

EI-901

(GRAZIELA) ITALIANO CUSUMANO

BIRTH DATE: MAY 21, 1911

INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 29, 1997

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 86

RUNNING TIME: 1:00:17

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: MANCHESTER, CONNECTICUT

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 10/1997

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: THERESA SIROIS; HELEN HENWOOD

SICILY, 1920

AGE: 8

SHIP: "THE PESARO"

PORT: NAPLES

RESIDENCES:

- **ITALY: NARO, SICILY**
- **U.S: THOMPSONVILLE, NJ; ASBURY PARK, NJ**

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.

SIGRIST: Good evening. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, May 29, 1997. I'm in Manchester, Connecticut. It's almost seven thirty in the evening. And I'm here with Mrs. Grace Cusumano.

CUSUMANO: Right.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Cusumano came from Sicily in 1920. She was eight years old. You were detained for three days at Ellis Island. Present also is her daughter, Theresa Siro-- (they laugh) Theresa Sirois.

CUSUMANO: Sirois.

SIGRIST: And she may interject as we go on. Mrs. Cusumano, can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

CUSUMANO: May 21, 1911.

SIGRIST: And can you say your name as it was when you were born.

CUSUMANO: Graziela Italiano.

SIGRIST: And can you spell Graziela for me?

CUSUMANO: G-A-R-Z-I-L-A, [sic.] I believe. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: G-R-A-Z . . .

CUSUMANO: G-A-R-Z.

SIGRIST: I-E.

CUSUMANO: L-A.

SIGRIST: L-A. Graziela. Your maiden name was?

CUSUMANO: Italiano. I-T-A-L-I-A-N-O.

SIGRIST: Great. What town were you born in in Sicily?

CUSUMANO: N-A-R-O.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

CUSUMANO: N-A-R-O.

SIGRIST: Whereabouts in the country is that?

CUSUMANO: I know it's in Sicily, but don't ask me. But the name of the town was Naro.

SIGRIST: Was there a larger city near it?

CUSUMANO: No. There was Catania, Vicina, Trieste. There was Palermo, all those small towns around, because we used to go down there a lot. But where we were it was Naro, that you named the place Naro.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about the day you were born? Did anyone ever tell a story about the day you were born?

CUSUMANO: I was born, you want me to tell you the beginning, when I was born?

SIGRIST: Yes.

CUSUMANO: I was born early in the morning. My father almost passed away. The

doctor was there. He told my mother by midnight your husband gonna pass away. So my father read that thing for the medicine, he threw it up and threw it away. So early in the morning the doctor went by and tell the neighbors, "Is Charles Italiano died?" He says, "Are you kidding? We saw him go by with a cane to get the midwife." Because I was born. So, you see? You never know.

SIGRIST: May I ask why they thought your father was going to die?

CUSUMANO: Because the doctor, he was very – he --he had double pneumonia.

SIGRIST: Double pneumonia.

CUSUMANO: Yeah, right.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

CUSUMANO: Charles.

SIGRIST: Charles.

CUSUMANO: Calogero.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Calogero?

CUSUMANO: C-L-O-G-E-R . . .[sic]

SIGRIST: Theresa's coming over here with some large manuscript here.

CUSUMANO: C-L-O-G-E-R-O. [sic] Calogero.

SIGRIST: Okay, great. Theresa, is that like the history of the family that you wrote, the history of your mom. Right. We may be referring to that off and on as we go. (they laugh) Um, what do you know about your father's family background?

CUSUMANO: Well, my -- my father's mother, she passed away when he was about a year-and-a-half old.

SIGRIST: His mother.

CUSUMANO: His mother. His father carry on. He had a place. We used to call it Worshu [ph]. My daughter could never pick up Worshu [ph]. It's like a farm. He had everything there.

SIGRIST: They used to call it Horseshoe?

CUSUMANO: Worshu [ph].

SIGRIST: Horseshoe, like a horse's shoe.

CUSUMANO: Worshu [ph], Worshu [ph].

SIGRIST: Worshu [ph].

CUSUMANO: She tried to work, but she couldn't get it. But we used to call, "Where you going?" "We're going up Worshu." So what was the name of

Worshu [ph]? I would say it was like a farm. They had all kind of fruits there, all kind of animals, goats. And, uh, we used to go there, and when we had to go there, we had to go ride on a mule, go on a mule, or walk with a bamboo stick, make sure there was no snakes crossing our path.

SIGRIST: No snakes?

CUSUMANO: Snakes, talk about snakes.

SIGRIST: Do you have a story that you can tell me about a snake in Sicily that you saw, or . . .

CUSUMANO: Great big ones. They were all, they were so big. And uhhh, they give you the chills! We used to say. But we used to go by with a bamboo stick and split it in half, because if the snake come near you you just have to hit it with the bamboo stick, and that cut you like a knife.

SIGRIST: Did you ever know anyone who was bitten by a snake?

CUSUMANO: No, none that I recall.

SIGRIST: But on your way to your grandfather's farm . . .

CUSUMANO: We had to . . .

SIGRIST: You saw snakes.

CUSUMANO: Plenty of snakes.

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about your grandfather's farm?

CUSUMANO: Well, we used to go over there and stay there. Naturally I was a little devil. And I used to play around there. I used to make mud pies. But there was no mud pie. There was just sand. He used to call my father, "Come and get your daughter. She's too fresh." We go back to Naro. Then he say, "Bring your kids back, because we're lonely over here." Because he remarried after a long time. And we used to stay there, but we used to go back and forth. And you go pick the wild artichokes and eat them. They had a big, great olive tree, and we would sit under the olive tree, cook the artichokes and eat them and all that. And my grandmother used to say, well, it was my step-grandmother, she would say, "You see, she had the big trunk, and they used to keep the money in the man's socks." She says, "When I pass away, this money gonna be all yours." But she passed away, we never got nothing. (they laugh)
Because we were here in the United States.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your grandfather's personality.

CUSUMANO: Oh, he was a good fath -- a good man, and he would come to Naro once in a while to deliver whatever. He had a [unclear] business with other people. Then go back home, and he would go back and forth. And he had a house there in Naro, and he had a house on Worshu [ph].

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your father's relationship with his father.

CUSUMANO: Oh, they were good related. Oh, yeah. But when we came here from Italy, my father was stubborn to ask my grandfather, his father, for money to come here. So we got it through my uncle. My uncle was here already.

SIGRIST: I see. But let's talk a little bit about your father. We sort of got sidetracked to your grandfather. Tell me a little bit about your father's personality.

CUSUMANO: Oh, he was a good working man. He respect us. He treat us good. He make sure we had bread and butter on the table, and make sure we had shoes on our sh – on our feet, and even gold chain, wearing hats. He used to take us very good care of us. We had no problem with him.

SIGRIST: What were some of the things that you enjoyed doing with your father when you were a little girl?

CUSUMANO: Well, we used to go with him a lot, and he had a habit of singing. Like, uh, you get a young fellow, he want to serenade his girlfriend, and he would say, " Hey, Calogero, come on, serenade." Oh, my mother say, "You're a married man now with three children." My father said, "I gotta go serenade." So he would take us, he would serenade the people, and then we'd come home.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the songs that he sang? (Mrs.Cusumano

laughs) Could you sing one for me on tape?

CUSUMANO: You want me to sing?

SIGRIST: I do. A song that your father used to sing in Sicily.

CUSUMANO: I can't remember all the words.

SIGRIST: Do your best.

CUSUMANO: (She speaks in Italian)

SIGRIST: Sing.

CUSUMANO: (She sings a small bit in Italian) I can't remember the rest. I was about five years old then. And he used to sing a lot of different songs, but I really can't remember many of the songs.

SIGRIST: Maybe as we're talking.

CUSUMANO: No, that won't come to me. I'm very thick on that.

SIGRIST: All right. Okay. Um, what were some of the things that your father enjoyed doing for himself, for his own pleasure?

CUSUMANO: He used to love to sing. He used to like to work. He had to work. He had no choice.

SIGRIST: What did he do for work?

CUSUMANO: Well, over there they used to work on the, on the garden, like, you know, like a farmer. That's what I remember. And then we lived in the, we went to live in the, a villa.

SIGRIST: In a villa.

CUSUMANO: In a villa. And he, we were there about two years. We were there, and there were a main road on top and a main road at the bottom, so every time he had to go close the gate from the main bottom road, I said, "Pa, let me come with you." "No, you stay home." So there was a big iron gate. I said, "I'm going to swing on the gate." He said, "Don't do that." I said, "Yeah, I'm gonna do it." I fall down, and I still got the scar here.
(she gestures)

SIGRIST: That's, you're pointing to over your right eye.

CUSUMANO: Right here.

SIGRIST: On your head.

CUSUMANO: Yeah, it's about three inches, and I was only about four years old. He says, "I tell you not to hang . . ." It didn't make any difference to me. I had to swing over there.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a time where your father punished you for doing something in Sicily?

CUSUMANO: No, no. He was not one to punish us.

SIGRIST: Who did the punishing in the family?

CUSUMANO: Neither my father or my mother. They were very nice. I mean, we can't say my father hit me. If we did something he would say, "Go to bed without food." That he would do. But punish us, that's the only punish we had.

SIGRIST: Is there something that your father taught you how to do when you were a little girl?

CUSUMANO: I can't recall. I can't recall.

SIGRIST: Did he ever make you anything?

CUSUMANO: Make?

SIGRIST: Yes.

CUSUMANO: I can't recall.

SIGRIST: Okay. What was your mom's name?

CUSUMANO: Teresa.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

CUSUMANO: Frisino.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

CUSUMANO: F-R-I-S-I-N-O.

SIGRIST: And what do you know about her background?

CUSUMANO: Well, my grandmother, she had a bakery, my mother's mother. Her name was Teresa, too. And, uh, she would bake bread for the people. They would come make big loaves of bread, and everybody would mark their – er -- their bread with a k—with a house key, because everybody had a different house key. So that was their mark on the loaf of bread, and my grandmother do it. So every time the people want to, she would make dough, and let it get old, like, you know? And that would serve for yeast. And then she would say, "Graziela, go to so and so and bring a little piece of yeast, they're gonna make bread." I would bring, "Here's the yeast. My grandma send it to you. Here's the yeast. My grandma send it." So they would make the bread and bring it to my grandmother, so she would put it in the oven. The oven over there you don't cook like electric or heat or coal. How she used to heat up the oven was or either with almond shells or walnut shells. That's how they used to heat the oven.

SIGRIST: That's very interesting.

CUSUMANO: A great big oven. And she used to make cookies. She used to make a lot of pastry. But I don't know how to make none of the pastry.

SIGRIST: This is your mother's mother. What was, oh, you said her name was Teresa.

CUSUMANO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What did she look like? Can you describe her in words?

CUSUMANO: Oh, she was a little woman. I got her picture home. Very small, smaller than my mother, and she had long, long, long hair, and I would comb her hair, you know, and she would love that. But she came here in United States before we did.

SIGRIST: Why did she come to the United States?

CUSUMANO: Because my uncle was here. My uncle came here in the United States when he was sixteen years old.

SIGRIST: That would be your mother's brother?

CUSUMANO: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

CUSUMANO: Frank.

SIGRIST: Frank. And he brought your grandmother over?

CUSUMANO: And, yes. He says, he wrote, he says, "Ma, come down, because Pa is born." He had a son, he named Charlie. So my grandmother's husband was named Charlie. So she said, "I want you to come down." But when she come down, my uncle had nine children. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Surprise.

CUSUMANO: Surprise. So she never come back.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when your grandmother left?

CUSUMANO: She must have left in the year fifteen, I guess.

SIGRIST: 1915. So you were a little girl.

CUSUMANO: Oh, I was.

SIGRIST: Do you remember her actually leaving?

CUSUMANO: Yes.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

CUSUMANO: That we went and bring her when she had to get the train and the boat, and then we come back.

SIGRIST: I see. Did your mother ever talk about her, her own childhood, anything

that happened to her when she was growing up?

CUSUMANO: No, not much. She used to help my grandma all the time until she came here, and then my grandma came here, and that was it. And it was us, and my father, and my, my father's father and his mother.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's personality like?

CUSUMANO: Oh, she was very quiet. She never disturb any. She was friendly with anybody. If she need any help, she would do them. I remember sometime there was some man, he would come over to my mother, he says, "Teresa, you sew me my pants?" My mother had to put him on the chair because the pants were so damn filthy. So my mother said, "Well, the poor man, you've got to help him." You know, he was by himself. And that's, but she always was good to the people.

SIGRIST: What were some of her responsibilities around your house? What did she have to do?

CUSUMANO: All she have to do, well, we had one great, big room, and there was like an arch that was their bedroom, and then there was a thing there, we had rabbits, we had chickens, (she laughs) we had everything in the – in the back there. And you would cook like a, with a, with a wood, you know what I mean? And we didn't have much water. When we, once a – once a day we open, they would open the water.

SIGRIST: What do you mean you opened the water? What . . .

CUSUMANO: The faucets, and it was on the street. And everybody had to go down to this faucet when they opened the water once a day, and we used to go down with jugs, clay jugs, and fill them there. And we used to get in line. And sometimes the older people would tell us, "Get out, and let me get for that." We said, "We were here first. We're gonna get the water first." And that was it. And then, uh, when it rained, they would put like –er -- you call here washtub, over there was washtub, made of wood with two scrubbing boards, one on each side. And when it rained, it would go in the washtub, that's where we used to wash, the tub. And then I remember . . .

SIGRIST: What did you do for soap?

CUSUMANO: They used to make the soap with bones.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that process a little bit?

CUSUMANO: You buy the beef, but now it was not much beef in the old country. It was more the turkey, pigs and chickens, rabbits, and you give the bones, and they would make soap, and that's how you use the soap. And that was it.

SIGRIST: We were talking about your mother's responsibilities around the house. Who did the cooking?

CUSUMANO: My mother.

SIGRIST: You mentioned chickens and rabbits. Why did you keep chickens and rabbits?

CUSUMANO: We had to eat them. We had no other place to put them.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about how your mother would prepare the rabbits, first of all, how they were killed.

CUSUMANO: How they were killed? You take them by their hind legs, put them upside -- upside down, and hit them on the ear, and they would die right away. Because I did myself, too. (she laughs) Even the chicken, I would take the chicken. Yeck! (she gestures and laughs)

SIGRIST: All right. So the rabbit's dead. Then what happens to it?

CUSUMANO: Then my father would make a little hole and blow it.

SIGRIST: A little hole where?

CUSUMANO: On the leg.

SIGRIST: And blow into it?

CUSUMANO: Cut the skin a little bit, and you blow it, so the skin be removed from the body, you know? And then all you have to do is strip it down. Then he

would take the skin, cut it, and wash with salt and water, and you make a little fur piece from the rabbit.

SIGRIST: And then what would you do with the meat?

CUSUMANO: Well, we eat the meat.

SIGRIST: How? But how did your mother prepare it?

CUSUMANO: Well, she used to make it with sauce, or the stew, or we used to make like what we call a Stemperata. We would get olives, celery, onions, vinegar, wine, lemon, mix them all up, cook them, and put them. And you make, we used to call it a Stemperata. Stemperata, matter of fact, I still make it for my children. I haven't make it for her yet, a chicken.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about other foods that you ate on a daily basis.

CUSUMANO: Plenty of fruits. We used to have pasta. We used to make our own pasta.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that process for me?

CUSUMANO: Yeah. She used to make the dough, and then we, we'd make shells, and she would make, stretch the macaroni, then cut them in small pieces, and then we would get the colander, you know, colander, where you strain the macaroni.

SIGRIST: A colander, yes.

CUSUMANO: To make it curly, like, we would take the thumb and just press it. And it would come just like a shell. And then if we had to make long macaroni, well, we'd roll it. But over there you roll it, it stays rolled, because it was real wheat. And then if you want to make lasagna, you stretch the dough big, then you roll it up, cut it, shake it up and hang it so it would dry up. And then we used to take the wheat, go way up to the top of the windm -- where they used to grind up flour, we'd put the wheat up there, by the time we'd get downstairs there was a bag of flour full. That's where we used to have the flour.

THERESA: Snails.

SIGRIST: Let me just fix your . . .

CUSUMANO: Oh, it's coming down. I guess I'm moving too much. (referring to the microphone)

SIGRIST: No, that's all right. Um, your daughter wanted to remind you about the snails.

CUSUMANO: Oh. (she laughs) Plenty of snails over there.

SIGRIST: First of all, where did you find the snails?

CUSUMANO: On the field.

SIGRIST: Out in the field.

CUSUMANO: Yes. When it was a damp day, or early in the morning, my father used to go over there and he used to get the snails. They were baby snails, or bigger snails. There was a bigger one, then there was the great, big ones. The big ones we used to call them grastuni [ph]. Grastuni [ph] were the big ones. And my father had a great, big barrel filled with hay. He would put some flour in there and fill it up, so any time my mother wanted to make macaroni and she want to put snails on, she would take some of the snails, wash them, clean them, boil them and then take them out of the shells and put them in the sauce, and we used to eat them like that.

SIGRIST: What kind of a sauce?

CUSUMANO: Macaroni. Tomato sauce. You used to -- you make your own tomato paste over there. [voice off mike, unclear] Oh, then in the morning we had to get milk, right? Over here you go to the store and buy the milk, you go here. But over there the goat man used to come.

SIGRIST: The goat man.

CUSUMANO: Yeah, he had goats. He would ring the bell, and everybody go out with a big pitcher. And he would take the milk right in front of you. Then when we had what we had, we'd go in the house and go to the next neighbor,

and that was the milk man.

SIGRIST: And how, what did you do with the goat milk?

CUSUMANO: Drink it.

SIGRIST: What else did you do with it?

CUSUMANO: That's it, we used to drink it.

SIGRIST: Did you make cheese?

CUSUMANO: Yeah. My mother used to make cheese. She used to make ricotta, you know.

SIGRIST: How did she do that?

CUSUMANO: Well, she would boil it, like, and then put it in these green things and fill them all up, you know? And . . .

SIGRIST: Green?

CUSUMANO: Leaves, like, I don't know what you – what you call them, but they were nice and stiff, and you put the ricotta right in there. And then there was -- or you make the ricotta with macaroni, or you make, like you say here, what do you call them? I can't think of the name. What do you call them, those square things?

SIGRIST: Oh, ravioli.

CUSUMANO: Raviolis, we used to make. And we used to make everything with the dough, because all the dough would never, you stretch it, it's going to stay stretched. It won't shrink like here. Here if I make something, I stretch and stretch and stretch, I lift up my hands, and before you know it I stretch it again. But over there you stretch it and it stays put.

SIGRIST: Because of the wheat that's in . . .

CUSUMANO: Because -- because it was wheat. That was a whole wheat. When they say here whole wheat, it's not the truth. You'll never get whole wheat here.

SIGRIST: How often did you eat during the day?

CUSUMANO: We used to have breakfast.

SIGRIST: What time?

CUSUMANO: Well, when we used to get up in the morning.

SIGRIST: Which was?

CUSUMANO: Whenever. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Okay.

CUSUMANO: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: And when did you eat the next time?

CUSUMANO: Ate at noon time, and then at night time.

SIGRIST: And what was your biggest meal?

CUSUMANO: Well, we used to have two meals a day. We used to have in the afternoon and at nighttime. Or chicken or, we used to have chickpeas with the macaroni, or either favi with macaroni.

SIGRIST: Favi?

CUSUMANO: Favi. F-A.

SIGRIST: Like fava beans.

CUSUMANO: That's it, fava beans. And we used to make the pigs feet, or pigs skin. We used to have the pig, we used to have the pig down there.

SIGRIST: You had a pig?

CUSUMANO: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Is there a story about the pig you can tell me?

CUSUMANO: Oh, yeah, sure. While we were living in this place, and it was like high, and in the bottom there was where a cave, where the pigs used to be.

SIGRIST: A cave?

CUSUMANO: A cave. My father say, "Go down and feed the pig, but do not tease the pig, or he's gonna harm you more." Not me, Gracie was tough. I went down there, "Here, piggy, piggy, piggy, here piggy, piggy, piggy." So the piggy got a hold of my dress and went, "Waaaaaa!" My father said one time, "Well, then give the damn pig the favi." (she laughs) So I give the pig the favi, and then the pig won't bother you any more.

SIGRIST: They can be vicious.

CUSUMANO: They could be. Same thing with the turkey.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. You had turkeys in Italy.

CUSUMANO: Yeah. So the turkey, if you wear something red, the turkey will come after you. So my father said, "Be careful for the turkey." Now, the turkey come after me, and gave me such a pinch over there, and pull, my father said, "I told you be careful of the turkey." Oh.

SIGRIST: Did you have brothers and sisters?

CUSUMANO: Up there. We had brothers, but they passed away.

SIGRIST: No, I meant at that time, when you were living in Sicily. Did you have brothers and sisters?

CUSUMANO: They were dead. I had two sisters, three sisters. They're all gone.

THERESA: But they were alive at the time.

SIGRIST: They were alive at the time

CUSUMANO: They were alive at the time, yes.

SIGRIST: And what was their name, their names?

CUSUMANO: My oldest was Carmela.

SIGRIST: Carmela.

CUSUMANO: Carmelina. My one before or after me was Josephine, and then there was the baby, Lillian.

SIGRIST: So you're the second child?

CUSUMANO: I think. My sister said there was a boy between us. I said, "I don't know. I don't think so, but I don't think there was." My mother had boys over there, but they just passed away.

SIGRIST: Let's just pause. [break in tape] Just resumed now. We're talking about your brother, your sisters.

CUSUMANO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Four sisters. Do you remember when the youngest sister was born in Sicily?

CUSUMANO: No. See, because when we come here in the United States she was three-and-a-half, and I was about eight, so I really cannot remember when she was born.

SIGRIST: I was, what I was getting at was I wondered how mother dealt with her pregnancy in front of the children, and . . .

CUSUMANO: Oh, it was different over there. But I remember when my, the one after me, Josephine, when she was born, was the earthquake, so we had to get out in the middle of the night, and my mother was pregnant from my sister Josephine. And where we lived half the wall fall down, and we had to go on the street, otherwise you stay there about, but day she was born, see? That I remember, because my mother used to say it.

SIGRIST: Josephine was born during the earthquake.

CUSUMANO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you have any, can you talk about the earthquake a little bit more, what you remember of that experience?

CUSUMANO: Well, the only thing it comes like, like over here. It starts shaking, everything starts shaking, the wall starts to break, and the streets start to

break, and if you don't go out the house is going to fall on you, so the best thing is to go out in the open. Then when everything settled, then you come back in the house.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what year that was?

CUSUMANO: My sister Josephine, 1911. She must have been born 1913.

SIGRIST: So you're 1911, and she would be 1913.

CUSUMANO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: The reason I ask you that is I've had other people describe the same earthquake, so I was curious what you might remember about it.

CUSUMANO: Well, that's all I could remember. Other than that, I don't.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about pulling your life back together after the earthquake?

CUSUMANO: Well, like everything else, you just do the best you could do. Go back and stay where you are. They fix the place, and you stay there, and that's it. And then they -- they had the plague, what do you call it, the plague?

THERESA: The plague?

SIGRIST: The plague? A plague.

CUSUMANO: A plague, where people get sick.

SIGRIST: Yes.

CUSUMANO: Okay, we had that. I remember.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about that?

CUSUMANO: I was five years old and --er -- there was one funeral after the other. The streets they put all white lime, so make sure people don't -- don't get the disease.

SIGRIST: White lime.

CUSUMANO: Lime -- all white. All the streets were full of white lime. And we're standing right there on the porch looking all the funerals go by one after the other, and it was all white. But we were lucky, because none of us got it.

SIGRIST: No one got sick.

CUSUMANO: Not in my family.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a time where you were sick, or hurt yourself?

CUSUMANO: No. Yeah, I told you, when I hit . . .

SIGRIST: Right, about the head. But I wonder if you remember how they, how they

treated diseases, or were there kind of medicine that your mother or grandmother might have made at that time?

CUSUMANO: I don't remember being sick.

SIGRIST: Okay.

CUSUMANO: I don't remember being sick. Even – even my sisters, I don't remember them being sick.

SIGRIST: You were a healthy family.

CUSUMANO: We were a healthy family. We used to eat good.

SIGRIST: Tell me about religion. What religion were you?

CUSUMANO: Catholic.

SIGRIST: And was there a church, a Catholic church, in town?

CUSUMANO: Yes. The Catholic church was San Calogero Church.

SIGRIST: Say that slowly.

CUSUMANO: San Calogero. You don't hear much about him. But in Italy, Naro, was San Calogero. They had a church there. And when we lived in the villa, right there, outside from the villa, we had a high fence, and there was a great, big, big ground, and the soldiers would come there, and –

maneuver -- you know, when the -- when the soldiers have to do with that, and they were there. And then they would come over there and knock at the gate so we would give them water and fruits and the prickly pear. There was one soldier, one time, I remember, I had a little apron, fill it up. He was trying to get it, and I go (she gestures). Because I don't know [unclear]. I says, so I'll take the knife and cut 'em, the prickly pear. You know what's a prickly pear? And cut 'em, open them up. I said, "Now you eat it." And I remember they had give me one great, big loaf of bread. One soldier picked me up, and he was hugging me and he was crying. Maybe he was remembering he had a family with small children, because I was small, and I had long, curly hair at that time, and that was that.

SIGRIST: Who were these soldiers?

CUSUMANO: They must have been American soldiers, I don't know. All nationalities.

SIGRIST: Was this during the First World War? World War One?

CUSUMANO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

CUSUMANO: Yeah. 1920.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Before, actually.

CUSUMANO: Before, before 1920.

SIGRIST: So you would have been a little girl I guess, huh?

CUSUMANO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you have any other recollections of the First World War and how it might have affected your family?

CUSUMANO: I don't really recall much, because at that time then we were almost coming here in the United States. And when we went to Palermo, Canicatti, we had to go get the train over there to take us to the boat. As the train was coming, the soldiers, the train was full of soldiers, and they had the windows wide open. My father picked me up and threw me right in the window, on top of a guy's lap, you know? Until they got out there, because we couldn't even get on the thing. And then finally when we got on the boat that was a different story.

SIGRIST: All right. We started talking about the church, actually, and sort of got sidetracked.

CUSUMANO: That was a big church.

SIGRIST: Um, what do you remember about attending church? How often did you go to church?

CUSUMANO: The church was across from us. We used to go all the time, yeah.

SIGRIST: Who was the most religious in your family?

CUSUMANO: I guess we all were. My father was very religious – he would -- and my mother was very good, too.

SIGRIST: How did you practice your religion at home?

CUSUMANO: We used to say our prayers and pray. My mother had a lot of pictures of God, all kinds of God, saint and all that. We had an awful lot of that. And she'd make sure that we say the, you know, the Hail Mary's, Our Father. As a matter of fact, now I don't even know them any more. (She laughs.)

SIGRIST: That was going to be my next question. (they laugh) Can you say a prayer that you learned as a child?

CUSUMANO: Not in Italian.

SIGRIST: Okay. What about holidays? What were some of the important holidays that your family celebrated?

CUSUMANO: Oh, the holidays, there was Easter, there was, uh, Christmas.

SIGRIST: How did your family celebrate Easter at that time?

CUSUMANO: Oh, Easter, in Italy they, in, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Sicily?

CUSUMANO: In Naro.

SIGRIST: In Naro.

CUSUMANO: That's where I come from, Naro. For Easter, there was – was a church, San Giorgio Church, there was a mundi. What you call a mundi, it was like stairs all up, around, around, and up there there was like a cross, and that's where they used to bring the cross. And people used to go sit down there for three days at a time. It was Friday, Saturday and Sunday. And my father used to sing –er -- every time I sing the song, I cry anyway. (she laughs) I'd better not cry. (she sings in Italian) And everybody followed him.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

CUSUMANO: And then when it was Easter they would take the Virgin Mary from one end of the street, and God on the other end of the street, and they would meet. And the people there would just, you don't have this over here.

SIGRIST: What about at home? How did you celebrate Easter at home?

CUSUMANO: Well, we used to celebrate, like anybody else. We used to have a big meal. We used to go to my grandfather, or we'd just stay home.

SIGRIST: What was -- were there special foods that you ate in Easter?

CUSUMANO: No, we always had good food. Either we had turkey, or we had rabbits, or we had chicken, or we had God knows what, pig.

SIGRIST: But there wasn't a special Easter food that . . .

CUSUMANO: No, no. We used to eat very good. There was, and my mother used to do a lot of baking.

SIGRIST: What about at Christmas time? Was there a special Christmas food that you only ate at Christmas time?

CUSUMANO: No, we used to eat all the time. We didn't have anything special at Christmas, or any holiday food. But we used to make a spaghetti with macaroni, meatballs, pigs feet or skin or whatever. Then we have the chicken with a little meatballs and the chicory and all that. We used to have both at the same time. I don't know why we used to have both.

END OF SIDE A
BEGIN SIDE B

SIGRIST: I should have asked you this before. Why did you move from wherever you were into the villa? Why did you move?

CUSUMANO: Because my father got a job there. And we were there. And we used to live on the house on top, and the owner had that place way at the

bottom. But he never stayed there. He would say, "Go clean il casino [ph]." Il casino [ph] was pull the grass. I'd say, "I'll pull the grass." You're going to pull the grass, and we used to go down there, and they had an awful lot of fruits over there, and then they had a big fountain and all that. And then they had a cave. My sister and I, my older sister, she says, "Let's – let's go pick the biggest apricots." We'd pick them, go onto the cave, put them in the sand, tomorrow we go get them. But you try to dig something in the sand, you'll never find them for sure.

SIGRIST: How did where you lived at the villa differ from where you had lived before?

CUSUMANO: Before we came here?

SIGRIST: No. Well, before, when you moved from your house to the villa, how were they different?

CUSUMANO: Well, then we were living with my grandmother.

SIGRIST: But, I mean, the structure itself. I never asked you, can you describe the house that you lived in before you moved to the villa.

CUSUMANO: There was a big house.

SIGRIST: Was that the one room you were talking about?

CUSUMANO: No, that's another place. That's where my grandmother lived.

SIGRIST: Oh, right.

CUSUMANO: She had one room with a oven, and then she had a room, then we had a room, and all that. But when my grandmother came here, we had to get out from there, so we went to the villa, see? Then from a villa, because after two years and a half, three years and a half, I think it was, we -- we had to get out, and we lived to this house, then we came here.

SIGRIST: You purchased prior to coming here.

CUSUMANO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you go to school in Italy?

CUSUMANO: Oh, I went to school. They had the Catholic school.

SIGRIST: Yes.

CUSUMANO: But I never wanted to learn. I used to go to Catholic school. I used to take a handkerchief, roll it up. I used to play. So the Mother Superior used to call my sister. She was like a principal over here. Carmelina (speaks in Italian). In other words, I didn't want to learn. My sister was afraid, she says, "The nun's going to hit me, what she's calling me for." But it was on account of me. They have the big bench out there. We roll on the bench and stay there. (she laughs) I didn't want to learn.

SIGRIST: Hiding under the bench.

CUSUMANO: Hide, oh, I was terrible.

SIGRIST: Why didn't you want to learn?

CUSUMANO: I don't know, I just wanted to play.

SIGRIST: Could your mother read and write?

CUSUMANO: No.

SIGRIST: What about your grandmother?

CUSUMANO: No.

SIGRIST: Your father.

CUSUMANO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes.

CUSUMANO: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Did anyone ever try to teach you to read at home?

CUSUMANO: No.

SIGRIST: No. That was not important.

CUSUMANO: No. At that time it wasn't.

SIGRIST: Right. What about your older sister?

CUSUMANO: She learned.

SIGRIST: In school?

CUSUMANO: Yes. I told you, when the nun used to call for her, we were together. But she did learn, but I did not learn.

SIGRIST: Um, all right. Well, let's, let's start getting you to America here. Your grandmother's already in America with her son.

CUSUMANO: Yes, Frank.

SIGRIST: Tell me why your family, your father, I assume, wanted to come to America.

CUSUMANO: Because my mother, she lived with her mother all the time. See, she lived with her mother. And every time she'd say, "My mother, my mother, my mother." So my grandmother used to, her son used to write, my grandmother didn't know how to write, and, "Come down here in the United States." So my mother told my father, "I want to go United States." My father said, "Well, we got over here. Let your mother come down here some time." "No, we want to go over there." So finally my father said, "Where I'm going to get the money? I'm not going to ask my

father." Because he was ashamed to ask his mother for money. So naturally he asked my brother, my uncle, my Uncle Frank. So he sent us the money, and that's how we came here.

SIGRIST: So it was really your mother who wanted to come, not your father.

CUSUMANO: No, my father did not want to come.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. That's the reverse of what it used to be.

CUSUMANO: Then he was getting disgusted from over there. He said, "Well, we might as well go over there." And that's it.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the process of getting ready to leave?

CUSUMANO: Well . . .

SIGRIST: What did you have to do in order to leave?

CUSUMANO: We didn't have to do nothing. Just pack what we had.

SIGRIST: What about paperwork? Did you have to get any . . .

CUSUMANO: I don't remember. My father must have did that all himself, because I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Did you have to go to a doctor?

CUSUMANO: No. We went to a doctor when we got here in the United States (she

laughs).

SIGRIST: Did you have to be photographed?

CUSUMANO: My father was photographed, yes. Yes. I remember he still had the picture. But my brother must have that picture. I don't remember. And he had whiskers at that time.

SIGRIST: But did you have to be photographed before you left?

CUSUMANO: I don't remember. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you packed.

CUSUMANO: We packed, I don't think, we had two trunks, and whatever, clothes, no furniture or anything. You don't bring no furniture here. Just the clothes we had, and that's all we brought over here.

SIGRIST: Do you remember bringing any kind of objects of any sort, table objects or books, or . . .

CUSUMANO: No tables, no books. Just two great, big trunks. They were trunks at that time, now they're suitcase. And in a trunk you can put plenty of stuff in there.

SIGRIST: So it's 1920. What month is it that you left?

CUSUMANO: It must have been March or April. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Some time in the spring, in March.

CUSUMANO: Yeah, in the spring, because when we got here in the United States there was a lot of ice in the ocean.

SIGRIST: Tell me, you had to say goodbye to your family members.

CUSUMANO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You saw the grandfather there.

CUSUMANO: My grandfather, yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you explain to me what, how that made you feel as a little kid?

CUSUMANO: Well, we were a little kid and we didn't like to leave over there, because we used to like to go up his place and pick up the fruits and do everything we wanted to do, and we thought we'd come back, but we never did. So that was that.

SIGRIST: You said that you thought that you would come back. Was that the original intention, that you would . . .

CUSUMANO: We thought.

SIGRIST: Oh, the kids thought you would be coming back.

CUSUMANO: And, uh, my sister and I, we would sing, "The sun goes down and

tomorrow come back, but if we go away we'll never come back," which we never did until three years ago.

SIGRIST: Until three years ago. Well, good, we'll talk about that later. Um, how did you, before you got here, think about America? What did America mean to you as a little girl in Sicily?

CUSUMANO: Don't ask me.

SIGRIST: You didn't have any expectations of what you might . . .

CUSUMANO: No, we did -- we had absolutely nothing at all.

SIGRIST: Had you ever seen anyone who had been in America?

CUSUMANO: No.

SIGRIST: Was there some kind of a gathering of your family at dinner or something, before you left.

CUSUMANO: No. Well, there was my mother other brother.

SIGRIST: Your mother's other brother.

CUSUMANO: He had nine children. He had a great big place. He had horses, he had a farm, he had everything. He [unclear] he was -- used to grow wheat and all that. And we say goodbye to him. But, as I say, other than that, I don't remember a lot much.

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

CUSUMANO: From Naro we went to Palermo.

SIGRIST: How did you go to, how did you get to Palermo?

CUSUMANO: Uh, with a train.

SIGRIST: Had you ever been on a train before?

CUSUMANO: Yeah. We used to go to Palermo a lot of times. Palermo, Canicatti, Giorgenti, Messina. We used to go there all the time.

SIGRIST: Very well-traveled children.

CUSUMANO: Yeah. So we used to go there, and then when we got there, then we had to get to the boat. Like I tell you, my father had to push me on the train, because the train was, it was full of soldiers.

SIGRIST: So did you get the ship in Palermo, or did you have to go into . . .

CUSUMANO: I think we got it in Palermo.

THERESA: Naples.

CUSUMANO: Naples.

SIGRIST: Your daughter says Naples.

CUSUMANO: But from Palermo we got the train, then we went to Naples, and that's where we got the boat.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay in Naples before you got on the ship?

CUSUMANO: I don't think we stood there too long. I don't recall staying there too long.

SIGRIST: And did anything happen in Naples that sticks out in your mind at all?

CUSUMANO: No.

SIGRIST: No. Well, what was the name of the ship that you came on?

CUSUMANO: Pesaro.

SIGRIST: And do you remember seeing it for the first time?

CUSUMANO: Yeah. That was a great, big, big ship, was a brand new ship.

SIGRIST: And how did you feel about having to get on this brand new ship?

CUSUMANO: We didn't think nothing of it. We got on the ship, and that was it. We didn't think we're going to get on the ship, or we were afraid. I never was afraid anyway.

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep on the ship?

CUSUMANO: Oh, there were – there were bunks, one on top of the other. You know,

they had bunks, like, with one on top of the other. And then we used to go out for the food, and you stay up --up on the top of the floor there. And then upstairs, well, of course, there were the rich people upstairs, like always, and they used to play the band. We used to listen to the band all the time, so it didn't bother us.

SIGRIST: In the area where you slept, did you have a cabin, or was this a big area with lots of people?

CUSUMANO: It was like when you see one bed after the other, three decks, like, first, second and third, and then we had to go on top of there and sleep on top of there. Each . . .

SIGRIST: How many people slept in that room?

CUSUMANO: Oh, God, you got me. I don't remember. But I know it was some kind of room. But we were on both sides, you know, when we used to come down. Some sleep on this side, some sleep on . . .

SIGRIST: But it was more than just your family in there.

CUSUMANO: Oh, yes, a little bit more than just a family, yes.

SIGRIST: I see. Was there a bathroom down there? Do you remember?

CUSUMANO: I don't remember a bathroom.

SIGRIST: You have a good memory, so that's why I'm asking you.

CUSUMANO: We had (she laughs) piss pots, okay? (She laughs robustly.)

SIGRIST: Well, that's important to know. You know, that's, (laughs) so there were chamber pots.

CUSUMANO: Chamber pots, okay. Chamber pots.

SIGRIST: Okay. And you said that you went up to the deck to eat.

CUSUMANO: Yes.

SIGRIST: How, what was the procedure of eating? How did they serve you food?

CUSUMANO: Well, they would come around and bring you food, and at certain times they have the food and would put it there and eat it. And then there was a nurse used to have the pastina for the babies only, but my mother couldn't eat no kind of food, so we used to go to the nurse "Give me a little pastina, I want to give to the baby." I want to give to my mother, never mind the baby, because my mother couldn't eat that. She was pregnant from my brother. And everything she would eat she'd just upset her. And we were there twenty-one days, I think, on the ship.

SIGRIST: That's a long time.

CUSUMANO: A long time is right.

SIGRIST: That's right, I forgot, your mother was pregnant with your brother during this experience. Did your, so your mother was sick, I take it, seasick?

CUSUMANO: Yeah, she was, yeah.

SIGRIST: Were any of the other members of your family seasick?

CUSUMANO: No.

SIGRIST: No. Did you see anything on the ship that you had never seen before?

CUSUMANO: Yeah, when the big waves used to come, and some people, they die, they throw them overboard.

SIGRIST: Did you see that happen?

CUSUMANO: At night time that would happen. There was three of them, I think. They would wrap you up and they just throw you overboard. And when we were there on the boat, was in the middle of the night, we would hear the foghorn. Another boat was getting drowned. They wanted help. Another boat did drown. Us, we go, we were tipped. So then they told us from this side of the boat, why don't we go on the other side, so maybe we'll balance the boat. Oh, well, I'm -- here I am, I'm a devil, I run way ahead, so when I got to the door then I looked back, my mother was not behind me. I told the guy, I said, "I want to go back and see my mother." He hold me, he said, "You cannot go back and see her." I said, "Why?" He

said, "They're all gonna come here until the boat balance." And, uh, that's what happened. So until everybody came. Then they used to call, holler, "Pesce cana, pesce cana, pesce cana." Pesce cana is a fish with a face of a dog.

And then as we were walking in there, there was like a big hole, and I wanted to look down there. My father said, "Don't look down the hole, no good." I said, "What's down there?" He says, "Monkeys." Well, when he said monkeys I wanted to see the monkeys. But they weren't monkeys. They were human, people, all naked, putting coal in the furnace. He said, "I tell you not to look." But I didn't know what was the difference anyway. They were all dirty. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: They could have been monkeys anyway.

CUSUMANO: They were monkeys to me anyway. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Monkeys to you, right? (laughs) Um, what -- what about your -- your sisters? It's the six of you, right? Mom, Dad and the four kids.

CUSUMANO: Right.

SIGRIST: And Mom's pregnant, so. What about your sisters? Were they, did they roam around the same way you were?

CUSUMANO: I was the wild one, running around all the time.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Did you see anything on the ship that you had never seen before, except for the naked men throwing coal into the furnace?

CUSUMANO: (she laughs) No. There were people below, throwing up on the ship, they were throwing up on the ship, and I was "oohhh". And me, and nothing ever bothered me. Until now nothing bothers me.

SIGRIST: All right. So it took twenty-one days to get to New York. Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when the ship came in?

CUSUMANO: Yes. And then my uncle came there, and when he got there in the port he had a bunch of bananas. We had all kinds of fruit in the old country, but we didn't have bananas. He said, "Throw down a rope, I'll send you down the bananas." How are we going to send him a rope? Anyway, finally we get the bananas, so we didn't know what to do with a banana. He said, "Just . . ." (she gestures) So we peeled the banana and we started eating. That was the first fruit we ate from here, United States.

SIGRIST: And did you like it?

CUSUMANO: Yeah, it was okay. Yeah. So when we got to Ellis Island there, they examined . . .

SIGRIST: Wait, the ship docked.

CUSUMANO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: First, and then how did you get to Ellis Island?

CUSUMANO: From the ship, it was right there. And then they take you over there, they had a doctor for the eyes, a doctor for the nose, a doctor for everything. All kinds of doctors. So we're going by, my sister, Josephine, like she was born on the earthquake, she was born with a dislocated hip. Well, my mother, she got afraid during that, whatever it was, I don't know. So . . .

SIGRIST: You mean, your mother got afraid when she was pregnant, that's why that happened.

CUSUMANO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see.

CUSUMANO: It could have happened then.

SIGRIST: It could have happened.

CUSUMANO: I don't know. So my father told my sister, "Do not run, because you're limping, and if you're limping, they see you limping, they're going to hold us back." My sister didn't care. She just kept on running like nobody's business. So they called us back on account of her. And that's why they took us in the rooms upstairs. And until they examined her and examined everybody, and they find out nothing was wrong with her, and

they let us go.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about sleeping overnight at Ellis Island? You were there for three days, I think your form said.

CUSUMANO: Yeah. Well, we went upstairs. I used to tell my daughter, I says, "You know, they had the iron bars on the window upstairs." She says, "Oh, Ma." She said, "They couldn't have iron." I says, "Oh, yes." And when we went there five, six years ago we went upstairs. I say, "You see the bars? That's where we stood when we came from the old country."

SIGRIST: And does anything stick out in your mind about having to sleep there or eat there, or during the examinations?

CUSUMANO: No, they just give you so much food, they don't give you anything special. So we ate there, and they examine you, make sure you was healthy and all that. And then the people that had no papers, they would put OPA, without pap – er --OPA. Wait a minute. Without papers. With, WPA. Am I saying it right?

SIGRIST: WOP.

CUSUMANO: WOP. And they were calling them wops. I said, "We weren't wops." But that's what WOP would stand for.

SIGRIST: Did, um, did your sister Josephine ever tell you about how she felt about

holding the family back and then needing to be examined.

CUSUMANO: No. Well, she was younger than I was, so she didn't make any different with her. We just stood there and that was it.

SIGRIST: Can you talk to me a little bit about her, her disability?

CUSUMANO: She was born with a dislocated hip.

SIGRIST: How did she, I mean, how did it affect her life as she was growing up?

CUSUMANO: No, she, she was [unclear] all right. She lived until she was seventy. She was [unclear] all right.

SIGRIST: Did she have to have crutches or a brace?

CUSUMANO: No, no, no.

SIGRIST: Nothing like that. I see. Okay. So they finally let you off of Ellis Island. And did someone come to meet you?

CUSUMANO: My Uncle Frank.

SIGRIST: Your Uncle Frank came. And where did he take you?

CUSUMANO: Thompsonville.

SIGRIST: How did you get from, from . . .

CUSUMANO: Train.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about that train ride?

CUSUMANO: No. All we knew was that when we were in the train, my uncle told my mother, "I have to go to Springfield," because his wife was sick in Springfield. So he was, he said, "While I'm on the train I'll let you off in Thompsonville, and I'll continue going." And he told my mother, "It's okay if I take Carmelina." Carmelina was my oldest sister. So my mother says, "Yeah, okay." So we stop in Thompsonville, and he went to Springfield, then we come back. Then when we went to my uncle house, my uncle had nine kids, he had a boarder with two other kids, we were another four kids, she was taking care of about another twenty kids. There must have been about fifty kids in the house. (she laughs) I says, "Holy caboose." And it was, they were just something. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you spent the first night in, in the house with your uncle? Did they, did they feed you, and . . .

CUSUMANO: Oh, yes, they feed us all right, and we had rooms upstairs. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Was your grandmother there?

CUSUMANO: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing your grandmother?

CUSUMANO: Oh, yes, yeah. She was there all the time.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about when your mother first saw your grandmother?

CUSUMANO: Oh, she was happy to see her, yeah. So after, when we were in Thompsonville about a year-and-a-half, my father couldn't find him a job, so some cous -- cousin on my father from Asbury Park, New Jersey, he says, "Come down here, I'll make you get a job over here." So naturally we packed, we went Asbury Park, New Jersey."

SIGRIST: Thompsonville, I should say, is Thompsonville part of Enfield? Is that . . .

CUSUMANO: Yeah, well, that's Enfield now. It used to be Thompsonville before. Now it's Enfield.

SIGRIST: I see. So, anyway, you were there for a year-and-a-half.

CUSUMANO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And you went to Asbury Park. Before you get to Asbury Park, did they put you into school in Connecticut?

CUSUMANO: Yeah, we went to school.

SIGRIST: Can you talk to me about being put into American school for the first time?

CUSUMANO: Oh, I was good to the teacher. The teacher was good to me. And then

there was a boy who used to say dirty words, and I used to say, "Teach! He said dirty words." "You stay after school." And I used to run home. And then I was there, I was very good on arithmetic.

SIGRIST: Theresa wants to say something. Say it loudly.

THERESA: Tell him about when you needed winter coats to go to school.

CUSUMANO: Oh, well, that's in Asbury. But [unclear].....

THERESA: Oh, I thought that was in . . .

CUSUMANO: No, Asbury Park, New Jersey. So when we got in Asbury Park, New Jersey . . .

THERESA: [unclear]. Your sister died.

CUSUMANO: My, oh, that's in Thompsonville. My younger sister, she died after we were here about two or three months.

SIGRIST: Which sister is this?

CUSUMANO: Lillian.

SIGRIST: Lillian. Can you talk about why she died, and what you remember about that?

CUSUMANO: Well, she had the measles. She had the measles, and then she was

getting better. So naturally she was pregnant from my brother, so she told my mother . . .

SIGRIST: Your mother was pregnant.

CUSUMANO: My mother. She told my grandma, "Take care of Lillian. Make sure she doesn't go in the water." Because at that time if you had measles if you go in the water it was no good. Well, my grandma, she had about thirty kids in the house, and she was a little bit of a thing, so my sister, she climbed on the chair and she was washing herself. So after a couple of days all her body she had spots like lentils. You know what's lentils?

SIGRIST: Lentils, yep.

CUSUMANO: Oh, and that was it. Then there was the Feast of San Calogero. And my little sister was sick. So she was sick, and somebody threw some sparkles, that's stuff like sparkles, on the roof, and it started to burn. And we all get out. My mother said, "I'm not going to get out. My daughter's sick. I won't go. If the house burns, I'll burn with my daughter, and all that." Then finally they put out the fire and all that. So my sister, she was sick, and she was in one room, and she -- we were -- we had all nice clothes for the Feast of San Calogero. My sister was sick, she had nice clothes, all that. My little sister, she was sick, she told my mother, "Ma, I cannot wear those clothes." My mother said, "Why not?" She says, "Well, I want you buy me all white clothes." We had just come from

the old country. My mother says, "How can I buy you all . . ." "I want to buy all white clothes." "What for, Lillian?" "Well, you see, up there they're waiting for me, and I cannot go until I have all white clothes." So today, next day was the same thing. My mother, what she's gonna do? You have a sick child, you try to please her. She went buy all white clothes for her, everything white, shoes, everything, everything white. And the next day she was in one bed, she say, "Put me in the other bed." And she want --- she wanted bread and onions in the middle of the night. Then she said, "Now, I wet your bread -- your bed." Then she look at the saint, she says, "Oh, God." And she was gone. She told my mother, "See, I want the white clothes to go over there." She said, "They're waiting for me up there." I remember, because I was there.

SIGRIST: How old was she?

CUSUMANO: Three-and-a-half.

SIGRIST: How did this affect your family?

CUSUMANO: Well, they felt very bad. Nothing could do about it. So . . .

SIGRIST: And that was in Thompsonville.

CUSUMANO: That was in Thompsonville, yes.

SIGRIST: Had your mother given birth to your brother yet?

CUSUMANO: No, no. So we came in the month of March or April, I don't remember, and this happened in the month of July. And my brother was born in the month of October, see?

SIGRIST: Well, get us to Asbury Park, and tell me what happened down there in our last few minutes.

CUSUMANO: So we went over there, my father got a job working for the railroad, which was okay.

SIGRIST: Doing what?

CUSUMANO: Uh, working on the railroad tracks. Oh, I don't know what kind of job he was doing, but working for the railroad anyway. And we were living with his cousin. So then, by then my little brother Joe, he was about six, seven weeks, uh, months, and then there was my cousins, my father's cousin's children. I told him in Italian, I says, "(speaks in Italian), give me some milk for the baby." Because he wanted to drink some milk. And I said it in Italian. Don't ask me, when the father came they say I swore at them, which I never did. We never used to swear. And my father gave me a damn good beating. My mother was so damn mad. She said, "We're gonna get the hell out of here." So we did get the hell out of there. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Could you talk to me about how you learned English? When did you start learning English?

CUSUMANO: When we went to school.

SIGRIST: In Thompsonville?

CUSUMANO: In Thompsonville, then Asbury Park, New Jersey.

SIGRIST: Can you talk to me a little bit about how you learned English.

CUSUMANO: Well, we used to go to school.

SIGRIST: Yes.

CUSUMANO: We used to go to Sunday school. Then they had the neighbors. They used to talk English, so I had to talk to them, explain and all, all that. So we moved from there, and where were we gonna go? And I used to take the baby where my mother used to work. She used to work for five cents an hour. (she laughs) Sewing children's clothes. And I used to put the baby in the carriage and I used to take him. Because my sisters go to school, I had to stay home and take care of the baby. And I would take the baby to my mother so she could nurse him, and then I'd come back home. So anyway, we moved to this other house, it was a two-family, it was. We were living upstairs, and this other lady, with her husband, she had a little boy, was living downstairs. And she would leave me alone with her little boy and my little brother, so there was a big grapevine. I would sit on the rocking chair and rock myself. Upstairs (clears throat) in

that house before we moved there, there was a Jewish family. This Jewish fellow, he loved his cousin. He wanted to marry her. She did not want to marry him. So she married somebody else. So naturally, see, he was in the family, he was there, like everybody go home and the family stay there. In the middle of the night, [unclear] he says, "If I couldn't have you, the other guy not gonna have you," and he killed her, right there in her wedding gown and all that. He killed her. And she put her hand on the wall, and there was blood, her hand. My mother scrubbed [unclear] it didn't come down. As we were living there I was sitting downstairs, and I would look upstairs, in the window there was this man that killed his -- his cousin. He was dark complexion, with a little moustache, beautiful hair, he was good looking, and he was looking down. I was looking at him, and he was looking at me. But it didn't bother me who the man was at my place. We're just there. (Coughs) So in the middle of the night I dreamt I was in the attic, and I used to see this couple roll from one end of the room to the other. That was in my dream. But it was happening, because my father got up in the middle of the night with a big stick, he's, "Who's trying to scare us?" He said, "Nobody could get in the room." But, anyway, he went over there and he scared the people, the ghost. We say ghost. The people next door, they heard the noise, they went away during the night. And the lady downstairs, after she did confess, she said, "Yeah." She said, "I used to see the man from my living room walking back." That's why she said she used to go out every day, and she used to leave me all alone. But I was not afraid.

So we moved from there.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about how your father, who was a little more reticent about coming to America, he didn't really want to do it as much as your mother did, tell me how he adjusted to America.

CUSUMANO: Well, like everything else, he had to get used to it. He says he got to go work and support the family. My mother, she didn't go to work. She went to work in Asbury Park, New Jersey, for a couple of days. Coming back, she lost her way, and she went in the woods, and everybody was looking for her. And my mother was crying, she didn't know where to go. All she could remember was a white school. Where we lived, across the street over there, there was a great, big, white school, and the white school was half for colored people, half for white people. They were not connected. Half for the white kids, girls, and half for the white boys. There were four, four playgrounds, all [unclear]. And it was a beautiful school. And all she could remember was the white school. She couldn't say nothing. The white school.

SIGRIST: You're saying Weiss?

CUSUMANO: White.

SIGRIST: White.

CUSUMANO: The school was painted white.

SIGRIST: I see. The school was white.

CUSUMANO: Yeah. And then finally she come out. My father said, "You're not going to go to work for no money," and he made her stay home.

SIGRIST: Did your parents attempt to learn English?

CUSUMANO: Yeah. My father did.

SIGRIST: What about your mother?

CUSUMANO: She tried.

SIGRIST: How did she try?

CUSUMANO: Well, she tried to say the words, but naturally when you don't know how to read and write in Italian, it's very hard to learn the language. So we -- we were there for a while, and my mother said, "I don't want to stay here any more. I want to go back to Thompsonville." We went back to Thompsonville.

SIGRIST: Did your mother and father ever want to go back to Italy?

CUSUMANO: No. No.

SIGRIST: Did your grandmother, who was here, did she go -- she didn't go to Asbury Park with you, right?

CUSUMANO: No.

SIGRIST: She stayed in Thompsonville.

CUSUMANO: She stood with my uncle.

SIGRIST: Had your grandmother learned English at that point?

CUSUMANO: She, she used to learn, but not -- she was not perfect. Yeah. Because every, everybody used to talk Italian.

SIGRIST: What do you think the hardest thing was for your parents to get adjusted to here in the United States.

CUSUMANO: Well, it was very hard to get adjusted. It was not that easy. My father couldn't get a job in Thompsonville, then he finally got a job in the Bigelow. I don't know if you ever heard the Bigelow, where they used to make the rugs?

SIGRIST: Biggle?

CUSUMANO: Bigelow.

SIGRIST: Oh, Bigelow.

CUSUMANO: They used to make the rugs.

SIGRIST: Bigelow.

CUSUMANO: There was a great, big, now they got all apartments there. There's -- they don't do rugs there any more.

SIGRIST: But it was a factory where rugs were made.

CUSUMANO: Where -- that's -- they used to make the yarn, and they spin it, and then they make the rugs. They would paint the rugs. And when the rug used to come down from the ceiling, my father had a sharp knife, and he had to cut just so, and the rug would fall right there, and then another would come down, and he -- that's what he used to do.

SIGRIST: Because your father was used to working outside, you know, in Sicily.

CUSUMANO: Well...

SIGRIST: I wonder, did he ever tell you how he felt about having to do these kinds of jobs?

CUSUMANO: No, no. [unclear] Never -- never said.

SIGRIST: Did he become a citizen?

CUSUMANO: Oh, yes. When we came here, he took his papers. But then he didn't take the second paper. If he would have take the papers from the beginning, we all would be citizens, but because he didn't, after the time went by, after two years, that was it. He had to start all over again. But

he did become a citizen.

SIGRIST: What about you?

CUSUMANO: Oh, I've become a citizen.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you became a citizen?

CUSUMANO: Oh, I got married. The husband I had, he said, "You don't have to go." I said, "Don't tell me I don't have to go." I said, "I'm going to be a citizen whether you like it or not."

SIGRIST: And how, what was the process of becoming a citizen? What did you have to do?

CUSUMANO: Well, we had to go over there, and then you had to learn what the president was and who's this or that, different thing, and you tried to [unclear] it, and you tried to say something. You know what I mean? And that's, and then -- then finally, I couldn't get my papers, because I had to get two witness. So I got one -- one witness, then I got the man witness. And I was waiting, I was waiting. I went over there, I said, "How come I don't get my papers?" They said, "Well, the one you're going to have a witness, he was in jail one time." For crying out loud! Anyway, what he was in jail for, because he was drunk. And for that, I said, for that I don't get my papers? But, anyway, I did get my papers.

SIGRIST: And how did it make you feel to become a citizen?

CUSUMANO: Very good, very good.

SIGRIST: When you think of yourself in terms of nationality, do you think of yourself as Italian or as American, or how do you think of yourself?

CUSUMANO: Well, as I said, they said, "What do you want?" I'm Italian. Well, a lot of people take me for Greek, take me for Spanish, Portuguese, but no Italian. Jewish. Jewish? I said, "I'm Italian." "You're Italian. You don't look like, you don't s – you don't act like Italian." "How do I like act? I act, that's me." But, as I say, that was very good.

SIGRIST: Good. Well, I think I've asked all the questions I need to ask. Mrs. Cusumano, thank you very much. You have a wonderful memory, and you're very expressive. I wish we were doing videotape, too, (she laughs) because you've been acting out your whole story. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Grace Cusumano on Thursday, May 29, 1997, in Manchester, Connecticut. Thank you very much.

CUSUMANO: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW