

**EI-915**

**FRED GROSSO**

**BIRTHDATE: MAY 2, 1913**

**INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 29, 1997**

**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 84**

**RUNNING TIME:**

**INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST (PH)**

**RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME**

**INTERVIEW LOCATION: ROTTERDAM, NY**

**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: INES JIMBO**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: ELIZABETH ORCUTT/IS**

**ITALY 1928**

**AGE: 13**

**SHIP: UNKNOWN**

**PORT: NAPLES**

**RESIDENCES:**

- **ITALY: SAN GIOVANNI LIBIONI, ABRUZZI**
- **US: Schenectady, Rotterdam NY**

**HISTORIAN'S NOTE:** Photographer for the *Schenectady Gazette*, Bruce Squires; Reporter \_\_\_\_\_ for the *Gazette*, Matt Roy; and Family Friend Margaret Saharis are present during the interview.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Sigris for the National Park Service. Today \_\_\_\_\_ is Tuesday July 29, 1997. I'm in Rotterdam, (PH), New York with Mr. Fred \_\_\_\_\_ G. Grosso. Mr. Grosso came from Italy in 1928, He was thirteen years old at \_\_\_\_\_ that time, and was detained at Ellis Island for seven days. Present also in the \_\_\_\_\_ room -- photographer for the *Schenectady Gazette*, Mr. Bruce Squires; reporter \_\_\_\_\_ for the *Gazette*, Matt Roy and family friend Margaret Saharis. We're \_\_\_\_\_ all here (laugh) in the

room. Mr. Grosso, can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

GROSSO: 5/2/13

SIGRIST: So, that's May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1913.

GROSSO: Correct.

SIGRIST: Yes. And where were you born, sir?

GROSSO: I was born in a little village called San Giovanni Libioni, which is a province of Abruzzi and also a province of Chieti, Italy. I was born in the little village of San Giovanni Libioni.

SIGRIST: Okay. And do you know anything about the circumstances of your birth, the day it happened. What do you know about it?

GROSSO: Uh-uh. I, I was, I can't remember too much, really my birth...

SIGRIST: Something that was told to you?

GROSSO: I understand, I was the first -- the first child of my mother and father and I was rather -- a little bit reckless boy. As my mother relates to me that I used to sit on the floor and crack nuts with a big hammer. Not only did I cracked the nuts, but I also cracked the deep tiles on the floor. So I must have been a little bit of a [laughs] rough boy.

SIGRIST: Um. Tell me a little bit of your mother. What was her name?

GROSSO: My mother's name was Vittoria.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that please?

GROSSO: V-I-T-T-O-R-I-A.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

GROSSO: Her maiden name was also G-R-O-S-S-O, Grosso.

SIGRIST: Was she related to your father?

GROSSO: No, no. Many of the people in the village were Grossos. But this must of gone back many, many years. Were -- no longer were related.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you know about your mothers up bringing and her family background.

GROSSO: Well. [clears throat] Of course -- in our village over there, there was no industry. All of the people lived on the -- what ever they could raise. Whether it was wheat or corn in the fields, all done by hand. And also the animals which supplied -- like the chickens, and the pigs, and the goats, and the, and the sheep -- supplied the meat. The only thing that we would -- really we could buy imported -- was sugar and coffee, okay. So. And my grandfather (which is my mother's father) we use to go to a near by village to get cigarettes and cigars for the community.

SIGRIST: Did he sell them to the....

GROSSO: Yes, yes he sold them.

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

GROSSO: My mother -- she was a tremendous, peaceful individual. She always tried to make peace for anybody. She was wonderful, I mean and she was the leader of the family. She, she ran the family. She did most of the thinking. And, of course my father was the provider. Okay? 'Course when he was in Italy -- so I say, and here if I can tell you a little bit of the background of my father. At the age of fourteen he came to America here, and his job was take care of the horses for General Electric Company executives. Okay? After three or four years he went back and, naturally, the first thing he was inducted in the Italian army. Because Italy at that time was at war with Ethiopia. And no sooner that he got [clears throat] out of that war of course then he was, he was intr—he was inducted into the first World War. So he spent very, very little time at home and it was my mother to raise the four children.

SIGRIST: What was your fathers' name?

GROSSO: Giustino.

SIGRIST: Could you spell that please?

GROSSO: J-, G-I-U-S-T-I-N-O.

SIGRIST: Did ever tell any stories about his participation in the war with Ethiopia?

GROSSO: No, about all I can tell you the participation is what my mother related to me. That -- in my understanding -- at first, you know, that every time he came on a furlough there was another child born. [Laughs] And he was -- he was injured by many (practically all through his body) by shrapnel through the, through the war. So he did come home on a furlough occasionally. But I don't, I don't remember very little about that era about my father.

SIGRIST: Can you talk little bit about your father's personality maybe what you experienced later on with him?

GROSSO: Well, my father personality, I think was more or less Italian idealistic. As they were. He's a leader and his responsibility is to provide for the family. So I think that I could say that my father was a very normal, typical Italian.

SIGRIST: Was he present when you were growing up or was he in America?

GROSSO: No, no, no. All the growing up of all the four children was the responsibility of my mother. As I indicated to you previously, he was either -- when he [clears throat] was a young man, he was in America. And he came back and was in service, and he came back and he was in another service. And so it was -- it was hardly any time that he spent, really with the family.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about his work, um, tending the horses for General Electric?

GROSSO: Well all I can remember is that he didn't want to talk very much about it because his job was to -- cleaning the, the mess that the,

the horses made. And that was his major responsibility. So, he didn't want to talk too much about it.

SIGRIST: Well, I can't blame him [laugh] for that, I guess. Um, so your mother is pretty much raising the -- the children. You said there are four children.

GROSSO: That's right.

SIGRIST: Can you name them for me, please?

GROSSO: Well I was the oldest, Fred. And then, then I had a -- a sister and 'is name was Ber-- Bernice B-E-R-N-I-C-E. And then the younger one was Silvio, S-I-L-V-I-O. And the fourth one, of course, was Areste. That's the one that was, was -- he died, you know, when he got burned.

SIGRIST: Um, that's right. You were telling us that story before we started the tape.

GROSSO: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Could you just tell it again, quickly? The story about Areste and how he died.

GROSSO: Well he was a young fellow and he was playing when my mother was going the cooking. And she had just taken a big kettle of hot water with spaghetti off the fireplace. And -- and she turned around to get the cold water because she needed to cool the spaghetti before she took it out of the kettle. She turned around. My young

brother -- he walked backwards, okay, into the kitchen and he just sat right in up in a --into the kettle. And he lived four days after that.

SIGRIST: And then he died.

GROSSO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Um, what was your name when you were born in Italy?

GROSSO: My name was Guido G-U-I-D-O.

SIGRIST: And were you named for someone?

GROSSO: I don't know. I -- I that -- where my father got that name, I couldn't tell you.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your childhood, growing up in this household with your mom, and the kinds of things you did on a daily basis.

GROSSO: Okay.

GROSSO: Well my mother was very much concerned about having her children work out in the field by hand. As you know, as everybody did over there. So she, at what -- when -- I must of been about the age of ten, she asked me to go in and learn the carpenter trade. For three years, I worked in a carpenter shop under supervisor. He was the owner. And there, we -- we did everything by hand. If we had a log which was four-foot square or two feet square and twelve feet long, another young man and I -- with each one on each end of the side of it -- we would cut this into one-inch boards. Sometime it took us days in -- to cut one board. Our main function was there to produce

boards in order to -- we were building doors, windows, and coffins. And as I say, I was -- I was -- I was about ten or eleven years old at that time. But worked six days a week -- every day eight or ten hours a day -- working in a carpenter shop.

SIGRIST: And did you stay at the shop or were you still living at home?

GROSSO: No...

GROSSO: I was living at home. It was the same village, I was at home.

SIGRIST: Was this a typical practice to send children?...

GROSSO: Well, no. No, it was not a typical practice. Over there -- for instance, you know -- even though I was working all those hours during the week, I was not getting any pay. The consensus of opinion was that he was teaching me, and this was worth more than my work was worth. So my mother, occasionally he gave him gifts. You know. To give him some chickens, give him some eggs, and give him something to pay for his teaching me -- you know -- or keeping me in his shop.

SIGRIST: What was your favorite thing to do in the carpenter shop?

GROSSO: Well, really you know, I don't think I can say anything was -- except that some of the work was much more difficult and it required a lot more strength. I mean. Do you know? When you -- when you sit on a saw and you pulling (one young men on the side and the other one) all day long, it's pretty tiresome. See and for instance, to give you an example here, they have a [clears throat] a plane, that planes the wood. And when my father came over there he saw me -

- that the plane was longer than I was tall. And he immediately sent me home because that was not the kind of work of an individual my age over here in America.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your mother sort of maintaining the household and what her responsibilities were in the home?

GROSSO: Okay. My mother was such a tremendous lady. Okay? That during the time that she was raising the four children and during the time that my father was in the war, you must remember that she was practically all alone in the house. She had a sister-in-law and she had a fa-- --Let me see, that was my father -- my father's father. That was his father-in law. And so it was no one that could produce anything. And during the Second -- the Second World War, the -- the -- the government of Italy took about all the produce that all the people in the various...

SIGRIST: [interposed] First World War.

GROSSO: First World War, First World War, okay. They took all the produce in order to give the food to the -- to the soldiers. They took all of the -- the grain, the wheat, the thing and also some of the animals. However, my mother was appointed by the government and was given the wheat as a ration for the -- and make bread. Take the wheat to the -- to the place where it would be ground into flour with -- on a little horseback. 'Cause she had to walk and the horse would carry the wheat, and she'd come back with the flour and she made the bread for the entire village. And the reason she did this, because she always use to tell us that I -- she didn't want her children to go hungry. They would have enough bread to keep them alive.

SIGRIST: Were there any other ways that World War I affected your family specifically?

GROSSO: Well I think [phone rings] it was very, very difficult because as I indicated here... [phone starts to ring]

VOICE: I{whispers} I'm sorry about this, I'm sorry. [phone continues ring]

GROSSO: Hmm.

SIGRIST: Other ways that World War One --

GROSSO: We had, we had -- my mother had no coal, or we had no wood to make all this bread. So she had to go to the forest and gathered little chips of wood and this kind of thing to take it home in order to make the bread for the whole community. So it was a very, very difficult time. And for instance, the place that she had to take the wheat in order to change the wheat into flour, it was probably about six or eight miles. And this was -- she had walk both place a long a little, little jackass (as you called them over there, you know) to do all this. It was a very, very difficult era over there at that time.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you worked for a number of years -- correct? -- for the carpenter?

GROSSO: Yes. Yes, I think I was over there for about three years. From the time I was ten years old 'til the time I was thirteen years old.

SIGRIST: Were you able to do any schooling at that time?

GROSSO: Yes. The, the school in my little village consisted of third grade only. So I had already gone to the third grade, but then my mother felt that we needed little bit more education. So we had an individual in the community you know, which was a college professor. So I went to -- to his house two or three hours a week. You know. To learn more schooling in order to -- that I would have a little bit more of an education than the other people. Because she wanted both her children you know, not to continue to go and -- and cultivate the land in order to make a living.

SIGRIST: Could your mother read and write?

GROSSO: My mother could not read or write. She could not even make her own name. She could not even read her own name, even after she came to America here. However, later on she took lesson, she went to school and she was able to get the citizenship.

SIGRIST: Tell me what religion were you in Italy. [clears throat]

GROSSO: Catholic.

SIGRIST: Catholic. And how did you practice your religion at home?

GROSSO: Well, the religion at home -- of course, I said we went to school. Okay, we went to school for the religion, too. We learned the religion, at the -- not only the -- the education that consist of also learning about the religion.

SIGRIST: Did you have religious articles in the house at all? Objects of some sort?

GROSSO: There were very few articles in our house. You know, because one of the things of course, practically everybody over there went to church every Sunday. So the church was the place you know, where everybody went to on, on Sundays.

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

GROSSO: Not one that I can remember. Not anymore, the regular Catholic teachings. [Laughing] Which I don't remember myself very well either. [Continues to laugh]

SIGRIST: Tell me what people did for fun back then? If you, if you had time to entertain yourselves, how would you do it?

GROSSO: Well as far as entertaining; I must say that it probably was very, very little of entertaining at that time. However things has changed considerably today...

SIGRIST: But at that time you know, what, were the games that you played or...

GROSSO: Well, yeah. They use to play games of bocce, which is the main sports of course in Italy. And they use to play soccer, which is also the main sports of Ital - of Italy

SIGRIST: And did you do that as well?

GROSSO: Yes, yes, yes

SIGRIST: And tell me quickly what kinds of food you ate, you mentioned bread already, what other...

GROSSO: Well, I think most the food was all made you know, from flour. All the kinds of macaronis, and all kinds of spaghetti and all kinds of these things. Although, we did have eggs because we had chickens. We did have pork because we, we raised the pigs. And then every year (sometime in February) they'd butcher the pigs and then you'd have meat, the sausage and these kind things that was made from that.

And the other things, too, we had with sheep. And then usually we would have some sheep that they would butcher and, you know, and have meat. And we had goat meat and chicken.. So we had chickens and we had some of the other animals, you know, which is normally used for food. But we had a lot of vegetables and we had a tremendous, large garden and we, we raised all kinds of vegetables. And there were many, many fruit: grapes, apples, artichokes. And so we di-- did, we had sufficient.

SIGRIST: When you were a small boy in Italy, how did you perceive America? What did America mean to you?

GROSSO: Well, of course, while my father was over here and we were growing up in Italy; there was constant correspondence between my father and my mother. I was the only one that was able to read my father's letters. And my father occasionally would send us gifts. Like for instance, he sent both my brother and I, he sent us a pair of shoes. Unfortunately the pair of shoes they sent me were both for one foot. [Laughs] These are some of the little incidents, you know, that I can remember. [Laughing] Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little about how you decided that you would be coming to America? Who made that decision?

GROSSO: Well, I -- I think that -- that decision was made more so by my father. I think he came here probably in the early 1920s. And after seven years -- of course at that time, you had to stay here seven years in order to achieve your citizenship. So it was his, most of his thinking and mo-... action you know. That he was over here and he didn't want to stay in Italy where he had to work in the fields. So he definitely -- I'm sure that he considered that this was his life objective, you know. To come back to Italy once he became an American citizen, and then to bring his family over here.

SIGRIST: Was he living up in Schenectady those seven years?

GROSSO: Yes, yes

SIGRIST: And was that was when he was working at General Electric...

GROSSO: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: For those seven years?

GROSSO: Yes.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about getting, what had to be done before you left? What sorts of things that had to be accomplished?

GROSSO: I -- I don't remember very much of the activities was required. As I say, I think my father took care of all the needs -- you know -- of getting us all over here. All I can remember is, for instance, that we

had never ridden on a train. We had never ridden on a bus, we had never ridden on an automobile, and we had never gone on an airplane. So from our village -- for instance -- to go to the next village in order to get bus ,we had to go by horseback. And then from the next village, we went by -- by train until we got to Naples.

And we spent three days -- my father wanted us to see little bit of -- of Italy, Rome. Because not any one of us other than my father had been outside of the village. So we didn't -- we'd never been anywhere outside of that. So he wanted to show us so we spent three days in Rome. We went to the zoos' -- for as far as I can, remember that was it.

SIGRIST: Did your father come back then from the United States, and, and accompany you over?

GROSSO: Yes.

SIGRIST: I see.

GROSSO: Yes. He came back and I believe in December 1927. He was home for Christmas and -- and we, he was there a couple of months and then we came back in here in early part of 1928.

SIGRIST: Did you had to under go any kind of physical examinations prior to leaving in Italy?

GROSSO: The physical examination. Once we got the -- the papers, you know ,to where -- there was no physical examination on the Italian side. The physical examination were Ellis Island when we arrived here

and that was seven days later. It took the boat seven days to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what you packed, what the family packed to take with them to the United States?

GROSSO: I don't remember much of anything we packed, other than the clothes we had on our back. I mean. My mother brought some things over there which -- which she -- she thought was, you know, linens and this kind of things. Which they -- they considered over there as very useful. Okay? Some of those things we brought but other than that, not very much.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you father took you to these various sites, he wanted you to see...

GROSSO: Yeah. We stopped in Rome for three days.

SIGRIST: You stopped in Rome. And then went to Naples?

GROSSO: We went to Nap --... we took, we went to Naples by train.

SIGRIST: And how long were you in Naples prior getting on the ship?

GROSSO: We were in Naples only one day. We got there in the morning and we boarded the -- the ship in the afternoon.

SIGRIST: And it's you and your mother and your father, and the three other children?

GROSSO: No there's two other children besides me, yeah.

SIGRIST: Two other children Silvio and ...um...

GROSSO: Bernice.

SIGRIST: Oh, and Bernice. That's right because Areste had died.

GROSSO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Nobody else from your village or, was traveling with you.

GROSSO: No.

SIGRIST: No. Do you remember the name of the ship?

GROSSO: No I don't.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you thought when you saw the ship?

GROSSO: Well, I -- I think --. If I can remember the ship, it looked tremendously large to me. However -- during the seven days -- very, very unfortunately, I became seasick from the first day. I was in bed for seven days, seven nights, you know. And not -- and always being you had the seasickness. Whereas my brother, he use to be -- he use to go on the deck. And he used to play with all the other men pitching pennies -- which was a game which they did. And he -- he'd bring me a hamburger once in a while [Laughs] in my bed. And I must say here -- you know -- that when you're seasick, your -- your -- one of the things you try to avoid is liquids. And so I tried to avoid some water. And I was so thirsty. And I only could remember those things. And at -- every night I used to dream about

the beautiful streams and the water used to flow in Italy [Laughing]  
that I couldn't even have.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you felt personally about leaving Italy?

GROSSO: I don't think, I think that it was more or less that I -- that I let my parents make that decision. I just went along with what ever happened. I really --. I don't feel that I was old enough, you know, to realize, you know -- where am I going or what am I going to do and this kinds of things, you know. I think I left all of this thinking both to my mother and my father.

SIGRIST: I was just wondering if it was -- if you had to say goodbye to friends or you know?...

GROSSO: Well, I'm sure of that but I really don't recall.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. So you're on the ship for seven days...

GROSSO: Yes.

SIGRIST: And what do you remember about the ship, arriving in New York?

GROSSO: Well, oh. [Cough] The first thing that had happened, by the way, is -- you know, -- that when the ship comes out of Naples ,it has to go through the Strait of Gibraltar. That night we left Naples in the evening and then it got dark and we were at the Strait of Gibraltar. During the night, somehow the ship missed direction. And when the -- the -- about ten o' clock in the morning when the fog lifted and the sun came out, the ship found itself going towards land rather than through it. So we were very fortunate at that time to return the

course back on there. We were very fortunate. We would have probably hit land if the fog had continued. It was one of things definitely I remember. And, of, course the next thing I remember is when I saw land [laugh] and The Statue of Liberty in New York.

SIGRIST: Did you know what that was?

GROSSO: Yes.

SIGRIST: The Statue of Liberty.

GROSSO: Yes. Of course when I was a boy there and we were always thinking (and not only myself, but other people of the village that had relatives in America). And probably -- I'm sure that every one of those individuals, you know, that used to write as to the conditions and the ways of America. So we in Italy, we only could think about as the land of milk and honey. This one thing, which we always kept saying, that America was the land of milk and honey.

SIGRIST: Well tell me how the family ended up in Ellis Island once the ship came in?

GROSSO: Well. I think that everyone that comes into America from the various other nations in Europe, I think they all have to go through an examination in Ellis Island -- as there was standard at that time .

SIGRIST: And can you tell me what happened... to your family?

GROSSO: Well, the thing that happened is that as you go through there, they put all the men in one line and all the women in another line, in other words. And you're, you're asked to take all your clothes off. And

then someone, I don't know whether it was a doctor or what ever it was, you know, glanced over your record and all any information you had. And whether -- for instance, they found a lot young -- young boys, you know, had -- what do you calls those things in their heads, the bugs...?

SIGRIST: Oh. Lice.

GROSSO: Lice. And they were sprayed with some kind of a powder, you know, and this kind of a thing. And some of them were sent back. If you had any disease -- you know -- that there was anything, you would be sent back. However, they found at that time -- it was found that both my brother and I had caught cold while we were on the ship. Therefore, they didn't know that this was a serious disease or it was something else. So they, they detained us for seven days. And at the same time, they let my father go 'cause he was a citizens. He went right on, he came to Schenectady and trying to get some inf-- some influ -- influence individual, you know, to -- for to release us there. However, he was not able to do it. My mother and sister were detained, but they could have left. But my mother and sister -- my mother made the decision that if we were not goi-- not gonna accept us and send us back, she and my sister, we were all go back to Italy.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about those seven days at Ellis Island?

GROSSO: Well, seven days is a memorable incident that I will never forget it. Okay? for instance, [clears throat] we went -- we went to eat in a large hall three times a day. And the first time that we were in the morning, I guess we were given cereal. We were aware of cereal, but they also gave us bananas. We had never seen or tasted

bananas, so we didn't particularly like it. The other thing which we never seen -- as you know, in Italy whenever you use -- you don't have any butter but you have olive oil. We had not seen butter or margarine. So they served us at the meals, they served butter and they served us bread. And we saw -- and we did -- we put the, the butter on the bread. And we thought it was such a wonderful things that we -- we took some from the dining room. And saved them, put under the pillow in our room at night so we could have some snack to -- to eat during the night [Laughing].

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me where you slept and the, the sleeping accommodations there?

GROSSO: I really don't recall the sleeping accommodations. I mean, you know, I think they were probably bunk beds in a large, large room where there were many, many people.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed to see your mother and your sister?

GROSSO: No. No, we were not allowed to see my mother or sister for seven days. The only time we saw her is before we -- we arrived and after they released us from Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Did they, do you know if they put you in the hospital at Ellis Island? Or is you were just in a dormitory situation?

GROSSO: No, no we were just in the dormitory.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

GROSSO: It's in a reception center.

SIGRIST: Does anything else stick out your mind, for instance like, the staff at Ellis Island? Did you have any interaction with one of the guards or major,

GROSSO: No. No. I don't have any recall of any, any introduction, or any speech, or any talk to anyone. To begin with, you must remember they all spoke English and I didn't know a word of it. So we were kind of mute.

SIGRIST: How did you finally get released?

GROSSO: Well,. Apparently it was finally decided, you know, that the -- that the -- our cold was not -- what do you call it? kind of a disease which is catchy and this kind of a thing, see. So therefore they said we could go.

SIGRIST: Did your father come back down to get you?

GROSSO: Yes. Yeah, he came back there

SIGRIST: And what do you remember about going up to Schenectady?

GROSSO: Well, the only thing I remember is that we left New York and we got on a train and we landed in Schenectady. And my father,[clears throat] before he returned to Italy, he was rumingrooming w-with one of his uncles in a place up in -- called South Schenectady. Okay. And, and fortuanalyfortunately enough in this home there was an empty -- let me see now -- an empty apartment over this, my uncles house, upstairs. So we were able to, to rent the apartment upstairs. Now this had no heat, it had no heat whatsoever. And we spent the

first winter over here. And some of the things (you ask me some of the things that stands out my mind, yeah) is for instance -- if we had pass water during the night, we would do it in a little -- little pan. But however, you found it ice in the morning. And these are some of the incidents, you know, that happened Because in Italy you know, the temperature -- we, I think we saw snow only once and in the morning. And so the temperature during the year is more than the temperature he is here's in the month of January, and February, and March. And we had n— no – no central heat in there, see.

SIGRIST: Was there a way that you did keep things warm during the day some how?

GROSSO: Well, I think we had a fireplace. That was the only source of heat, was the fireplace. And of course, you had a kitchen stove, which you used for coal and wood.

SIGRIST: What street was this on?

GROSSO: Ahh, Princetown Road.

SIGRIST: Princetown.

GROSSO: Princetown Road.

SIGRIST: Did you have electricity in this apartment?

GROSSO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did you have running water in this apartment?

GROSSO: Yes.

SIGRIST: So was there a bathroom?

GROSSO: No.

SIGRIST: No.

GROSSO: All the bathrooms were outdoors, the little house outdoors, with Montgomery Wards [laugh] catalog.

END OF SIDE A    BEGIN SIDE B

SIGRIST: You tell me when you, were you put into school when you got here?

GROSSO: Yes. The first thing we did, they put us to school over here in Jefferson School. It's a school no longer, used as a school in, on Princetown Road. And we were all – all three of us, we were put in the first grade. Now we were -- I was thirteen, and my sister was eleven, and my brother was nine or ten. And but we were put in a class, all the children of five years of age. However the -- this was an area (this South Schenectady that I'm speaking) it was an area where they were many, many Italians. So many, many of the students came from Italian families. So each one of the three of us was – three of us was assigned a student that knew a little bit of Italian and English, and so we were able to communicate.

But the thing was, you know, we had -- . Even though we had only gone through the third grade in Italy, the quality and the gree-- degree of knowledge that you attained over there was equivalent to an eighth grade over here. Because if someone could explain to us,

for instance, a math problem we -- we would be able to solve it. Even though we were in the first grade, we would be able to solve problems equivalent to the eighth grade over here.

SIGRIST: Do you remember some of the first words in English that you learned?

GROSSO: That's difficult. No, I think it's very difficult to remember. Now one of the things you know, which is --. I will say this because I have a little bit knowledge now of the change that's taken place in the United States America in the last 100 years, okay. That is, at one time we were very grate -- all these people that came from foreign countries in Europe were very, very grateful to come to America. As I indicated to you, there were -- it was always considered the land of milk and honey. So they were very grateful. And they, both we and they, these people accepted -- accepted whatever was available. Okay. We didn't revolt, we didn't have any strike, we didn't have anything of this kind of nature. See, we accept all these kinds of things.

SIGRIST: Talk...I'm sorry go ahead

GROSSO: Go ahead.

SIGRIST: Talk to me little bit about what Schenectady was a like in the late 1920s, and how it was different then than it is know?

GROSSO: [Deep breath] Well, other than trying to -- to go to school and learn the American language and it -- then we did not involve in our self in any political, or any social, or any of these other activities, you know. And you must remember now because, for instance, we got here in

1928. 1929 America had the greatest Depression, you know. Crash, crash Depression 1929. So what happened is this that – that my father was laid off from the General Electric Company shortly after 1929, and then we had the greatest Depression of the early 1930's years. So there was no one in our family of five who was earning any money to keep the family going.

And both my brother and I, one of the things we found what we could do is deliver newspapers. We would delivery newspapers to the area in the community. Morning, night, Saturdays, we'd go out and collect and deliver newspaper on Sundays. This kept the – the – the little money that we were able to make by delivering newspapers, we were able to keep the – the family going. And shortly after we got here, I think it was in the early parts of the thirties my mother and father bought a little house on, on, on Plunkett Avenue. And -- and this little house had a garage, and, but we didn't have any car.

So my father and mother decided that some means, you know, to augment the living -- food. So my father built cages all inside the garage and we raised rabbits which we used for meat. And we had an average of seventy-five rabbits the year around. Also, in the same garage we raised chickens. My mother knew how to put eggs under a hen and come up with little chicks. And we did that, did that and so we had chickens that gave us both eggs for food and meat. So these are the things we did and, you know, and we had to do -- all the boys had to do many, many things, you know. For instance, we would go to the -- to the stores where they had vegetables and we would collect the lettuce and this kind of things to raise our – our rabbits with. And this was the kind of thing that kept us going.

SIGRIST: Did you sell any of the rabbits, chickens, also for extra income?

GROSSO: No. No, I don't remember selling -- just for our own use, to survive. Yes. In fact, my mother as I indicated was such a tremendous -- [Laughing] ingenuity, Individual that he was --. She read in one of the New York papers that you could send for raisins in California. Okay? And then you could put this through some process, you know, you could make wine. And believe it or not, she did this and we had even wine which was a luxury at that time for us, you know. And she was able to make this and follow the directions that she had read in the -- that she sent for raisins in the state of California.

SIGRIST: Do you remember at all what the process was like? How she did that?

GROSSO: No.

SIGRIST: How, how she did that?

GROSSO: No, no, no. I really, details I don't remember.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that sold newspapers,

GROSSO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was that the first job that you got in the United States?

GROSSO: Yes.

SIGRIST: And do you remember what you were paid for that?

GROSSO: Well you paid what you made. [Laughing] Penny – penny each. I think we made a penny for each -- each paper -- daily paper. You might have made a little bit more on Sunday. But I think all we did, you know, each newspaper we delivered every morning and, you know, probably got -- you made one cent. There was a difference between what you sold it for or charged the customer, and what you had to pay the *Schenectady Gazette* for.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Can you tell me what the next job that you got for which you were paid?

GROSSO: [deep breath] Well, as I say, now this is during the Depression and we were going to school and newspapers. So there wasn't much else you could possibly do, you know, just a couple over time. I do remember for instance, some of the little things. I remember very much that it was so cold in here in the morning. We used to get up at four o'clock in the morning to go out and deliver newspapers, you know. And because the *Schenectady Gazette* would deliver it to a center location in the community. And we'd go over there and pick it up and deliver the papers. And many times we went by bicycle. That was our means of transportation -- bicycle nothing else. We had no cars, we had no motorcycle. We had nothing else than that, so you just bicycle. And we -- you used to be so cold that when you came back in the morning, the jacket you had was all ice – ice -- icicles.

SIGRIST: Was during the Depression, was there some sort of relief organization?

GROSSO: Yes, there was some. Yes, during the Depression there was some relief form the city. Okay? And my mother used to go down in

there, I think, once a week and they would of give her a little bit of sugar, and a little bit of flour, or some potatoes. It was, there was a rationing, that was but all you could get.

SIGRIST: Um, did your family, members of your family become citizens of the United States?

GROSSO: Well to begin with, my father became a citizen by [clears throat] living in here and working in the United States from 1921 to 1928. So he was a citizen. However, because each child was under age of eighteen, he was able to bring them here even though they became citizens under his citizenship paper because they were underage. Now, so that took care of the three children. My mother and I -- my mother as I indicated here before, she went to school. She learned a little bit about, she went before the judge and she became -- she got her citizenship paper and she became a citizen.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the process that she had to go through? Did you assist her to do this, how did she learn this?

GROSSO: Well she, yeah. She had to learn who the president of the United States were, whether -- what congress was, what the -- some of the other functions of both, for the city. And the other. These are some of questions that the judge asked, you know, for her to recite.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about your mother's life in the United States? Your father had already been here for a long time.

GROSSO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: But, but talk to me about how your mother adjusted to -- to --

GROSSO: Well, I think my mother was such an ingenious individual that she adjusted very easily. She always found the way to earn a living in, a certainly in an honest way. And she was so brilliant even in the finance area. The for instance -- the to say something here to that extent was that my mother and father, as I indicated, bought a small house about early, about nineteen, early part of 1930's. And of course, not having sufficient funds to pay for the whole thing, they went to the Building and Loan at that time and got a mortgage.

Now during the Depression many, many families lost their house to the banks. And, as you know, when you -- if you went to the bank they told she had to pay so much per month for so many years. And however, the bank founded [sic] that they could somehow (either legal or illegally) they were able to assess the people who were able to make the monthly payments for the portion that the people lost their house and that they didn't get the payments.

My mother, through her own ingenuity and her ability, she went to the bank and she said, "You can't do this." And she was able to tell them not to do it, and they allowed her not to do it. I mean here, here's a lady you know, that didn't even know how to write her own name when she came over here. At the same time, to go in front of a president and vice-president and so forth of the bank and argue within them about the legality of some of the things that they were trying to impose on onto these people.

SIGRIST: In the 1930s, were there Italian organizations that were active in this,

GROSSO: In the city of Schenectady, as I indicated to you, the -- there's a -- the pop-- the Italian population was approximately twenty-five percent. And they had attorneys and they had doctors -- Italians and those kind of things. Okay? And um, so there was approx -- and it was unusual, you know, because the Italians, they always say here are so different than the Jewish people. The Jewish people seemed to stick together, whereas the Italians -- they all seemed to go in their own little community. There was approximately ten to twelve Italian organization in the city Schenectady back in the early thirties and forties. And most of them, by the way, most of them have since disappeared or gone out of business.

SIGRIST: Were you parents active any of these organizations?

GROSSO: My father was active in one Italian organization for the people that came in the vicinity Abruzzi, where we came from. They had an organization that they called Abruzzi Society, in the city Schenectady which was incorporated in 1912. Okay? And my father had joined it and I joined -- he made me join when I, 1937, when I got out of college.

SIGRIST: What, what kinds of activities did these organizations provide for their members?

GROSSO: It was strictly social activities among members. And the other things they used to do -- they tried to raise some money for, someday, somehow, they would be able a buy a piece of land and have their own building and their own residence.

SIGRIST: Did that happen?

GROSSO: Yes. Oh yeah, definitively. [Laughs] That's later in years. [laughs]

SIGRIST: Um, did you ever experience any kind of prejudice or bigotry, personally because you were foreign born?

GROSSO: Well, to tell you the truth, being a good American citizen is to say -- I don't think it's that to even talk about or say about some of the activities. Although, I must relate to this. Yes. For instance, my father, as I said, he could only do manual work while he was in the General Electric Company. 'Course he had every little education. Okay? And also, my -- my teacher in Italy -- okay? -- came to America. He was a professor; he was a college professor. He got a job at the General Electric Company pushing a wheel barrel. Now these were the only jobs which these individuals were allowed. You know, not allowed to get -- which was offered to them. They, they didn't put any resistance. They were so glad and happy to do something where they can earn some money. So there were never any resistance on their part whatever the job was. However, I think was somewhat demeaning. And I must say this -- that I finally after college (I graduated from Bentley College -- today it's a four year, at that time)...

SIGRIST: [interposed] Excuse me, what was the name of the college?

GROSSO: Bentley.

SIGRIST: Bentley.

GROSSO: Bentley, which is in Boston, Massachusetts. So we can get to that. Okay? Okay. So, but even to myself -- you know -- for instance, when I -- later in years when I was -- I got a job with the General

Electric Company in accounting because I had – I had graduated from an accounting school. And I saw where, I had to do better than the average individual in order to be treated the same. I mean, there was, there's no question. And I think there was not only me. There was, and every day ordinary kind of expectations, so.

SIGRIST: Did your father ever regain his job with General Electric?

GROSSO: Well, my father worked in a factory. Okay? I mean, when they went -- when they -- just b-- after he came back to America and he pa-- worked in a factory. And so. But he continued to work in the factory, as a factory employee, for all those years 'til he retired. And I don't recall back -- he retired in early 1960's.

SIGRIST: Did you ever have a desire; actually scratch that. Did your parents ever a desire to return to Italy?

GROSSO: To what?

SIGRIST: To return to Italy?

GROSSO: Not really.

SIGRIST: Did they ever want to go for a visit?

GROSSO Not really, not really. In fact, I didn't go back to Italy for the first time -- I think, it was somewheres close to sixty years after I had been here.

SIGRIST: Did you go back to the town that you had come from?

GROSSO: Uh, in 1985, yes.

SIGRIST: And what did that feel like to be in that?--

GROSSO: Heaven. It was such a pleasant things is because when I got back in Italy in 1985, I already had retired from General Electric Company. And I was over there and I found the -- all the cousins and the -- the -- the -- it was over there, you know. And they found -- I found just about everything. I found the house that my father and his brother had built and I found that the living was the same. The attitude was the same.

The only thing that had changed there considerably over the sixty years was that practically all of the people in Italy (that was after Mussolini, you know, era. Mussolini did quite a bit good for Italy. I mean, you know. Progr-- he built the railroads, built roads, he built these kind of things, you see.). So. And when we went back over there, the only people they were left (there was no industry in our little village) -- the only people that is left was the people that were there long, long ago.

They're still there today and some of them that they have gone to other cities. In the month of August, which is vacation month in Italy, we all gathered there. So there is -- there is about eight of us there (when I go there now, there's eight of us in Italy) and there's no industry or anything. See. Each individual -- the young people have migrated to the cities. So there is very little left in the village except really most of the older people from sixty and over. And so when you go back over there it's -- it's -- it's a kind of vacation. Because in Italy right now all the people that age, sixty and over, under

government pension. So they no longer need to cultivate the land in order to make a living.

SIGRIST: What part of your personality do you think is truly Italian? Or something --

GROSSO: Well, I -- I think to work and save. I think the two of the things which most of us that came from a country which -- we were poor. Okay? And you had -- you had to work the fields in order to get. You didn't have all of the -- the mechanized equipment at that time. Everything was manual labor, and it was very difficult. And my mother especially -- my mother decided while my father was in America here that she didn't want her children, you know, to work the fields. So therefore she tried to get me to, you know, to get a -- to learn the carpenter trade. By the way, I had started at the age of 10. I started working at a carpenter shop.

SIGRIST: That's right, as you had told us.

GROSSO: Yes. Yeah, from ten to the age thirteen. And when my father came back here in 1927 and he came over and saw what I was -- the kind of work that I was doing as a young man of thirteen years old --. He -- he gave me a boot in the rear and send me home, 'cause that was not the kind of a thing that a young man of my age would doin' here in America.

SIGRIST: Let's, before we end, let's get a little bit of family information in here. Umm, did you marry?

GROSSO: I married, in fact, in late years. I was about 25 years of age and this -- I married in 1945? 1945.

SIGRIST: And what was the name of the person that you married?

GROSSO: Oh, gosh. You know, when you get to be my age you don't...  
Christine ...

SIGRIST: Did you have children?

GROSSO: Christine, Christine Salerno.

SIGRIST: And did you have children?

GROSSO: I had one boy.

SIGRIST: And what was his name?

GROSSO: Roger.

SIGRIST: Roger.

GROSSO: Yes. Now, now my wife was -- before we were married, she was in  
the Waves, American Waves in Washington, D.C.

SIGRIST: Waves, the women in the military,

GROSSO: Yes. Yes, okay. And so [laughs] and when she use to go up with --  
with her friends and other individuals, you know, that were in the --  
either in the army or something like that, you know, they use to call  
"Roger" at the end of every expression. So my wife called her first  
child, Roger.

SIGRIST: Was she born in the United States?

GROSSO: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did you meet her in Schenectady?

GROSSO: Yes, roller skate, a roller skating rink.

SIGRIST: Where was the roller skating rink?

GROSSO In Schenectady.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

GROSSO: This was a kind of an activity, you know, that we used to go in the evenings, you know, roller skate.

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would of been different if you had stayed in Italy and never come to the United States?

GROSSO: I -- I really can't say that I -- I can picture the life in Italy because -- (based on what my mother did in order to get us, to give us a right -- the little bit more education, give us the -- the -- learn the trade and this kind of things, you know) -- is that we probably [clears throat] --. As you remember that most of the individual in my little village was people who had to cultivate the land in order to make a living and this is the kinds of things my mother from a early time -- that when she started having children -- that she had hoped that we, her children, didn't have to do this. So that's why she sent us to school, and in fact, even after I finished public school, which was to the third grade -- [Phone rings] Go ahead answer it.

SAHARIS: Hello? Mr. Grasso's phone

SIGRIST: Answer! We're going to pause. We just resumed after the phone call. Let's ask you one final question. What did you do in your life that you're the most proud of?

GROSSO: What I am most proud of is one, first I must thank my parents for having brought (my father and mother) for having brought this family in the land of America. Okay? Which was certainly was an improvement from what we had to do in, in Italy. And the fact is that my mother always insisted --. Now I only can say this because my father worked at the General Electric Company for many years and he, more or less, he was the bread winner. But my mother was the brains of the family.

SIGRIST: But what did you do in your life that you are the most proud of?

GROSSO: Well, I, I think what I'm most proud of is my accomplishment that I did by learning the American language, going to college. Coming out and making a living in America, which was our greatest achievement -- Okay -- and opportunities.

SIGRIST: Great. Well Mr. Grosso, thank you very much.

GROSSO: You're welcome.

SIGRIST: You've done a great job, you've answer all my questions

GROSSO: Yeah, yeah.

EI-915/GROSSO

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off on Tuesday, July 29 1997 in Rotterdam, New York, with Fred Grosso, thank you sir.

GROSSO: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW