

EI-930

MARY (MARIA) CHIAPPONE SANDRONI
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ITALY, CIRCA 1912
APPROXIMATELY AGE 5
PASSAGE ON "THE AMERICA"

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LEVINE: Today is September 3, 1997. I'm here in Tudor City with Mary . . .

SANDRONI: Chiappone.

LEVINE: Well, Chiappone was your maiden name.

SANDRONI: Yes. Oh, my name is Sandroni.

LEVINE: And Sandroni is your married name. And you were born Maria, but you go by Mary. Is that right? Okay. And, um, Mary came from Italy, northern Italy, in 1911 or 1912, and Mary was either four or

five years of age at the time that she came. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service.

Okay. Well, we'll start at the beginning, and if you would say your birth date and where you were born in Italy.

SANDRONI: My name is Maria, wait. My name is Mary Sandroni.

I was born in Torino, Italy, on April 6, 1907.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, do you have memories of Torino?

SANDRONI: Yes.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

SANDRONI: Not many, but some.

LEVINE: When you think of Torino when you were a little girl there, what are the things that you do remember about it?

SANDRONI: I remember the rail, the railroad terminal. I remember the River Po[ph]. I remember going for walks along the River Po[ph] with my mother and my sister. And I remember all the, all the lovely shops, pastry shops and things like that. Yeah.

LEVINE: How about the town? Do you remember anything else

about the town of Torino at that time . . .

SANDRONI: Well, it's not a town . . .

LEVINE: City.

SANDRONI: It's a city.

LEVINE: A city.

SANDRONI: It's a, it had tall buildings, like three and four stories. Yeah.

LEVINE: And, uh, let's see. How about, was your family a religious family?

SANDRONI: At that time I, well, you know, not very religious but, uh, enough. My mother kept some of the holidays, some of the religious holidays, but not all of them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Can you recall, like, Christmas or Easter in Italy when you were a little girl, anything about those holidays?

SANDRONI: No. I know that we must have kept them, but I don't recall any of them in Italy. Only when I came here.

LEVINE: Okay. We'll get to here later. What was your father's name?

SANDRONI: My father's name was Antonio.

LEVINE: And his name was Chiappone.

SANDRONI: Chiappone.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

SANDRONI: Giovanna.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

SANDRONI: Ponzo.

LEVINE: P-O-N . . .

SANDRONI: Z-O.

LEVINE: Z-O. Okay. And how about grandparents? Did you know your grandparents?

SANDRONI: Yes. I knew grandparents on my mother's side, my mother's parents.

LEVINE: And what do you recall? Do you recall any kinds of experiences with them, or what they were like, or how they treated you?

SANDRONI: Well, my father, my, uh, my grandfather, he was what we would call here a greengrocer. He used to go from town to town with his wagon full of vegetables. But not in Torino. This was in a small town out of Torino.

LEVINE: And did he grow the produce that he had in his wagon?

SANDRONI: Maybe some, but I'm sure, but I don't think so.

LEVINE: And what kind of a man was he? How was he with you?

SANDRONI: Well, we didn't have too much to do with him because the men always had to do, they always had something to do. But he was kind. He was a kind man. My mother loved him very much.

LEVINE: And how about your grandmother?

SANDRONI: Well, she was more stern. But then, of course, she had so many children, she had, my mother was there, was the first of about six or seven children.

LEVINE: So did your grandmother, by the time you were born, her children probably were grown, although your

mother was the oldest, so maybe there were some still left in the house?

SANDRONI: Oh, yes. There were some left in the house. There was, uh, my Aunt Mary and my uncle, I forgot his name. But his name was, I don't remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about any experiences with your grandmother or your Aunt Mary or your uncle?

SANDRONI: Well, you know, we three children, because I have a sister, Mathilda, and a brother, Antonio. We were left with my grandmother when the, when my mother left and came over here, and she left us with my grandmother for, I don't know, three or four or five months.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. So when you were staying with your grandmother, what was that like compared to before that?

SANDRONI: Well, she was very, she was very stern.

LEVINE: What would she be strict about, or what would she . . .

SANDRONI: Well, everything had to be done on time. And it

being a small town, I guess, well, I don't know why she was that way, but she was really strict.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And were you the oldest, or the youngest?

SANDRONI: I was the youngest.

LEVINE: The youngest. Uh-huh. And Mathilda, was she the oldest, or the middle?

SANDRONI: My sister? My sister was two years older, and my brother was three years older than me.

LEVINE: And, uh, so when you were living with your grandmother, were your Aunt Mary and your uncle in the house at that time?

SANDRONI: My Aunt Mary was. My uncle, I guess he was. My Aunt Mary I remember, but my uncle, I know he was there, but . . .

LEVINE: He didn't spend that much time with you.

SANDRONI: Well, because he was a young man at that time, and he was older than my Aunt Mary.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you ever go places with your Aunt Mary that you can remember?

SANDRONI: No, no.

LEVINE: And how about school? Had you started school in Italy or not?

SANDRONI: Well, I just went for half a day.

LEVINE: Oh, no! (they laugh)

SANDRONI: For half a day at this here, uh, maybe you would call it nursery or kindergarten, and I was given a very small basket, a very cute little basket, with some snacks in it, because in the middle of the morning we would have our snack. But I didn't want to go, but I had to go. My mother said I had to go, I had to go, I went. Well, after we had our snack, I saw my mother passing the little schoolhouse, and I quickly picked up my basket, and I ran out of the school, went to my mother, and that was it.

LEVINE: So, uh, so, uh, but Mathilda was in the school, right?

SANDRONI: Well, I don't know where she was. I have no recollection of my sister being around, even. She, you see, two years older, she was already with

another group of children.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you have friends that you remember from when you were little in Italy?

SANDRONI: No.

LEVINE: No. Uh-huh. And what would be, like, a treat? What would be fun for you when you were there, as a little girl? What . . .

SANDRONI: Well, I used to like to be on the train going from this little town back home to Torino, or from Torino going to the little town. That was my treat. We did that every, every summer we would go to the little town.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Do you remember market day? Like, was there a market day in the little town, in Torino?

SANDRONI: No. I only remember, I only remember, and this is quite vaguely, I remember it must have been a holy day, when the Catholic church would give out small loaves of blessed bread, small loaves of white bread. And being that it was white bread, and so cute, we thought it was a cake. (she laughs)

And, uh, and then, and we would go into the church, and they would give us this here bread. We would stand there, and the priest would bless it, and that was it.

LEVINE: What kind of bread were you used to having?

SANDRONI: Just white bread, but not, not tiny and, you know, big, big loaves of bread, we used to have.

LEVINE: Did your mother bake the bread?

SANDRONI: No, no.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that?

SANDRONI: No.

LEVINE: No, because you were in a city, so you could go to a shop and buy things.

SANDRONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SANDRONI: And when we were in the town my mother would buy, oh, the thing is that my grandparents had this little shop. In Italy in those days a little shop was not allowed to sell everything. They only sold

certain things. And then the next little shop would sell certain things. So everybody had a little way of making a little bit of money. I didn't realize it at that time, but now lately now I've been thinking about it, and we were allowed to sell, if you sold tobacco, you could not sell salt.

It sounds kind of crazy.

LEVINE: Well, that's interesting. I've never had anybody say that before. So each little shop was only allowed to sell certain things.

SANDRONI: Yeah. But they do allow you to sell more items, but if you had the salt, you didn't have the pepper, you didn't have the . . .

LEVINE: Tobacco.

SANDRONI: The tobacco.

LEVINE: Did you, did you, as a little girl did you, like, have certain tasks or . . .

SANDRONI: No, no.

LEVINE: Things that you were supposed to do or take care of?

SANDRONI: No.

LEVINE: No? And, uh, what was your father doing for work when he was in Italy?

SANDRONI: Well, all I can remember is that one year there was, there was an exposition from Japan in Torino. And I remember going in there with my parents, and I wasn't allowed to touch anything because they had such cute china. You see, was, there was, with all the china. And, of course, to me, they were like toys, you know. And I was looking at these little cups, they were so dainty, but I wasn't allowed to touch anything. And he was working at that, at that exposition. But he left for this country I think pretty soon after that, because there wasn't any work.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And when he left for this country, your mother left with him?

SANDRONI: No.

LEVINE: No, he went first.

SANDRONI: He went first, and it must have been in the spring. And after about, after a short while, I don't

remember how long after that, my mother left, and left us three children with my grandmother. And then in the fall she sent for us.

LEVINE: I see. So how did you feel when your mother left? Do you remember?

SANDRONI: Oh, yes, I remember. But, you know, when you're a child you forget everything. You think you, you think that you're never going to forget, but you forget.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SANDRONI: Which is a blessing.

LEVINE: Yeah. How about foods? Do you remember any foods in Italy that you particularly liked, or that you ate very often, or anything like that?

SANDRONI: We ate everything. I can't think of anything in particular. And, uh, we didn't have many sweets, like chocolate or candy or cakes or things like that, but just regular food. Never went hungry. That's, I know that. My mother was very good about that.

LEVINE: Like, did your family have, like, a garden, or did they grow any food?

SANDRONI: Well, they did have fields, but I can't, I won't know what kind of fields. I remember that my mother, in the summertime, she would go down and help my, and help my grandfather do some, whatever they do, like, they throw some . . .

LEVINE: Fertilizer?

SANDRONI: Yeah, not fertilizer, to keep the . . .

LEVINE: Oh, to keep the bugs away?

SANDRONI: Yeah, something like that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. I see. So she helped.

SANDRONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, is there anything else that we haven't talked about that has to do with your first four or five years there that, you know, if you, when you think back to that time . . .

SANDRONI: No.

LEVINE: That comes to your mind.

SANDRONI: No, that's, that's all that I remember.

LEVINE: So, okay. So your father left first, then your mother left. And you stayed for four months or so?

SANDRONI: Well, it seemed like an awful long time. But, uh, I know that it was getting cold when they came, so it must have been, and, as a matter of fact, because my mother, my mother worked two jobs when she came here, which I later found out, because she had to send four tickets for the three children, and for her sister, Augustina, who was about sixteen years old.

LEVINE: To come with you.

SANDRONI: To take care of us, sixteen years old, with three children.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about your father? What was he doing for work here in this country?

SANDRONI: Well, either he worked for the Biltmont or the Biltmore.

LEVINE: Hotel?

SANDRONI: Uh-huh. Just around here.

LEVINE: Oh.

SANDRONI: But at that time, when I came here, we lived on the west side, like West 28th Street, because that sort of rings a bell. And then my mother, my mother got a job in 45th Street between Second and Third Avenue, and she got this through, uh, word of mouth. You know, they say this little Italian, it was like a store, but they ran it as a club, a club for all these young Italian men who came from, uh, from the middle of Italy, and somebody had to cook for them and do things, so they were looking for some woman that would clean and cook, and my mother got that job, and that's how we moved over to the east side.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, did your mother, this club, was it just a social club, or did people live there?

SANDRONI: No, it was just a social club. They came in for their dinner.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh.

SANDRONI: You know, and they stayed, and they, they, just

like what they would call a man's club now, you know, a man's club? They would stay and play cards or play checkers or just socialize.

LEVINE: I see. So she cooked them dinners every day?

SANDRONI: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, uh, what was the other job? Do you recall the other job your mother had?

SANDRONI: Well, when she got this here job here, that's all she had.

LEVINE: I see.

SANDRONI: Because that was an all-day . . .

LEVINE: Job. Because she had to cook all day long.

SANDRONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Before that, do you remember what she was doing for work?

SANDRONI: Well, I think she was cleaning house for some, or helping somebody. But, no. You see, it didn't last too long, because it, she sort of got this here job almost right away.

LEVINE: And how about your father at the Biltmore, or . . .

SANDRONI: He worked in the kitchen.

LEVINE: In the kitchen, uh-huh. So, uh, so when your mother got the job through the social club, were these people who had just immigrated here, do you know? These men that went to . . .

SANDRONI: Yep. They immigrated from, most of them came from a town called Sanchaminiano[ph]. And that's, that's, that's near Sienna[ph], if you know where, do you know anything about Italy?

LEVINE: A little bit.

SANDRONI: It's all, it's in Tuscany, see? Torino is in Piedmont[ph], and these people came from Tuscany.

LEVINE: I see. And they were the only ones who belonged to this club, the people that came from that area?

SANDRONI: You didn't, you didn't have to, I mean, they, everybody could belong, you know, could belong, but there wasn't that many, maybe about twenty or, that I don't remember, how many.

LEVINE: Do you know if they had, like, dances and other kinds of events there?

SANDRONI: No.

LEVINE: Okay. So, um, then you must have started school.

SANDRONI: Yes.

LEVINE: What was that like for you?

SANDRONI: Well, I remember that I was brought to this here building, and that's where I got my name, Mary.

LEVINE: Did the teacher give you that name, or . . .

SANDRONI: No, no, no, that's not right. They gave me that name on Ellis Island because I guess they couldn't understand Maria.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

SANDRONI: Somehow that's where I got my Mary. And not only did, but then when I went to school, the first day of school, they couldn't understand Chiappone, so I went through six years of school underneath the name of Mary Clisbone. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Say it again? Clisbone?

SANDRONI: C-L-I-S-B-O-N-E. And that's how I learned to write my name, Mary Clisbone. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Do you remember when it got, when it got rectified?

SANDRONI: Yes. When I, I went to school at P.S. 73 on 46th Street, and that school only went as far as the sixth grade, and after that you had to transfer to P.S. 27 on 42nd Street, which is now the, that hotel there.

LEVINE: On 42nd Street?

SANDRONI: The Helmsley.

LEVINE: Oh, the Helmsley.

SANDRONI: That used to be P.S., P.S. 27, in those days. And it was a lovely school. It was a real lovely school with large buildings, large, you know, rooms and everything. So that's . . .

LEVINE: And that's where your name got changed back to your, to your real name.

SANDRONI: Yes, because my sister, being two years older, said to me, at that time, because then I was twelve

years old, and she was fourteen, and she was, uh, graduating from that school, and I was going to enter, then, and she says to me, "You'd better go to the office and have your name changed, because your name is not Clisbone." (they laugh) That's how I found out.

LEVINE: Well, actually, I skipped a whole part. Do you remember leaving your grandparents' house to start your trip to come to this country?

SANDRONI: Yes, yes. Yes, I, we left with my Aunt Augustina, and I guess, I guess she was scared, because I wasn't scared because I didn't know what was going on. But, uh, and we got on this here ship, and somehow, now, why did I, why am I thinking the ship called the Augustus.

LEVINE: Oh, well, maybe that's right.

SANDRONI: Well, if that ship is on the, on your . . .

LEVINE: On the list of ships that went from Genoa.

SANDRONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember saying goodbye to people? Do you

remember what you took with you, anything like that?

SANDRONI: Well, we took very little with us, because we had very little to take. My grandmother didn't know how to manage, to outfit us. But I remember going, going into, uh, a larger town, a larger town, to be outfitted, because everything had to be made. We didn't have stores with already made up things. Maybe in Torino, but my grandmother never went into Torino. And, uh, so she had, we had things made. And, of course, having things made, you can't have that many. Just buy enough to come over here.

LEVINE: So you did go and have outfits made in order to make the trip?

SANDRONI: Yeah, yeah. We had to. Just buy enough to come over here.

LEVINE: So you did go and have outfits made in order to make the trip?

SANDRONI: Yeah, yeah. We had to.

LEVINE: Do you remember what yours was?

SANDRONI: Ugly. (they laugh) Ugly and itchy.

LEVINE: Oh.

SANDRONI: Down to here, up to here. (she gestures) I remember when my mother saw us, she really was very annoyed, because she said, "I sent money over to have you people, to have you girls outfitted right." But when she saw us, I don't know how they came up with those dresses, but they quickly disappeared.

LEVINE: Did you take anything with you, a favorite toy or book or anything?

SANDRONI: No.

LEVINE: So when you left, your grandmother, how did you leave, and who went with you, and how did you get to, uh, Genoa?

SANDRONI: Well, all I know is that I guess my grandfather must have taken us to the railroad station, which was not in this here small town, but close by. From there we went into Torino, and then in Torino I guess we got on a train and went into Genoa, and that's where we stayed overnight.

LEVINE: So you, your grandfather took you on the horse and wagon to . . .

SANDRONI: I guess so. I guess so, but I don't remember.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And do you remember staying overnight in Genoa?

SANDRONI: In Genoa.

LEVINE: Did you stay in a hotel, did you stay in with friends.

SANDRONI: It must have been some kind of a rooming house or hotel. There were very few hotels in Italy in those days.

LEVINE: Right. So it was probably a rooming house.

SANDRONI: It looked sort of big, but anything would have been big to a small child, yeah.

LEVINE: And then you got on a ship the next day?

SANDRONI: It must have been the next day. I don't remember spending two days, two nights in there. I don't remember.

LEVINE: Had you ever seen the ocean before?

SANDRONI: No. Just the river, the River Po, which when I think about it now it wasn't very big, but it looked pretty big. (she laughs) It did look big, but it's not very big.

LEVINE: How about the voyage? Do you remember anything about that?

SANDRONI: Well, on the voyage, all I remember is that I only knew one person, and that was my aunt. And I stayed with her just like glue. I never left her.

LEVINE: How about your sister and brother? Were they . . .

SANDRONI: I don't remember what they did. I don't remember them ever being around. And, uh, and I don't remember even what, how we ate. But, uh, you want to shut this off?

LEVINE: We'll pause. (break in tape) Okay, we're resuming here. On the voyage over, uh, you said that you stuck very close to your aunt. Do you want to tell why that was, or what happened on the trip?

SANDRONI: Well, my aunt was only sixteen years old and very, very pretty, and very young. And, of course, all the young men working on the ship, all the workers, and they were young boys, they were all after her.

I didn't know why at that time, but I knew that I had to stick with my aunt, because I only knew her, and on the whole ship I didn't talk ever to anybody else. And, so, and on the staircase, at one time, we encountered one of these, one of these young fellows, and they said to my aunt, "Send this child away, send this child away." And I started to stamp my feet, "No! No, no, no. I will not go away. No, no, no, no!" And that was it. And, you know, all these young fellows, they used to bring my aunt diced apples or oranges. We never saw oranges before, but oranges. Because on first class they had all these here things. But we came over steerage, so we didn't have those things. And I never knew, and I never knew that these legs belonged to a chicken, because we always had the legs from the chickens because the people in first class only ate the white meat. (she laughs) And we had the chicken legs that these here young fellows would bring to my aunt for favors. (she

laughs)

LEVINE: So, uh, do you remember anything else about, like, where you slept, or what it was like?

SANDRONI: Oh, we slept, we slept in steerage, in three tiers. And, uh, and I remember that we had, we had a couple of bad storms. But one very bad storm, everybody was told to go down into the dormitory, but they didn't call it a dormitory at that time, and they locked us in, because the ship was, really was rolling and rolling and rolling. It was very bad. A lot of the women, they got seasick at that time. I never got seasick, and neither did my aunt. My sister and my brother, I don't know where they were. They must have been there, but I don't recall.

LEVINE: Was it the women in one section and the men in another section?

SANDRONI: Yeah. As a matter of fact, my brother, who must have been, who must have been near ten years old, he had to be with the men. Now, can you imagine a ten-year-old boy being with, I don't remember seeing my brother until we got off the ship.

LEVINE: So, uh, do you remember when the ship came into the New York Harbor?

SANDRONI: Yes, yes. And my aunt said, and it was getting dark, because it was, it was fall and, you know, and daylight, well, you know, evening came early. And we were, we were passed through, we were passed through people, and they looked us over, open our mouth, open our ears. Oh, I remember that on the ship I was vaccinated. Because I wasn't vaccinated in Italy. I was vaccinated on the ship. And, you know, they scared me. They said to me, "And don't you touch it, because if you do, we have to do it all over again." And you know how they gave the vaccination in those days? With a needle, zoop, zoop, zoop, zoop, zoop. It got to be the size of a quarter, crusty. And I never dared to touch it.

LEVINE: So when the ship came in, did you see the Statue of Liberty by any chance?

SANDRONI: I don't remember.

LEVINE: And what was your impression of Ellis Island?

SANDRONI: Well, it seemed like a big, cold place, and it seemed forever. And everybody left except, it seemed to be that everybody left but my little family. And then finally my mother, my mother and my father came with somebody else who was more knowledgeable of, because they were only here about five or six months themselves. And we came over, and I see this here woman coming towards me, and she had her arms out, and I'm backing towards my aunt, because I didn't know this woman. This was my mother, and I didn't know her, because she already was a little Americanized. She had on a hat, she wore on (?). She was dressed very nicely. And my sister said to me, and I said to her, "No, you're not my mother, you're not my mother." My father, I accepted right away. But I said, "No, you're not my mother." And my sister said to me, "Stupid, this is your mother." (she laughs)

LEVINE: And, so, but your father you remembered now.

SANDRONI: Yes. Yes, I knew him right away.

LEVINE: So then, where did you, you all were together, and then where did you go from Ellis Island?

SANDRONI: We went to my Uncle Eugene, brother to my mother, Janu[ph]. And he had an apartment, and we all went there for, I don't know, a week or two weeks, a very short while. And, uh, and then as soon as my mother got this here job, then we just came over here on our own. And we lived at 228 East 45th Street.

LEVINE: And, um, do you remember any first impressions, those first few days and weeks?

SANDRONI: Very, the place was very big, and people was very, uh, well, the people were very, they all, everybody was hurrying, you know? People, they all had, they all had things to do to make a living.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Were you treated nicely, or do you remember how people were towards you?

SANDRONI: Oh, they're very nice. You know, 45th Street, 45th Street was a, near Third Avenue they were mostly Irish. In the middle there was a mixup, and towards Second Avenue they were mostly Italian.

And then across Second Avenue, towards First Avenue, they were all Italian. But I didn't know that at that time, but that's the way it was at that time. With the butcher on the corner, on the avenue, and the grocers, they were all Italian. This was really an Italian community. Maybe not as big as the one downtown, but they were mostly Italian. I don't know how I ever learned the language.

LEVINE: Did your mother learn to speak English?

SANDRONI: Yes. She learned, but very brokenly. But she made herself understood, and she understood more than she could answer.

LEVINE: And how about your father?

SANDRONI: No, my mother learned, my mother learned more. My father, he learned the necessities, but he didn't, uh, well, I really don't know, because I only spoke to him in Italian.

LEVINE: I see. So the family kept speaking Italian at home?

SANDRONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, uh, how was learning English for you?
What was that like?

SANDRONI: I just learned it.

LEVINE: Well, you didn't make a particular point of it.

SANDRONI: I just absorbed everything, you know.

LEVINE: And how was it in school? How were the teachers
and the other kids in school?

SANDRONI: Well, the children, you know, well, you know, the
children in those days, they accepted everything.
And the teachers were very nice, and very
understanding. And P.S. 73, the one I went
through, the teachers were very patient, and we
learned how to read very fast, I think.

LEVINE: Um, let's see. Uh, did, um . . . Was the school
composed of a lot of other children who had also
recently come over? Do you remember that?

SANDRONI: No, I don't remember that, no. I may have been the
only one at that particular time, yeah.

LEVINE: Did you ever get called a greenhorn, or did we

use . . .

SANDRONI: Never, no.

LEVINE: Uh, let's see. And how about, were there Italian social clubs that you were aware of, like in the community?

SANDRONI: No, no, no. You see, this place that my mother worked at, they had to make a, years ago there wasn't any rooming houses, and they couldn't afford hotels, so everybody had a bed in some private home.

LEVINE: Like they were a boarder?

SANDRONI: Yeah, as a boarder. And all they had were, all they had was the bed. They didn't have any food there. They just went to sleep there. And that helped, that helped to pay the rent. Maybe the, maybe the woman of the house, of that house, would take care of their laundry. That I don't know. But when it came to food either they ate in the hotel, their one meal, they would have dinner or whatever. At this here place it was this man who got this group together. I guess he got it

together because he was lonely. And, you know, when you get to know somebody and then it kind of grows.

LEVINE: So, um, it would be interesting for you to tell anything else you remember about this neighborhood at that time. How about between the Irish and the Italians? Was there a conflict, did they get along?

SANDRONI: No. No, I mean, uh, I remember that growing up all the mothers would be leaning, in the summertime, would be leaning out of the window, and they would say, they would say, "Johnny, now, you stop it, otherwise you have to come inside." (she laughs)
That was their way of being punished. And we used to make, like, ring, ring around the rosy. About twenty or so, or thirty of the children. We would all play together, and all that kind of stuff, you know? And just have a grand time, yeah.

LEVINE: You remember growing up here as a good experience?

SANDRONI: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: And you enjoyed it.

SANDRONI: Yes. Yes.

LEVINE: So, um, so, let's see. You said, you went to school, and then in sixth grade you transferred to the school that's now the Helmsley Hotel.

SANDRONI: Yes. It was P.S. 27.

LEVINE: P.S. 27. And then, how was that? And how long did you stay in school?

SANDRONI: Well, that school went up to the eighth grade.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

SANDRONI: And then I transferred to, uh, I keep on saying, Washington Irving. I want to say Martha Washington. Washington Irving.

LEVINE: And that was a high school.

SANDRONI: That was a high school.

LEVINE: And where was that?

SANDRONI: That was on 17th Street in that, I remember. On 17th Street and Lexington Avenue, I think.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then did you stay all through high

school?

SANDRONI: No. I stayed until, I stayed at the third year, then I didn't finish the fourth year.

LEVINE: And why did you stop?

SANDRONI: Well, you know, I just stopped.

LEVINE: Did you get a job, then, or what did you do after you stopped?

SANDRONI: Well, I wanted to go to work, and somebody just said to me they're looking for young girls on 28th Street off Third Avenue, and they would, no, no. After, after my second year I transferred to Manhattan Trade School on 22nd Street and Lexington Avenue, and there I learned a trade on the machines. I liked that better than studying, I guess. And from there I got a job making straw hats. This was only, like, a winter job, because then they would close up for the summer. But that's all I wanted was just to make a, I don't know, make a few dollars that I made, because I got married when I was eighteen.

LEVINE: And what was this place where you made the straw

hats? Do you remember the name of the company?

SANDRONI: No.

LEVINE: But it was a, was it like a big factory?

SANDRONI: It wasn't a factory, but it was only on one floor.

LEVINE: It wasn't that big.

SANDRONI: No, it wasn't that big, yeah. And it was very nice. And I, and I never, I never made my million there. (she laughs) I was, I was too fussy about making that, making it right.

LEVINE: And then how did you meet your husband?

SANDRONI: Oh, he lived across the street from us, from us.

LEVINE: So had you known him, like, for a long time?

SANDRONI: Well, I knew him, but I didn't know him until after, when I was about seventeen-and-a-half.

LEVINE: And so how did you happen to . . .

SANDRONI: Well, because the parents knew one another, you know. But he had his own, his own group, because being ten years older, he had his own group, you

know. I was just . . . (she laughs)

LEVINE: So it was the parents, you think, that introduced you to each other as a possible marriage?

SANDRONI: No, no, no. It's just that, that I said something one day, I said something one day about, I forgot what it was about. And he said to me, "Okay, I'll come and pick you up Wednesday and we'll go to the movies." And that was it. And that started everything.

LEVINE: Do you remember what the movie was?

SANDRONI: No. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So then did you, did you get married soon after?

SANDRONI: No. As a matter of fact, it was not a movie. We went to, to the burlesque show on Broadway in the 40's. It as called burlesque, but it was more, you know, it was nice clean burlesque. It was at Minsky's.

LEVINE: It was like, it was like singing and dancing.

SANDRONI: Yeah, and little skits. Yeah, little skits. See,

Minsky's, that might have been more interesting.
(she laughs)

LEVINE: So you started seeing him then, and then you got married soon after that, or . . .

SANDRONI: Well, almost soon after that. Well, let's see now, about six months later, yeah.

LEVINE: And then did you have a big wedding, or not, or . . .

SANDRONI: No, we just had a family wedding, yeah. Big weddings weren't, they weren't in in those days.

LEVINE: And, let's see. So then after you got married did you work again, or not?

SANDRONI: No, no. From 25th Street I moved to 43rd Street, across the street, 338. And I was there for over fifty years, and then I moved here in 1982.

LEVINE: Oh.

SANDRONI: In this building.

LEVINE: So you've been on this street . . .

SANDRONI: Seventy-two years. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Seventy-two years. Wow. So you must have seen this neighborhood change a lot.

SANDRONI: Very, every building that is being built, I went through all that blasting. And the building that I went is still there. 338 is still across the street.

LEVINE: Can you say anything else about the neighborhood in the old days?

SANDRONI: I liked it better in the old days. If everybody was quiet, it was quiet, and people were more sociable. Because it was small, you see? Being up on a hill, it was small. Because now it's smaller, now it's lively. And Erica loves it! (she laughs)

LEVINE: But you probably knew more of the people in the neighborhood in the old days.

SANDRONI: Yes, because with building these buildings, strangers came in, and the others moved out, and they keep on changing, strangers, it keeps on changing all the time.

LEVINE: Are there people still here that you've known for many, many years, still here?

SANDRONI: No.

LEVINE: No. Uh-huh. No.

SANDRONI: I know somebody that's been here fifty years, but I didn't know them from way, way back. No, it's . . .

LEVINE: How about New York itself? What, uh, can you say anything about the changes in general?

SANDRONI: Well, I think that New York was more responsible in those days than it is now. The people were more responsible.

LEVINE: In what way?

SANDRONI: Well, they were, in what way? Well, you know, today everybody, they just buy and throw away. Money comes and money goes. In those days everybody has, it was more family-oriented. But, you know, you just go with the change, yeah.

LEVINE: Well, what, now, how many children did you have?

SANDRONI: I have four children.

LEVINE: And what are their names?

SANDRONI: Oh, well, I had Flora, Elena, Anita, that's Erica's mother, then I had a boy, Augusto, Gus.

LEVINE: And what was your husband's first name?

SANDRONI: Augusto, and we always called him Gus.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. And, uh, what do you feel proud of? What makes you feel satisfied about, you know, when you look back over your life and, what do you feel good about.

SANDRONI: Sometimes I don't feel satisfied.

LEVINE: What do you feel dissatisfied about?

SANDRONI: Well, you see, one daughter is, one daughter, Anita, is down in Atlanta. Elena is in California. I have, uh, one daughter here with me, and she's a widow, and I lost my son about four years ago, and he lived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I mean, the family just . . .

LEVINE: That's true of so many families now.

SANDRONI: I know.

LEVINE: Yeah. Uh-huh. Um, well, when you think about coming here as a little girl and spending the rest of your life here, do you think that made a difference, the fact that you started out in one place, and then the family moved, and you became American?

SANDRONI: I don't know, I can't see what I could have amounted to in Italy, because there wasn't any, any industry there at that time. Just, maybe just married, and if I was lucky, I found somebody. If I wasn't, you know, no, I can't, I don't know what would have happened if we had stayed over there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And do you feel like, um, how do you feel, like, about being Italian, and being American? Do you think of yourself as both, or one or the other?

SANDRONI: Well, if I had to choose, if I had a dollar to give to save one of the nations, I would give it to us, to the United States. Yeah. But if it were Italy against somebody else, I would go for Italy. But, no, this is my country. Although I've been back to Italy quite a few times, and I love it, but I'm

always glad to come back home.

LEVINE: Yeah. Um, okay. Is there, and how about, like, at this stage in your life?

SANDRONI: Well . . .

LEVINE: How are things for you? You're ninety years old, you look in great shape and full of energy.

SANDRONI: Yeah. Well, yes, I'm lucky in that respect. I'm healthy, and I have energy. I can't see very well. It's, this macular stuff is getting. But I could see things, but I can't read, and I can't, I can't do, I can't do any handwork, because I can't, I used to do a lot of crocheting, and sewing. I lost that, because I can't see what I'm doing.

LEVINE: You can't wear glasses for close-up work?

SANDRONI: No, whatever I have is all the, doctors can't give me anything more.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh. Is there any advice, we're getting a whole new surge of immigrants now, like the immigrants who came when you came, a whole surge of them. Is there any advice, or do you notice

anything that, uh, has to do with other people coming here and starting a new life?

SANDRONI: But, you see, now, you know, now I know nobody that's Italian. Everybody I know is everything else but Italian. I'm forgetting the Italian language, because I don't practice it with anybody.

LEVINE: And do you miss that?

SANDRONI: Well, you know, of course, when I go, when I go to, I haven't been there for four years now, when I go back, it kind of comes back enough to, uh, to make my wants known and, you know, to hold a simple conversation, but, uh, but before that, because I never went to the Italian school, but before that I spoke grammar Italian, not a dialect, although I do speak a dialect, but I did speak good Italian, like in school, because my, my in-laws, coming from Tuscany, but in Tuscany you have no dialect, see? IT's just the way, if you never go to school in Tuscany, you still speak it correctly.

LEVINE: Um, let's see. Is there anything else you can think of relevant to coming here and changing your life, and . . .

SANDRONI: Well, coming here, I guess, I guess it was good for the whole family because my father and my mother, they, you know, they worked, and they brought us up, and we all, we all prospered, in a sense.

LEVINE: Do you think your mother and father were happy that you'd come?

SANDRONI: Well, my mother, I used to say to my mother, after I was married and I had my own family, I said to her, I said to my mother, "Why don't you take a trip to Italy?" No, not me. She says, "I want no part of it." She would never go back.

LEVINE: And what was your, did your mother and father have the attitude that you should become American?

SANDRONI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Or did they want to, did they hold on to certain customs and certain ways?

SANDRONI: Oh, yes. Holding onto customs is one thing, but feeling that, feeling more American, well, feeling more American, you can't really feel that way when you're a grown up. But you knew that, that if you

had to give your vote, you would give it to this country. That's what I'm trying to say. But, uh, yeah, no.

LEVINE: Well, what were the kinds of customs that your mother and father held onto?

SANDRONI: OF course, the holidays, Sundays the family had to be together. And when it was, like, Christmas or Easter, or, of course, we didn't know, we didn't know Thanksgiving in the beginning. We knew Easter and Thanksgiving, and anniversaries. So then we would have a real Italian meal, and all the goodies. My mother would be doing all this cooking, all this there, making sweet stuff, four days ahead of time.

LEVINE: And did you carry on some of those kinds of customs?

SANDRONI: No. (she clears her throat) No, not really, because when I, when I married, then my mother-in-law, who lived next door to me across the street, said, "Well," she said, "you're all alone and we're all alone. Why don't we just live together?" And God bless her, she was the best mother-in-law that

anybody ever had. Just a beautiful woman.

LEVINE: So did you? Did you?

SANDRONI: Yes. So, actually, I had, I had my, my three daughters, and I was eating with my mother-in-law, not living with her, but I'd be there for the meals, you know, and we would . . .

LEVINE: I see. So she would carry on the customs, and you, and you didn't need to.

SANDRONI: No, and I didn't need to.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

SANDRONI: After when, uh, when finally I had to go on my own, then I would. But I, I never did all that they did, all that my mother-in-law or my mother did, because they did too much.

LEVINE: Were there certain ways that your mother and father brought you up, or certain attitudes they had about, you know, what you should be like, or how you should do things, or . . .

SANDRONI: Well, you see, my mother finally, finally got herself into a place where she had like a little

Italian restaurant, and anybody would go in. And, uh, you know, they would feed. But, see, because it was getting to be, how can I put this? See, before, before nobody ate in a restaurant. Everybody ate at home, or in a hotel. And this was something new. This was something new. But, uh . . .

LEVINE: And it was in this neighborhood?

SANDRONI: It was in this neighborhood. It didn't last long, because she finally, because my father finally got ill, and the doctor told her to take him out of the city because the air here wasn't doing him any good, so she moved out to Jersey, to a place called, it was near, it was near Flemington, and we used to go there in the summertime.

LEVINE: I see. So the family still lived here, but they would go to New Jersey in the summer?

SANDRONI: My family lived here, and my sister lived out in the island. But my mother and my father moved out there, and we would go and visit them over there.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh. Yeah. And, um, so do you think

you brought up your children in some of the ways
that your mother and father brought you . . .

SANDRONI: Well, I think I brought my children up more strict.

LEVINE: Oh. Do you know why?

SANDRONI: No. I just, I just wanted them to be at home at a
certain hour, and they couldn't do certain things,
and . . .

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And was your husband strict with them?

SANDRONI: No.

LEVINE: Oh, you were the strict one. I see. Uh-huh, uh-
huh. Yes. So, uh, right, right.

SANDRONI: And the thing is that I felt that I had to be home
when they came home from school. As a matter of
fact, my son said to me, not too long before he
passed away, he said to me, "You know, Mom," he
said. "When I think back," he said, "I'm happy
that you were home every time when I came home from
school." See, he liked the idea, because by that
time a lot of these buildings were up, and he had
friends whose mother was never home, and they would

always be over at our house playing until five o'clock, which was fine with me, you know? But this is why he said that, because those boys that he played with, their mothers were never home.

I guess maybe they were working, or probably they were just out socializing. I don't know. I didn't know the parents. I just know the children.

LEVINE: So the children would be at your house. Now, um, did you visit Ellis Island since it's been restored?

SANDRONI: Yes. When my son was here about five years ago we went to see Ellis Island. And, I tell you, they restored it, they restored it. They should have left it alone.

LEVINE: Oh. Why do you say that?

SANDRONI: Because they should have painted it and cleaned it up, but it wasn't that luxurious. (she laughs)

LEVINE: It looks better now than it did at that time. Uh-huh. Did it bring back memories? How did it strike you to see it so many years after?

SANDRONI: Well, it didn't, it didn't remind me of anything.

That's how changed I felt it is. But there is one area that my daughter-in-law found, and she said to me, "I'll show you." She said, "Mama, come over and look at this." And that was more.

LEVINE: It was the unrestored part, probably.

SANDRONI: Yeah. And that's the part where my mother, where my mother came and met us, and it was just one bench, one hard bench, and that reminded me. But we didn't have no marble floors or anything, any mosaic. Not that I remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember any foods that were new and different when you first came here?

SANDRONI: No. Food was, I wouldn't eat anything. Food is food. The bread, the pasta, the vegetables. It was all the same.

LEVINE: You mentioned on the ship the orange was something new to you, right?

SANDRONI: Oh, they are, the apples and the oranges, they . . . (she laughs) That was the only thing that I would allow them, the boys, to give us.
(she laughs)

LEVINE: And they were getting it from upstairs in the, uh, in the first and second class, probably.

SANDRONI: I don't know whether they had a second class or not. All I remember is that I don't remember eating any of the food that the ship gave to the steerage people. I don't remember. But I ate. I ate, I ate the bread, and I ate the chicken legs, and, uh, and then when I got here, then I saw a whole chicken.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, you had chicken in Italy before?

SANDRONI: In Italy? Yeah, we had chicken in Italy. But, you see, you know, it's, it never registered, because everybody raised chickens in Italy, because on account of the eggs and all that kind of stuff, but it never registered. It started to register on the ship.

LEVINE: When you had the legs.

SANDRONI: When I had the legs, which was always delicious.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, we're just about at the end of the tape. Is there anything else that you'd like to

say before we close?

SANDRONI: No, except that I'm glad that my mother came here and gave us, gave me a chance to raise my children here, because maybe I wouldn't have had more children if I stayed in Italy. I don't know. I don't have much to say.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, um, I think we'll close here, then. I've been speaking with Mary Sandroni, who came from Italy, northern Italy, Torino, in 1911 or '12, at four or five years of age, and at the time of this interview, Mrs. Sandroni is ninety years old, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off.