing? You don't remember anything on the ship?

CIANCI: No. The only thing . . . (she laughs) The only thing I could say that my mother, she didn't like the food that they had on the boat, and she ordered chicken, nice stuffed chicken. The first time that they made it, it was delicious, but the second time that they made it, she didn't like it, so she told them take it back, and she never ordered any chicken any more.

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

CIANCI: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What happened when the ship came into New York?

CIANCI: It was on a Saturday, and my father, my brother-in-law and a friend of them was there on the boat, and they won't let us come out of the boat because everything was closed on a Saturday, and we had to stay on the boat overnight till Monday morning. Monday morning, my mother, she get up, she says the kids get up, we gonna be, we're gonna go home. And we get up, we were on the front of the door. We waited for the door to open, five thirty in the morning. And the first one they come out of the boat was

us, my mother and I, and my sister and I. And my father was there to come and pick us, because at that time they used to park the boat in Battery Park. (voice off mike)

SIGRIST: Yes, Battery.

CIANCI: Yes. And then we used to get the small boat and come to Ellis Island. So we was the first one, and my father was in a big room, and they had a lot of, like, uh, like, you know, the prison they have with the iron bars and everything. And my father was there with somebody there, you know, he was waiting to get the boat to come and get us. So he saw us come by, the he hollered for my mother, "Anna, Anna!" So the guy was with them, he says, "Do you know those people?" "This is my family," my father said. And, uh, we come out, and then we went to New York City, and from New York we got the train and come to Hartford.

SIGRIST: Tell me about seeing your father for the very first time, a man you don't even know.

CIANCI: He was a good man, though.

SIGRIST: What did you think when you first saw him?

CIANCI: We thought it was somebody, there was another guy in front of us. My sister Anna thought it was the other guy, my father, because she was twenty-two months old and I was six years old. We never

saw my father. So, and, uh . . .

SIGRIST: So he went to Ellis Island, he picked you up. Did anything else happen at Ellis Island that you can remember?

CIANCI: No. We come in right straight to Connecticut, Hartford.

SIGRIST: You went up to Hartford.

CIANCI: Yeah. Because when my mother came in this country, my father (?) to move to Hartford, and they live in Hartford all this time.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me when you got to Hartford where he took you to live?

CIANCI: On Temple Street. My sister . . .

SIGRIST: Temple? Temple Street?

CIANCI: Temple Street.

SIGRIST: T-E-M-P-L-E?

CIANCI: Near Brand Thompson[ph]. You know where G. Fox is?

SIGRIST: G. Fox is a department store. (voice off mike)

CIANCI: Yes, I mean, on the corner, there's a Brand Thompson[ph], and then you go straight, that's Temple Street.

SIGRIST: Temple Street. Can you describe, was it an apartment, or a house?

CIANCI: Apartment house.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the apartment for me?

CIANCI: The apartment, it was a five-room apartment, one room after the other. We didn't have no heat. That was the stove. And, uh, we live there for many years, and then my father pass away, and that's the end. And I got married.

SIGRIST: Did you get a job when you got to America? (the doorbell rings)

CIANCI: Who is it?

SIGRIST: We're going to pause for a moment. (break in tape) All right. Just tell me about the first job you got.

CIANCI: The . . . The first job that I got was, I used to work, we work on Underwood, I went to work.

SIGRIST: Underwood? Making what?

CIANCI: Typewriter.

SIGRIST: Oh, Underwood Typewriter. Uh-huh.

CIANCI: Yes.

SIGRIST: And what was your job at Underwood Typewriter?

CIANCI: I had a big machine, I had a machine, and I pressed work. And from then then I got married.

SIGRIST: What year did you get married?

CIANCI: 1930, September 30, 1930.

SIGRIST: And how did you meet Mr. Cianci?

CIANCI: We live on the same street. After six years that I was over here, we met each other, and then we got married.

SIGRIST: And how did you learn English?

CIANCI: I didn't go to school over here. But I was working with people, they speak English, and I used to work.

SIGRIST: Okay. Okay, I know you want to stop, so let me just . . .

CIANCI: Yeah, please.

SIGRIST: Thank you very much. This is Paul Sigrist, signing off with Carmela Cianci, on Thursday, May 29, 1997. Thank you.

CIANCI: Thank you very much.