

EI-931/PROTO

EI-931  
MARIANNA DI MODICA PROTO  
BIRTH DATE: JANUARY 21, 1923  
INTERVIEW DATE: SEPTEMBER 10, 1997  
RUNNING TIME: 56:57  
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PhD  
RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME  
INTERVIEW LOCATION: NEW YORK, NY  
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 2/1999  
TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

SICILY, 1923  
AGE THREE MONTHS  
SHIP NAME NOT RECORDED

many  
8.  
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Levine  
LEVINE: Okay. Today is September 10, 1997. And I'm here in New York City with Marianna Proto, who was born Marianna de Modica. She was born in Vittoria, Sicily in 1923, and came to this country at three months of age. Today at the time of this interview, Mrs. Proto is seventy-four years of age, and this is Janet for the National Park Service. Okay. If you would start by saying your birthday.

PROTO: Uh, 1/21/23.

LEVINE: Okay. And do you, you, of course, wouldn't have

memories of Sicily, or even coming here.

PROTO: No, not at that time. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: But do you recall anything that your mother or any other family members said about it?

PROTO: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: What, what do you remember? Um, do you remember about what they said about life in Vittoria?

PROTO: Well, my mother came from, not a poor family, from a landed family. And, uh, she was a dressmaking teacher.

LEVINE: Oh.

PROTO: Yes. And, uh, she came to this country because my father wanted to come back. He had, uh, he had come to this country at about, in about 1913, and gone back to visit, uh, in, uh, 1920, and there he married my mother and, uh, in 1923 they came back because he had this wanderlust. He wanted to come back.

LEVINE: Now, were you the only child?

PROTO: At the time I was the only child.

LEVINE: And, so he, uh, what had your father done in Sicily before he left, and then when he was here in the United

States? Do you know?

PROTO: Well, in Sicily he was diplomonad to, uh, work on  
large farms where he would, uh, I guess protect plants and  
whatever. make sure that the good fruit came from them,

Like, a horticulturist.

LEVINE: A horticulturist, uh-huh.

PROTO: Right. And that's what he did there, and he was  
work. diplomonad. He could go anywhere in the world to

And he had worked in Egypt and all over Italy. But  
him. when he came to this country, of course, in New York  
City, there wasn't that kind of an opportunity for

And, uh, he wound up doing general labor, working at  
of the Board of Health as an elevator operator. Well,  
course, during World War One he was conscripted into  
the American Armed Forces, and he was a GI.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh, so, in other words, before he married your  
mother in 1920, he . . .

PROTO: He married her, let's see. I guess he, no, he  
married her in 1921. 1920 is when he went back.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

PROTO: To see his family.

LEVINE: Uh, you mean, his family was . . .

PROTO: In Sicily.

LEVINE: I see.

PROTO: Nobody is here but my father.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PROTO: And nobody in my mother's family ever came here but  
my mother.

LEVINE: I see. Huh. Say, if, is there anything else you can  
what, think of about your father's wanderlust? I mean,  
did he, he traveled a lot . . .

PROTO: Yes.

LEVINE: Before.

PROTO: Yes, before he was married. He just seemed to want  
to do different things and see different places. He  
went to Buenos Aires, and then he came to this country.  
And this, and he had friends here from the old hometown,  
and this is where he stayed.

LEVINE: Do you know, did anybody ever say, like, why he, I

be mean, if, it would seem like for a horticulturist to  
in New York City, would, do you know why he wanted to  
stay here?

the PROTO: Well, he had friends here and, of course, there was  
language barrier and everything. I guess he felt  
comfortable. If he had gone to California he  
probably would have done a lot more, you know, with his  
profession, etcetera.

LEVINE: Was he, was he happy here, would you say?

kind PROTO: Yes, I think he was happy. My father was a happy  
of person, hardworking and happy, quiet.

LEVINE: And, uh, what was his name?

PROTO: His name was John, Johnny.

LEVINE: And your mother?

PROTO: Rosa.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

PROTO: Mangione.

LEVINE: Could you spell that, please?

PROTO: Yes. M-A-N-G-I-O-N-E.

LEVINE: Okay. And what about, what kind of a person was she?

PROTO: Oh, she was a very bright, lively person, and very intelligent, really. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: So how . . .

PROTO: She could do anything. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: Wow. And she taught, um . . .

PROTO: She had her own, in those days where women weren't liberated, my mother was completely liberated. She had her own business, dressmaking business. And she had a class of about twenty children that she was teaching. In those days they, they, uh, to learn, uh, a trade whatever you would want to call it, they went to who did it, and they stayed there for a few years they learned it, and that's what she did. She had . . .

had

a

or

people

till

LEVINE: She had like apprentices?

PROTO: Yes, apprentices. She had several apprentices, and had a, a very going business in her field.

she

LEVINE: And did she want to come to this country, do you know?

had  
Italy  
to

PROTO: No. She did not want to come. And, uh, my father promised my grandfather that he would never leave before he married her, and then he just didn't want stay. He wanted to come back.

LEVINE: So how about, do you know anything about your grandparents on either side?

got

PROTO: Uh, well, my father lost his parents very young. He was one of thirteen children and, uh, and, uh, my mother, her parents were living, you know, when she married and, uh, they were, uh, comfortable. Not wealthy, but very comfortable. And, uh, so she, they never had any need to leave their country, and they never did.

LEVINE: What, what about Vittoria? Do you . . .

PROTO: Yes, it's a wonderful little busy town, very pretty, very old. Uh, my mother says that when she was a little girl in school, they had a five hundred year celebration of the town. And, as you know, Sicily is very old.

or,

LEVINE: So, um, do you know, uh, anything about, like, the leaving, or the, or, you know, getting to the port, did your mother ever tell you, first of all, who was traveling when you came?

they  
by  
PROTO: My father, my mother and myself. And, uh, I guess  
left from, uh, Naples, and they must have got there  
train.

your  
LEVINE: Okay. And, uh, do you, do you know anything that  
mother or father brought with them that they had in  
this country, from Italy?

she  
PROTO: Yes. Well, my mother had her entire trousseau in a  
wooden trunk, you know. And she had beautiful things  
that her mother had made. And in, uh, Europe, they  
start with the trousseau when the children are born,  
practically. And she had sewed, and embroidered  
practically for twenty years or so. And, uh, when  
came to this country most of the immigrants that came  
had nothing in their trunks, garbage. But when they,  
when they opened up that trunk, that was it. That  
trunk was stolen. And my mother never, never forgot  
it  
her entire life. But that's what happened to all her  
precious memories and belongings.

LEVINE: Now, where was it stolen?

PROTO: At, uh, Ellis Island. And, uh, it's one of those  
unfortunate things.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Did your mother or father ever tell you anything about their wedding?

PROTO: Uh, not much, except that I guess it was in their house, in my grandfather's house, and they invited friends and relatives, and it was a happy occasion.

LEVINE: And I guess your mother's mother was also a very good seamstress, or very good at, uh, she made the trousseau.

PROTO: She made, well, she, in those days everybody had looms and what not, and they made the, she used to make the sheets and whatnot. You know, they used to, she wasn't like my mother, no. My mother was trained and, uh, she she was also diplomonad in what she was doing. In those educated days it was very, uh, unusual for women to be her and my grandfather was very strict, but he allowed to be educated. You know, most of the men ( she clears her throat ) didn't go for women being educated, but my grandfather allowed my mother to be educated.

LEVINE: Was she one of many children?

PROTO: No. Uh, she had two brothers and herself. And they were also college educated. Unusual, in those days.

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh.

PROTO: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah. So, uh, how about the voyage? Did they ever talk about that?

PROTO: Yes. She said it was seventeen days of bad weather. And she said she was sick all the way. And . . .

words,  
LEVINE: Did she talk about the accommodations? In other  
were they traveling in the, in the, uh, sort of  
steerage?

best  
PROTO: I don't know. She said, I guess they traveled the  
way my father could afford, but she said it wasn't  
comfortable. ( they laugh ) She was seasick all the  
way.

LEVINE: And your father? Well, he . . .

know.  
PROTO: No, he was, I guess he was pretty, uh, tough, you

know,  
LEVINE: And how about you? Did your mother ever say, you  
that you were sick, or . . .

PROTO: No, no.

LEVINE: Okay. And then Ellis Island. Uh, so, well, I guess  
the big, the biggest thing was the stealing of your

mother's trunk.

PROTO: Yes.

LEVINE: Did they ever say anything else about that?

PROTO: I think they gave my father a hundred dollars for the loss, for the entire loss.

LEVINE: Oh.

PROTO: Yeah. Because that's all that he gave, you know?

LEVINE: Wow. Now, do you know if they gave it to him there,  
or  
if it took a while?

PROTO: I don't think so. I think it took a while. Yeah. (  
a  
telephone rings )

LEVINE: And where did they go? When they left Ellis Island,  
do  
you know where they went?

PROTO: Yes. Uh, they, they went downtown, in Manhattan,  
where  
my father had friends, and my mother stayed with  
friends for about a month or so until they found  
their  
own apartment.

LEVINE: And where was that?

PROTO: On Monroe Street in New York City, in little, at that

time there were a lot of Italian people there.

LEVINE: And so then did you grow up on Monroe Street?

PROTO: Uh, I grew up on Cherry Street, which is just like a couple of blocks away.

largely  
LEVINE: Now, what do you remember growing up? It was a immigrant Italian neighborhood when you were growing up?

part  
real  
PROTO: Yes. Well, every block almost was a different nationality. Upon Cherry Hill they were Spanish, and on Jane Street they were Irish, and on Rutgers Street they were Jewish. ( she laughs ) And on, on our of Cherry Street they were Italian. I mean, it was, you know, that's the way New York was. We were a mixture.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And how did, how did the kids get along?

PROTO: Everybody got along fine. We all got along fine.

LEVINE: And were you in the same school?

PROTO: Yes.

LEVINE: And so, uh, was it a lot of children that were newly arriving, do you remember, at that point?

PROTO: Well, it seems to me, unlike today, that even though  
their the parents didn't speak English, no matter what  
nationality was, when the kids went to school they  
spoke English in no time flat. We all spoke English,  
and all our parents were immigrants. Whether it was  
kids, the Jewish kids or the Irish kids or the Spanish  
everybody spoke English when they got to school. I  
don't know how they learned it, but we all learned.

LEVINE: And where were the Spanish kids coming from? Were  
they coming . . .

PROTO: From Spain.

LEVINE: From, they were, uh-huh?

PROTO: Yes, yes. They were. We didn't have any, uh, Puerto  
Rican neighbors at that time. They were from Spain,  
and from Portugal.

LEVINE: So what was it like for you as a child? You probably  
knew English better than your parents.

PROTO: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: And how, what was that like, being . . .

PROTO: Well, my parents learned pretty quickly but, uh, if  
they spoke to us in Italian, we answered them in

English, because that was our language. You know, that's what we spoke with our friends, that's what we spoke in English, and in that way it helped the parents, too.

LEVINE: Did you, do you remember, like, not wanting to speak Italian?

PROTO: No.

LEVINE: Did you feel like you were trying to become American, or wasn't that like an issue?

PROTO: It wasn't an issue. We felt we were American.

First  
LEVINE: So, um, and your father had already served in the World War.

PROTO: Yes, he did.

LEVINE: As an American soldier.

PROTO: Yes, he was. And that made my mother, at that time, automatically a citizen, and me, too, when we got here.

I,  
She never took out citizenship papers. Neither did I, because we were already citizens.

LEVINE: Because of his service.

PROTO: Because my father had served in the Army.

LEVINE: I see, uh-huh. Did your father ever talk about that, about serving in the American Army? Any stories that you recall?

PROTO: Well . . .

LEVINE: Or anything else that . . .

she  
PROTO: Well, he said, since he was also a very good cook ( laughs ) he cooked for the officers. ( she laughs ) Not for the poor enlisted men, but for the officers. And he enjoyed it. He liked serving in the army. He enjoyed it.

LEVINE: And did he cook at home sometimes?

Beach,  
PROTO: Uh, well, we had a summer place out on the South and, uh, he used to love to cook there, you know? He was a very good cook.

LEVINE: What would he cook? Would he cook Italian dishes?

pots  
on  
PROTO: Well, it was mainly, no. He cooked mainly, you know, outside there. He made the steaks, you know, on the grill, and things like chicken and steaks and big of corn on the cob, because we had a large property Staten Island, and we had all kinds of fruits and vegetables, and we had wonderful summers.

LEVINE: Oh. So you, did . . .

we  
know,  
rent

PROTO: We grew up, we had a summer place on the beach, and  
lived on the Lower East Side in the winter. You  
we had a 7-room apartment, believe it or not, because  
we had two apartments. My father, he was able to  
two apartments, and they were adjoining, and the  
landlord permitted him to make it into one apartment.  
You know, they took down the wall, and they made one  
beautiful, large apartment. We had seven rooms in  
those days.

LEVINE: Wow.

now.

PROTO: Which is a lot better than what I have here right  
( they laugh )

LEVINE: Well, now, this was on Cherry Street.

PROTO: Cherry Street.

old

LEVINE: And was it, was it like an old, a brownstone, or an  
tenement . . .

PROTO: It was, no, it was a tenement.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PROTO: A five-story tenement, and it was very clean, nice  
stairs, you know, stone, and, uh, nice hallways and

And everything. It was very clean. It was very nice.

the people improved their apartments, you know.

LEVINE: I see. So you must have had a whole floor.

PROTO: No, we had half a floor. We had two apartments.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. Uh-huh. Yeah. Okay. So you had like either the front of the back, right? I mean . . .

PROTO: Yes, yes. We, they were side by side, you know, so that when they took down that wall we had the whole, yeah, thing.

LEVINE: And do you remember anything about living in, in that place?

PROTO: Oh, it was wonderful. All the neighbors were wonderful. And, uh, we used to leave our doors open, really, literally. And, uh, the neighbors all shared.

During the holidays, everybody was from a different area, and everybody made their special dishes, and everybody would bring a dish down to a neighbor. And so you would have all kinds of food, and all kinds of, you know.

LEVINE: Now, were there all Italian people living in your particular building?

PROTO: In my building they were all Italian, but all from

different parts of Italy, and so it was different.  
Everything was, you know, the cooking and everything  
was different.

LEVINE: So you, it looks as though you remember this fondly,  
this period of your life.

PROTO: We had a, yes, it was a beautiful childhood. People  
were very nice, and we had a lot of fun. We played  
in  
the street. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: What did you play?

PROTO: Oh, we played, uh, Johnny On The Pony, we played tag,  
we played Hide-and-Seek, we jumped rope, we  
rollerskated. You know?

LEVINE: Yeah. What's Johnny, I know, I've heard Johnny On  
The  
Pony, but I can't . . .

PROTO: I don't know. Kids would, uh . . .

LEVINE: Oh, like go down on all fours?

PROTO: Yes, and you'd jump over the kids and all that.

LEVINE: Right. Um, so how about school?

PROTO: School was wonderful. We had wonderful teachers and,  
uh, I had no problems. I was a straight-A student in  
those days. And, uh, I don't know. Everybody was  
very

us  
nice. The teachers were nice. I remember learning things in grade school that they were still teaching when we went to high school, and that's how good our education was.

LEVINE: Do you remember what school you went to?

up.  
PROTO: Yes. I went to P.S. 1 on Henry Street. It's still

LEVINE: Is it an active school?

of  
inside,  
went.  
the  
PROTO: Yes, it is. It's now, uh, part of Chinatown. A lot of Chinese children go there. I wonder how it is I mean, after all those years. It was old when I Sure. It was by the Five Points Mission, you know, Irish?

LEVINE: Yes.

PROTO: Yes, right there.

LEVINE: Can you say anything about the Five Points that you recall from your childhood?

PROTO: I didn't know much about it. I know that they were a charitable . . .

LEVINE: The mission.



for

PROTO: No, he was working as, he was an elevator operator  
the city, at the Board of Health.

LEVINE: Oh, the Board, uh-huh.

PROTO: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: Well, I imagine that was a good job to have.

PROTO: Yes. It was a very good job to have at that time,  
because it was a steady income, and people just were,  
they couldn't find jobs. They were all hardworking  
people, but they just couldn't find the jobs, and it  
was very sad.

LEVINE: Yeah. And it sounds like you, you were, you were  
fortunate in that you had a place, another place to  
go  
to in the summer.

PROTO: Yes, oh, yes.

LEVINE: Was that unusual?

PROTO: Yes, it was.

LEVINE: Did you know many people who had . . .

PROTO: No. Well, a lot of people from where my parents came  
from had arrangements like that. They all had jobs  
and  
for  
they all had places that they could buy, you know,

these summer places. They all helped each other build places. My father built our own house on the beach. And, uh, we had, uh, all his friends and neighbors built their own, too, but they all helped each other. You know, come Saturday everybody was in some house building a porch, fixing a room or something.

the LEVINE: Now, these, do you think some of these people were same friends that your father . . .

PROTO: Came from, yes.

LEVINE: That he came to be with.

PROTO: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PROTO: Yes, and that are still friends.

LEVINE: Really? They stayed friends all their lives.

PROTO: Yes, all their lives.

LEVINE: Do you have any contact with the children of these people that you knew growing up?

All PROTO: Some of them. A lot of them are gone, of course. away. of my father's and mother's generation are gone, because my mother was ninety-four when she passed

So you can imagine there isn't anybody left.

LEVINE: Yeah.

the  
PROTO: And then, of course, a lot of them moved away from  
cities. There was hardly anybody left. But we had,  
but we kept in contact with a lot of people. Because  
of our summer place, you know, they all had the same.  
Every summer we'd see each other.

LEVINE: Now, are those places still there, do you think?

PROTO: Uh, no. Staten Island now has roads built. ( she  
laughs ) When we moved, when we were there there  
were . . .

LEVINE: (?) Staten Island.

PROTO: There was cattle . . .

LEVINE: Yeah, that would be . . .

our  
PROTO: Cattle. People had cows, and they would come up to  
fence and, uh, we had a neighbor who had a nannygoat,  
and, uh, he would chain that nanny goat so that all  
the, he would just go up and down on the sidewalk.  
had  
Well, the nanny goat walked on the sidewalk, and we  
he  
to walk on the street. ( she laughs ) And I guess  
milked it every day, got his milk.

LEVINE: So it really was the country.

PROTO: It was real country in those days, South Beach.

like,  
LEVINE: And what about, how did people, did people have,  
big gardens, and . . .

thought  
PROTO: Yes, people had gardens, because you, when you bought  
property there you'd get two and three lots and, you  
know. So we had three lots, and then my father had  
bought three lots across the street, because he  
maybe one of the children would want to build a house  
when they grew up, or something like that. And, of  
course, we sold it all too soon. ( she laughs ) Six  
lots now would go for a fortune. But we enjoyed it,  
we  
enjoyed it for over thirty years.

LEVINE: So your father was back with, uh, horticulturally.

know,  
PROTO: Yes, yes, yes. Oh, the garden was gorgeous. You  
plums,  
we had figs and peaches and pears and apples and  
flowers.  
and all kinds of vegetables, and all kinds of  
It was just beautiful.

LEVINE: And did your mother or father make things out of, you  
know, the crops?

had

PROTO: Oh, yes, yes. We would, they, we would work for days on end jarring peaches and apples, making applesauce, and, uh, tomatoes and all kinds of things. And we enough for the winter. And everything was delicious.

LEVINE: And how about, did you have, like grape arbors?

would

PROTO: Yes, we did, but they weren't the grape that you buy in the store. They were like, uh, I don't know, Concord, what do they call those grapes?

LEVINE: Oh, those purple ones.

PROTO: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah, I think that's right.

PROTO: Concord, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PROTO: Yes.

LEVINE: And how about socializing? Did people, um, get together? Did they sing, and dance, and . . .

PROTO: Oh, on Saturday night all the neighbors would get together. They would come with their guitars to the different houses, and everybody would dance and sing every Saturday night. It was just, I wish we had something like that today. We had so much fun. And

to they went to the different houses. They would come  
our house, we'd go to their house.

your LEVINE: And would you provide food, like when they came to  
house?

know, PROTO: Oh, yes, yes. Well, yeah. There was fruit, you  
and maybe, uh, something to drink. Yes, we had good  
times.

your LEVINE: And how about your upbringing? Was your mother or  
father strict with you?

PROTO: Uh, they were strict in a sense, and in another sense  
they were very fair. We didn't do what children do  
with these days. If I went out, my brothers had to go  
me. ( she laughs ) They didn't, they no more wanted  
were me than they wanted a hole in the head, but those  
the rules. We went out together, and we came home  
together. That was it.

LEVINE: Until you were how old?

PROTO: Old. ( they laugh )

LEVINE: What were your brothers' names?

twins. PROTO: Frank and Joe, Joseph and Frank. And they were

LEVINE: Oh.

were  
PROTO: And they were just two years younger than I, so we  
more or less with the same crowd, you know.

LEVINE: And, uh, let's see. Uh, anything else about, uh,  
attitudes of your, of your mother and father, things  
that they tried to instill in you as far as being a  
certain kind of person, or . . .

own  
PROTO: Oh, yes. Honesty and education. Yes. My brothers  
were educated. One is a CPA, the other one had his  
business, and I was a secretary in, for a very short  
time, because then I was married. So they instilled  
good values, I think.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: And how about, um, how long did you stay in school?

PROTO: Uh, well, I graduated high school, and then I went to  
business college for a year.

LEVINE: And that I think probably . . .

a  
PROTO: In those days, in those days it was, you know, it was  
good education. My brother is a CPA, so he finished  
college. And my other brother graduated high school,

and

and he had, uh, a scholarship to go to MIT, but he decided he wanted his own business and that's what, he opened up a garage, and he did very well with his garage. He retired at fifty-one.

LEVINE: Was the garage in Manhattan?

opened

PROTO: Our first one was in Manhattan, and then, uh, he one in the Five Towns, in Woodmere, where he had very wealthy clientele, and where he did very, you know, exceptional, work on very good cars and whatnot.

LEVINE: Foreign cars?

PROTO: And stuff like that, yeah.

LEVINE: Wow. So what was your first job after you went to business school?

Island,

experience,

very

your

gave

PROTO: Uh, my first job was traveling from New York City all the way out to Midland Beach, Orange, in Staten because nobody would give you a job without and so our insurance man from Staten Island was a good friend. You know, in those days they came to house and collected their, whatever. And, uh, he me my first job. And so for six months I ran on that Staten Island ferry, then on a bus all the way out to

Midland Beach. And, uh, did work in his office.

LEVINE: And then what after that?

New

PROTO: Then I, I left. ( she laughs ) And I got a job in  
York, uh, at The Salvation Army headquarters.

LEVINE: Where was that?

PROTO: It was on 14th Street, near Orbach's, around there.  
They still have the . . .

LEVINE: I've seen it.

job.

and

and

took

looked

this

a

PROTO: The Evangeline Hotel, yeah. It was very nice, very  
nice. They were very nice, and it was a wonderful

I was a secretary there. They had, uh, fundraisers

whatnot, and, uh, you'd hear from the Vanderbilts,

the Duke and Duchess of Windsor came to visit. I

his coat and hung it up. ( she laughs ) And I

in it, and it said Prince of Wales. I says, "Boy,

is an old coat." ( they laugh ) But we had, it was

wonderful job. It was like a, it wasn't like working

in a regular office, you know? You got on the phone

when people would be making their donations and they

would be Rockefellers and Astors. It was really

place different. And then in the summertime they had a  
in New Jersey where they had a summer camp for  
children, and we were counselors there, the kids from  
the office. And so we were on the beach in the  
summertime. It was a really wonderful job.

LEVINE: And was it a big staff?

PROTO: Yes, it was, the whole building belonged to The  
for Salvation Army. It still does. And it was a hotel  
work women, you know, yeah, for young women who came to  
in New York.

LEVINE: At that time?

PROTO: Yes. It was like, uh, I guess the Barbizon, where  
they would give them meals and a room, and they had a  
lovely, big living room with a beautiful piano and  
whatnot where they could entertain their guests. It  
was, it was a beautiful, a beautiful little place.  
And, uh, it was very nice. I think I was the only  
Catholic there.

LEVINE: I was just going to ask you, was your family  
religious?

PROTO: Yes. My family was religious. And, uh, The  
Salvation Army is a Protestant organization, but they were

wonderful. I didn't care. When my brothers heard I was working there they said, "Are you going to play tambourine on the street?" ( she laughs ) I says, "No, I'm in the office." It was very nice.

the

LEVINE: So how long did you stay there?

PROTO: Oh, about two-and-a-half years.

LEVINE: And then did you meet your husband while you were working there?

drafted

PROTO: My husband was in the service. He was eighteen years old, and that was World War Two. And, uh, they everybody at eighteen and nineteen, and my brothers were eighteen, they were both in the service, and my husband was nineteen, he was able to stay out a year older. And he was in the service, and they all were combat zones, and lucky to come home.

in

LEVINE: Did you know your husband before he went in the service?

from

PROTO: Yes. He was a neighbor. He was across the street where I lived.

LEVINE: Were you, now, when you were working in The Salvation Army, were you still living at home on Cherry Street?

PROTO: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PROTO: I was living there till I was married at the age of  
twenty-five.

LEVINE: So that means probably your mother and father knew  
him,  
too?

PROTO: Yes. Everybody knew everybody. They were our  
neighbors. They lived across the street.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So had you known him, like, over the years?

PROTO: We grew up together, yes, playmates.

LEVINE: And did you think of him as a, as a boyfriend?

PROTO: No, not, no, no.

LEVINE: What was his name?

PROTO: Anthony, Anthony.

LEVINE: And how about when you got married? Did you have a  
big  
wedding, or not?

PROTO: No, we had a small wedding, and, uh, we had a  
reception  
at the house and, uh, all our friends were there.

LEVINE: So I guess his family, did they come from Sicily as

well, or did they . . .

PROTO: Yes, they did. But, uh, they weren't anywhere near where my family came. His family was city people. They came from Palermo.

LEVINE: And, uh, let's see. So then, uh . . .

PROTO: He was born here.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. And where did you live after you got married?

PROTO: Uh, we had an apartment on Market Street for a short while, and then, uh, just before my son was born we moved to Knickerbocker Village, and we were there for about thirty years. Knickerbocker is, uh, Knickerbocker Village is the original, uh, apartment complex, like Stuyvesant Town.

LEVINE: Right. Where is it?

PROTO: It's where Stuyvesant, it's, uh, Stuyvesant Town was fashioned after Knickerbocker. It was owned by, it was owned by Fred French. And, uh, it was very, very nice.

LEVINE: And where?

PROTO: It was, uh, it was a large complex, a square block. And we lived on Monroe Street.

LEVINE: Is it there now?

PROTO: Oh, yes. It's still a very nice apartment house,  
lots  
courtyard,  
of people. Beautiful rooms. We had a nice  
you know, with pretty trees.

LEVINE: Yeah? So it was like the first of that kind of  
complex.

PROTO: Yes, yes. And it was very nice. With beautiful  
mahogany furniture in the halls, and it was quaint.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Great. Now, did you continue to work after  
you were married, or did you . . .

PROTO: No, I was home. Uh, I was home. And, uh, when my  
husband passed away I went back to work.

LEVINE: Well, now, what did your husband do after he got out  
of  
the Army?

PROTO: My husband, when he was in the Army, was trained in  
refrigeration engineering, and so when he got out he  
opened his own place.

LEVINE: Downtown, in, uh . . .

PROTO: No, in Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Oh.

PROTO: And his company was the American Air Refrigeration Company. It was his company. He had a partner.

LEVINE: Great. And then, uh, you had children.

PROTO: Three.

LEVINE: Three. And what are their names?

PROTO: Uh, Nancy, John and Rosemary. Yes.

LEVINE: And then you stayed living in Knickerbocker Village?

PROTO: We stayed in Knickerbocker Village, yes, until I  
moved here to Waterside.

LEVINE: And was your husband alive when you moved here?

PROTO: My husband passed away, uh, at the age of thirty-two.

LEVINE: Oh, my goodness.

PROTO: He had a heart attack. And so I was a widow for a  
very long time, and I raised my three children, educated them.

LEVINE: When you went back to work, where did you go?

PROTO: The New York Journal American, right across the  
street from Knickerbocker. That's where the Post is now.

LEVINE: Oh.

used

PROTO: And Knickerbocker is right across the street. It  
to take me four minutes exactly to go from  
Knickerbocker to the New York Journal American, and  
that's why I took it, because I had to be in three  
places at the same time, at the office, at home, to  
make sure, schools, and.

LEVINE: So that worked out well? You stayed there for . . .

PROTO: Oh, yes, yes. Knickerbocker was wonderful. It was  
like a big family there. Everybody knew each other.  
Everybody watched out for each other's kids and  
everything.

that

LEVINE: So in a way there were probably some of the people  
you had grown up with in . . .

PROTO: Yes. In Knickerbocker, yes.

LEVINE: On Monroe Street?

PROTO: Yes, yes, right. Yes.

Waterside

LEVINE: Wow. So did any of those same people come to  
after that?

PROTO: No, no.

LEVINE: No, uh-huh.

PROTO: But I still go see them downtown. Some of them are

that  
still left there. Most of them have moved out, you know, and gone, and bought houses in Brooklyn or Long Island or whatever. But, uh, I have a few friends I grew up with still living in Knickerbocker, and we still see each other and call each other.

LEVINE: That's wonderful.

PROTO: Yeah. Girls I went to school with are still down there.

that  
LEVINE: Uh, well, when you, when you look back on that whole growing up in an immigrant community, do you think  
an  
made a difference in kind of who you became, or made influence on your life in some way?

PROTO: Well, if it did, I'm not too aware of it, because everybody considered themselves American, and everybody, uh, went to school and went to work, got married, you know, like, like everybody else. We didn't consider ourselves foreign, or immigrants.

uh,  
LEVINE: Did you ever, did you ever experience any kind of, you know, prejudice, or thinking of you as greenhorns . . .

PROTO: No.

LEVINE: Or that kind of thing?

the

PROTO: No, no. We didn't, because I guess we were all in same boat, practically, and nobody considered anybody anything, you know, whether they were friends or not.

LEVINE: And how about your, do you think you raised your children in some ways that your mother and father had seen?

PROTO: Of course, of course.

LEVINE: Can you think of any particular ways that you found yourself doing what your parents . . .

without

PROTO: I think we all find ourselves doing what our parents did unconsciously sometimes, and I guess I did, realizing it or thinking about it, even. You try to instill the right, uh, morals, and, uh, education, uh, I don't know, and keeping away from bad company, and even though I was working I used to call every day at three o'clock, and I made sure who was where, and when I got home everybody had to be home, or else. And, uh, I went to the PTA meetings. I did what parents do today with their children, and I never had a day's worth of trouble with any of them. We were very fortunate, because some of the children they grew up

with didn't grow up like mine. It's unfortunate, the  
parents are nice, too. It's just the way things turn  
out sometimes. Some children are more vulnerable  
and,  
uh, I wouldn't throw any rocks at anybody because I  
say  
there but for the grace of God go I. I just consider  
myself very fortunate in that respect.

LEVINE: How about, um, during World War Two? Do you recall  
anything about the impact of your war on you, and . . .

PROTO: Yes, yes. My brothers were both in the service, and  
my  
future husband was in the service, and all the kids  
we  
knew in the neighborhood were in the service. Some  
of  
them never came back. It was very sad.

LEVINE: And how about the war effort here? Were you . . .

PROTO: I think we had rationing, and, uh, but nobody really  
complained about it, you know? It was an effort that  
they  
we had to make, and there was enough. Even though  
were  
rationed, there was enough of everything. We  
fortunate, and, of course, everybody was working.  
And,  
uh, I was working. My brothers, of course, weren't  
in  
the service. They were just babies, eighteen. And,

considered

uh, everybody came back in my family, so we  
ourselves lucky.

LEVINE: And do you remember when the war was over?

PROTO: Yes. It was a very happy time. Everybody  
celebrated.

And we were all happy. We couldn't wait for them to  
come home. We wrote every day.

LEVINE: Really?

kinds

PROTO: Oh, every day we wrote. I wrote every day. And my  
mother wrote, and we sent packages, cookies, all  
of things. We always sent packages. I remember my  
mother sewing up those, those, those cloth packages.  
She put everything into cloth, and sewed them up, and  
then put wax to make sure the stitches didn't open,  
and  
we addressed everything carefully, and brought it to  
the post office.

LEVINE: And can you remember any of the letters from your  
brother that they were writing back?

in

PROTO: Oh, yes, oh, yes. They wrote and sent pictures and,  
uh, my brother Frank was in, uh, in the Pacific, and,  
uh, he was on an LST boat where they used to land the  
marines, and it was hard. And my brother Joe was in  
the Fifth Infantry in Italy, and, uh, my husband was

him

the Pacific, also. He was in the, they had trained  
in the, in air conditioning and refrigeration, and he  
took care of those supplies of food for the GI's,  
made  
sure those refrigerators or whatever were working so  
that, uh, we could feed the troops, and stuff like  
that. It was, uh, it was hard times when they were  
away.

LEVINE: And what about Joe? Was he, was he specifically sent  
to Italy because of him being Italian, or . . .

PROTO: No, no.

LEVINE: No.

PROTO: He was in the Fifth Army. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: Okay.

had,

PROTO: And, uh, and he was the least prospect for an  
infantryman. He was not a big guy, and he was, he  
he was a college kid. But they put everybody where  
they needed them. You know, after the service, they  
offered him a commission, and he said, "I'm going  
home." ( she laughs )

LEVINE: Well, when you think back on your life, what do you  
feel proud of or satisfied about?

at  
hard  
know,  
children.

PROTO: Well, it was, the fact that I was able to look back  
my parents to see how wonderful they were and how  
they worked, without letting us feel, uh, I don't  
poor. We never felt poor, because our parents never  
let us feel that way. And I did the same when my  
children, after my husband died, and the results were  
good with my brothers and myself, and with my  
I'm not unhappy.

LEVINE: And how about this period of your life?

PROTO: Now?

LEVINE: Yeah.

for

PROTO: Well, as my mother used to say, growing old is not  
sissies, so I'd rather not talk about it.

LEVINE: Well, your mother who lived to be what age?

PROTO: Ninety-four.

LEVINE: And was she with you, uh, how, in your old age,  
or . . .

PROTO: Well, she had a, she had a house in White Meadow Lake  
in New Jersey until she was eighty-eight. Then she,  
then we insisted that she give it up because it was  
getting too much. It was a big house and, uh, to get

house  
there  
somebody to cut the lawn, and to get somebody to do this and that, it was hard. And so she sold the which, of course, we don't feel too good about it. And, uh, she went to live with my daughter, who has a mother-daughter house, and, uh, she had her own apartment in my daughter's house, and I would go every weekend to make sure, I would cook for her and shop for her and, uh . . .

LEVINE: In New Jersey?

she  
PROTO: Keep her company. In, on Long Island. Well, when was in New Jersey I did that, too, yes. And, uh, that's the way things were.

LEVINE: Now, did you visit Ellis Island at all?

where  
PROTO: Yes, we did, and my mother has, uh, I don't know it is, where it's hanging. Oh, it's hanging . . .

LEVINE: ON the wall of the . . .

PROTO: In the foyer, yeah. Uh-huh. We have her down. Her, my dad . . .

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PROTO: Well, I guess now I'll be down. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: Well, yeah, good, good. So, did, I guess it, you

but wouldn't have remembered anything of Ellis Island,  
it probably does have a special connection . . .

PROTO: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: It does have a special connection for you.

PROTO: Yes, of course. I don't remember. I was only three  
months old. But, uh, my mother always says that, uh,  
he my father put us all in a taxi and we went to where  
was staying with friends.

LEVINE: When you got off of Ellis Island.

PROTO: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: And also you must have seen a lot of changes in New  
York City?

PROTO: Oh, yes, oh, yes. In fact, when, I lived on Cherry  
Street, and, uh, downtown, the Wall Street area, and  
whatnot, was, uh, where we used to play at night,  
because there were no cars. We used to bring our  
of skates and bicycles, you know, those hollowed sounds  
an empty office building and, uh, and now there's so  
much new construction and new Pace College, and all  
the new highways and whatnot, but I hardly recognize it.  
We used to, when we were children we, our idea of

the recreation at night was to walk the bridges, across  
Manhattan bridges. The Brooklyn Bridge one night, the  
Bridge another night.

LEVINE: A whole group?

we'd PROTO: Yeah, a whole bunch of friends. We'd all go, and  
sing, and, and just walk across the bridges, or walk  
to the Battery. Or, uh, go through Chinatown. I mean,  
skates that's what we did. And if we had bicycles and  
or whatever, we'd go to, to the courthouse, we'd call  
it, and that was round by the courthouses, because  
and there was nobody there, and the streets were empty,  
you could bring your skates and bicycles and whatnot.  
And that's what we did.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds like a good old time.

fun. PROTO: We had very good times, and New York was a lot of  
we'd We could come home any time of the day or night.  
Nobody bothered you. And we'd go to weddings, and  
Saturday go to socials, and different church socials on  
from nights, you know, and different, different friends  
school and whatnot, and we'd go to their church, and

they'd go to ours, and there was The Educational Alliance on East Broadway.

LEVINE: Oh, tell about that.

PROTO: That was very, very nice, too, and they had all kinds of dances and what not. We'd go there, too. By The Jewish Daily Forward, the Educational Alliance, on  
East Broadway.

LEVINE: Right. And so all different . . .

PROTO: All different nationalities.

LEVINE: Would go there.

PROTO: Yeah.

LEVINE: And they, and they'd have social events and also educational?

PROTO: Yes, yes. They had, they always had dances.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PROTO: Yeah, and whatnot. And we'd go, we'd go to everything,  
you know? To the church, to the Edgies, we used to call them the Edgies, the Edgies. And uptown, downtown, wherever we had friends.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And would you actually, like, study things there, in The Educational Alliance, or no?

PROTO: Uh, I, we just went for the socials. We didn't know too much about their other programs. We went to the library every Saturday for story hour.

LEVINE: Oh. Which library was that?

PROTO: On East Broadway. It's still there.

LEVINE: So what, someone would read, or . . .

PROTO: Yes. They used to have, I guess, a librarian there  
to  
read to the children on Saturdays, and we'd all go  
that  
there every Saturday, and then we'd take out books  
we liked. We lived in the library. We went to the  
library a lot. It was social as well as educational.

LEVINE: And do you remember anything about the Jewish  
Forward,  
any, I mean . . .

PROTO: I remember passing that building every time we went  
to  
The Educational Alliance. Of course, it was a  
wonderful, I guess it was their paper, The Jewish  
Daily  
Forward. I think it's still there.

LEVINE: I think, well, the building's still there. I don't  
know . . .

PROTO: I don't know if they publish any more. I don't know.

time

Maybe they publish elsewhere, but they did at the  
publish on East Broadway.

LEVINE: Yeah, right. And were there a lot of, uh, Jewish  
people, like, religious Jewish people around?

dry

PROTO: Oh, yes. My best friend, Rosalyn, her family had a  
goods store, you know. They sold everything there,  
know, like children's clothes, and if you needed

you

towels

or whatever. I went to school with Rosalyn. She was

a

very good friend of mine. And, uh, she was Jewish,  
yeah. As I said, we all, everybody mixed in those  
days, and nobody really even thought about, you know,  
and, like I said, each block there was a different  
group. It was really quite nice. I don't know why  
people didn't really hate each other in those days,

but

they didn't. I guess they were all immigrants,

whether

they were Jewish or Italian or Irish or whatever,

they

were all immigrants. And they all had to struggle to  
make it.

LEVINE: Well, that sounds like it's a perfect place to end.

PROTO: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: I want to thank you so much.

PROTO: You're welcome.

LEVINE: For a very interesting interview.

PROTO: Yes, thank you.

LEVINE: Really very lovely. I've been speaking with Marianna Proto, and it's, uh, September 10, 1997, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off.

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