

EI-913/Martin

EI-913

CARMELLA RICUPERO MARTIN

BIRTH DATE: FEBRUARY 4, 1929

INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 29, 1997

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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ITALY, 1937 Locri, Calabria

Age 8

SHIP NAME NOT RECORDED

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mrs. Martin is the sister of Josephine Milano, EI-914. 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., Oral Historian, 8/14/1997.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, July 29, 1997. I'm here with Carmella Ricupero Martin. Mrs. Martin came from Italy. They arrive in December 1937, when she was eight years old, and they were detained a few days at Ellis Island, because the authorities thought that Mrs. Martin had pinkeye. And I should say that we're in Rotterdam, New York, at the home of Mrs. Martin's sister, Josephine Milano. And she's playing with the microphone cord already. (they laugh) All right. Can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

MARTIN: I was born February 4, 1929.

SIGRIST: February 4, 1929. And where were you born?

MARTIN: In Locri, Italy.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Locri?

MARTIN: LEVINE: LEVINE: L-O-C-R-I

SIGRIST: And where is that in Italy?

MARTIN: It's somewhere near Rome. I don't know how many miles from Rome, but I remember visiting Rome when I was a child.

SIGRIST: Really? What do you remember about that trip?

MARTIN: What I remembered was that we went on donkey. (she laughs) And, uh, it was a feast day, and what, what impressed me so much was that all the trees were all lit up with lights, and it was so pretty, and that was the only time I ever was able to go.

SIGRIST: Do you know why you went to Rome?

MARTIN: It was the feast, and I was old enough....

SIGRIST: What feast?

MARTIN: And I was old enough that I was able to go. I guess you had to be a certain age before you went, otherwise you just weren't able to go.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about the circumstances that surrounded your birth, like what happened that day, any information about that?

MARTIN: Uh, what happened the day I was born.

SIGRIST: Stories your mother and father might have told?

MARTIN: Actually what happened was that my father, or my mother wrote to my father and told him that, uh, I was born, because my father was already here. And, uh, probably got messed up with the writing, and he thought that he had a son, Carmello, instead of a Carmella. So when he came to visit us, he was pretty upset that I wasn't a boy. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: How old were you when he came to visit?

MARTIN: Uh, I was, I was a child still, really, really small, still in a crib. And, uh, I remember, but I was told that he, you know, they had a party because he arrived there, and he got a little inebriated, and he was quite upset that I wasn't a boy. And, uh, probably hated me from that day on. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Were there other children, too, in the family, brothers and sisters that you had?

MARTIN: Later, yes.

SIGRIST: Later, but you were the firstborn.

MARTIN: I was the firstborn, and I had two, two other sisters, three other sisters. One was born here.

SIGRIST: Can you name them for me?

MARTIN: Uh, Josephine Milano.

SIGRIST: Whose house we're in.

MARTIN: And Theresa, and then Annemarie, the one that was born here. And I have a half brother, Frank.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the house, or the structure that you lived in in Italy?

MARTIN: It was, it was just a regular, sort of like a cottage, but it was made out of brick, and it was, we had marble floors. I remember the black and white floor where I used to, like, hopscotch across. And we had a, we were one of the first ones that had like a basement part, and we had a stove down there that, uh, we were able to cook in and do all kinds of things, and ovens, and stuff like that. And, uh, let's see, what else?

SIGRIST: Is there a piece of furniture that sticks out in your mind in the house?

MARTIN: Actually just the stove was, impressed me, because it was sort of one of the first things that we were able to have, you know? And the other things were either things that you cooked outside like, you know, fireplaces and ovens and, you know.

SIGRIST: Were there other family members that lived with you? I mean, obviously you and your mother.

MARTIN: Uh...

SIGRIST: Dad's in America.

MARTIN: Not with us, but we had my grandmother, which she lived up the road a little ways from us, wasn't that far. In fact, um, when I, when we went back to Italy, that was the first thing that I wanted to see was how far we were from our house. In fact, our house was still there. Not the whole house, just the bottom part, and the stove was still there. So that was really weird.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you went back for the first time?

MARTIN: It was just, it was about four years ago.

SIGRIST: Oh, just recently.

MARTIN: Yeah, just recently, after I retired. We decided...

SIGRIST: What did it feel like to be back there?

MARTIN: It, it brought back a lot of memories and, uh, I said, gee, that was the best move we made to get away from here. (she laughs) Because it was a lot of work over there, you know? They had all these farms, and everybody was constantly working the farms, and I just, wow, if I was still here, I'd be doing that, you know? (she laughs) so, of course, I'm working now a lot. (they laugh) But not that hard.

SIGRIST: You're not doing farm work.

MARTIN: Not that hard.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

MARTIN: My father's name was Frank.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me a little bit about his background, and why he went to America?

MARTIN: You know, to tell you the truth, I don't remember all that much about my father. It, I very seldom saw him. I think he was here most of the time. He visited occasionally, and that was about it. I think the reason that he came over here was to make a better, you know, to better his family, and better himself. Uh, you know, we always heard it was the you know, the streets were paved with gold, and stuff like that, and I guess he thought that he would be able to do better for himself than out there. At the time in Italy it was very, you know, it was very poor. People didn't have very much. You know, they just had what they, you know, their land. They just grew their own stuff, and things like that. So, and there wasn't very much work. You couldn't, you know, make any kind of a wage. So I think that's really why he came and, uh, after...

SIGRIST: Is there... I'm sorry, go ahead.

MARTIN: Then after he, one of the reasons that we came over here was because, I think mainly because of the war, there was talk of war, and he wanted us to come over here before the war started.

SIGRIST: You said that he visited a couple of times during your childhood before you came here. Is there one visit that sticks out in your mind for some reason?

MARTIN: Yeah. I remember this one particular time when we knew he was coming, and I must have been maybe, I don't know, maybe five or six years old, and I remember his brother who lived, like, down the road from us, uh, when he heard that his brother was coming, he jumped this wire fence and fell over. (she laughs) And he broke his leg and, uh, you know, he was just, he was so excited to see him, because I guess he hadn't seen him in quite a while. So that impressed me.

SIGRIST: Did he ever bring you a present from America?

MARTIN: I don't remember him ever bringing me anything. I do remember that he brought things for, you know, everybody, you know, but I don't remember anything in particular that he gave me personally.

SIGRIST: Um, what was your mother's name?

MARTIN: Concetta.

SIGRIST: Spell that, please?

MARTIN: C-O-N-C-E-T-T-A

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

MARTIN: Cinanni.

SIGRIST: And tell me what you know about your mother's background.

MARTIN: My mother came from a very large family, and I think she was the oldest one, if I remember. And, uh, a very nice lady, a very nice lady. She took care of everybody, took care of everything.

SIGRIST: What were some of her responsibilities in the house, for instance?

MARTIN: Boy, she, she did a lot. Besides taking care of all of us, she had to work the fields, took care of the, you know, her brothers, the uncles, uh, all the male that were working in the fields, they would come home, or come back in the evening, and she, you know, they would all be preparing meals and stuff like that. And, uh, she would make wine. And always canning and, you know, things like that.

SIGRIST: Was there something that you particularly enjoyed doing with your mother when you were a child in Italy?

MARTIN: I used to love to watch them making bread.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the process a little bit?

MARTIN: I don't know the process, because to this day I don't know how to make bread. But, anyway, they you now, we'd have this huge oven out, outside, and it would be my mother and my aunts and my grandmother, and there would be a bunch of us little kids running around, you know, and in order to keep us quiet they promised to make us a little loaf of bread, you know. So that was fun, that was exciting. That was our big prize, to be quiet. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, what do you think was so fascinating about the process of making bread, from the point of view of being a little kid?

MARTIN: It just seemed as though it was like a little family thing, you know, and it was fun to, uh, to be part of a family. The kids were kind of always more or less shoved away, you know? The adults would eat, and then after they would eat, then we'd come in and eat, you know? And to be part of the whole group seemed like, you know, we were something, finally, you know? And to have just that little piece of bread was great, you know.

SIGRIST: You mentioned a grandmother. Is this Dad's mom, or Mom's mom?

MARTIN: It was my mother's mother.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your grandmother?

MARTIN: My grandmother was the matriarch of everybody. She was the head of the household. She knew everything, did everything, and very, very intelligent woman. We could always go to her for almost anything.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what she looked like?

MARTIN: She probably was about, um, I remember, of course, when I was young, everybody looked tall to me, but she seemed very tall to me, and thin. I wouldn't say muscular but, you know, working in the fields and farm and everything, they were pretty tough and strong. But she, she was out there working all the time.

SIGRIST: Was there a grandfather that went with the grandmother?

MARTIN: Yes. I had a grandfather. And I've got to tell you a story about my grandfather. My grandfather had one of those moustaches, you know, what do they call those...

SIGRIST: You're gesturing like a panhandle.

MARTIN: Yeah. And he had one. I forgot what they're called. But anyway, he had this moustache that he was very proud of, you know, and always twisting the ends. And he was sleeping one time, and I had scissors, and I took part of, one half of it off. (she laughs) so that's what I remember about him.

SIGRIST: May I ask what his reaction was to that?

MARTIN: He was a little upset about it, but it was not that bad so he couldn't grow it back again. Of course, he had to cut the other side to match the one side, but uh, that's what I remember about him. They, they, um, the men, for some

reason, they didn't pay that much attention to us. You know, we'd come in and they'd pat us on the head, and then we'd be off again somewhere, you know. We were always outside playing, or whatever.

Sigrist: What do you remember about, about being a small girl in Italy, and you say you ran off and played? What did you do? What, how would you entertain yourself as a child?

Martin: well, let's see. We would, when I was younger, I had responsibilities a lot of them. I had to go out in the fields with my animals and, uh, would take the sheep out or the goats, and they, I would get like a, a half a load of bread, like crusted, and that would be my meal for the day, because most of the time we found things to eat, because there was always fruit growing or berries, or whatever. So I'd be out almost all day just with, uh, either the sheep or the goats or whatever. And, uh, that would, that would take up most of our time, and then, of course, I went to school. We had to walk to school barefoot. (she laughs) Like Bill Cosby you know. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Is there a story that you can tell about something that happened at school one time?

MARTIN: Yeah. Walking to school this one particular day, I walked by this hole that was in the ground, and there was a bunch of snakes, and I stepped right in it. And so instead of continuing on to school, I ran back home again, and my mother was upset because I didn't continue going to school. There was, uh, we had, we had like a pool that we would catch water, because water was very scarce, and there was always water snakes, or water moccasins in the water and everything, that was scary. And, uh, let's see, there was, there was a time that, I can tell you this story. My sister doesn't remember it. We were without water, and I woke up during the night, and I was very thirsty, and there was no water to drink. And I kept crying, and my mother would say, "Well, you know, we've got water that the men used to wash their hands with," and I said, "I'll drink that, anything." You know. And so I'm laying there in my bed, and I could see, you know, after a while your eyes get accustomed to dark, and there's this big black snake that had come inside the house, and it was headed for my, for my sister's crib. And I, naturally I woke up and I got a hold of my, I woke up my mother. My mother called my uncle, and he came and he killed it. But the snake was going after my sister's milk bottle. So that was kind of scary. But, uh, that's about the only thing that I can remember of the, you know, we used to always be, you know, we'd wash, do our laundry in a creek, you know, and use a rock to, to wash with, and then we'd hang them, like, on bushes, on top of this hill, and I used to go up there a lot, up on the hill, and just sit and wash the clothes, and dream, you know? (she laughs)

SIGRIST: You mentioned going to school. Could your mother or your grandmother read and write?

MARTIN: Uh, evidently my mother did, because she would write to my father. So I don't know if she wrote the letters. I think she did, unless somebody else did. I never really paid all that much attention, but I know that he got letters. And he, my father would send letters, too, so somebody would read them.

SIGRIST: Someone able to do that. What religion were you?

MARTIN: Catholic

SIGRIST: Can you tell me how you practiced your religion at home?

MARTIN: Well, we always prayed, always, before meals.

SIGRIST: Is there a prayer in Italian that you still remember?

MARTIN: Uh, no. (she laughs) I don't remember any Italian prayers. It was similar to, "Thank you, God, for our food, and bless everyone and make them healthy, and make the green grass grow so that our sheep and cows would have food." And, you know, stuff like that.

SIGRIST: Did you have religious articles in the house?

MARTIN: Oh, yeah. There were statues all over the place. We had statues of the Sacred Heart, and the statues of the Blessed Mother, crosses of God all over the place. Yeah, there was, very religious.

SIGRIST: And what about actually going to a church? Was there a church nearby, or...

MARTIN: I think the only time that they went to church, I didn't go, was in Rome, because I don't remember, there probably was churches close by, but I don't ever remember really going to them.

SIGRIST: So your religious life is really centered around the home.

MARTIN: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: What about holidays? You mentioned celebrating a saint's day or something in Rome.

MARTIN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about holiday celebrations at your own home? Did you celebrate Easter or Christmas in some way, or...

MARTIN: No, I don't ever remember Easter. Christmas was a big thing there, Christmas time. Easter, I don't remember that much about Easter. We didn't have any eggs. We had eggs, but we never colored them or anything or hard boiled them or any of that stuff. But, uh, I remember at Christmas time we would get like a little gift, maybe another loaf of bread. I don't, I don't remember ever really getting gifts. The only toys that we had were things that we would find. And I can remember this one particular time walking along the creek, and I found a stone that kind of was tall, and I remember it had almost the shape of a doll, and I would, I picked that, and I brought it home, and I'd make clothes for it. (she laughs) But that was my toy, you know. That was about it.

SIGRIST: Clothing. What kind of clothes did you wear as a little kid, and where did they come from?

MARTIN: Just, um, they I think they made most of our clothes. You know, living in a hot area we didn't have that many clothes. All we had was maybe just a little, shorts or something. That was it. And if we had to go anywhere special, uh, I remember, in fact, that picture that my sister showed me, or showed you, has the dress that my mother knitted, or crocheted. That was my good dress. And, uh, I think they made most of their stuff, yeah, most of the clothes.

SIGRIST: So your mother would do handiwork of some sort?

MARTIN: Oh yeah, yeah. They all knew how to crochet and weave, and they, we had, we had sheep that they would take the wool from the sheep and have the spinning wheels, and they did all that, yeah.

SIGRIST: A tough life.

MARTIN: Oh, it was. I can't imagine working, you know, living that way.

SIGRIST: When your father first came to the United States, which was before you were born, I guess?

MARTIN: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Was that the first time he went, before you were born?

MARTIN: I don't know. I don't really know if he came before that, or that was the first time, or what.

SIGRIST: That's the first time you know about.

MARTIN: Yeah, the first time that I know about.

SIGRIST: Where did he go, and what did he do?

MARTIN: He went to Albany. And I can't remember if he had a friend or a relative that he stayed with. He eventually got his own place, bought a home, and, uh, was planning on sending for us at the time. But I don't...

SIGRIST: How did you think about America as a little girl in Italy? What ideas did you have about this place?

MARTIN: It just seemed, you know, I really didn't hear all that much, because they didn't tell us little kids very much, but when I finally knew that we were going to be leaving Italy and coming to the United States, and everybody was saying, "Oh, its going to be great. You're going to have all kinds of things, plentiful. And, uh, you never have to worry about anything. You're going to have all kinds of food and clothes and a house and, you know, everything that you want will be there." I never was, I didn't feel I was for want in Italy, you know? (she laughs) But you never know that you're poor, you know, until somebody tells you that you are, you know? But, uh...

SIGRIST: Do you remember, was there a specific moment when your mother you you were leaving this place?

MARTIN: Yes. She, because by that time I was eight years old, and when she told me that we were going to go to live with my father in the United States, I had to say goodbye to all my friends, and I had this one little boy friend that was really upset because I was going to leave. Because in Italy they have you almost, you know, planned on who you're going to marry and everything, and this kid was supposed to be my husband in the future. And he says, "I'll probably never see you again." I say, "Oh, no, I'll come and visit." You know, "I'll come and visit." Because I never really knew how far we were going to be. I thought it was, like, down the road somewhere, you know? I'm going to just go to the United States, and I'll be back. And, uh, I remember one of my uncles, when we were in the train station, they had this big fountain, you know. And he says, "Carmella, next time you see this, it'll probably be all old and worn out." I remember that as plain as anything. So when I did go it was still there, but it wasn't...

SIGRIST: When you went to visit...

MARTIN: It wasn't, yeah, when I went to visit it was still there, but I didn't see it all worn out and everything. It seemed like, like when I left. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: They kept it up.

MARTIN: They kept it up, yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you have to do prior to leaving? What had to be done before you could leave Italy?

MARTIN: Well, I remember that I had to go see the doctor because of my eye.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what was wrong with your eye.

MARTIN: Uh, you know, nobody ever really told me, because when I was born, we didn't have doctors. It was just a midwife, and I think it was my grandmother that delivered me, or my aunt, one of them. And in order to, uh, you know, clean my eyes out, they put some sort of solution in there, and either that injured my eye or what. I never really knew. But I had this redness in my eyes, and they said it was a ...

SIGRIST: It was your left...

MARTIN: It's my left eye, and it's still there to this day. So that was one of the things that detained us from coming over, because I had to keep going back and forth to doctors. And finally it was making it worse, so the doctor, I assume, had to write to whoever he had to write to, or make some sort of letter saying that it's not pinkeye, that it's just a birth defect. And so eventually we were able to come.

SIGRIST: How long did all that take, do you think?

MARTIN: IT seemed to me, and I was trying to check into it, it seemed like we were, like a year, almost