

EI-98

ANTHONY MERITAI

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ITALY (born U.S.), 1906, 1907 and 1910

AGE 5 (final trip)

SHIP:

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RESIDENCES:

- **ITALY: LUCCA**
- **US: WATERBURY, CT.**

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, September 26, 1991. We're here at Ellis Island with Anthony Meritai, who was born in Waterbury, Connecticut but who traveled to Italy in 1906 and returned with his family in 1910. Good morning Mr. Meritai.

MERITAI: Good morning.

SIGRIST: Could you please give me your full name and your date of birth, please?

MERITAI: Yes. My full name is Anthony Meritai with no middle initial and I was born

in Waterbury, Connecticut and...

SIGRIST: And the date?

MERITAI: And the date is 26, May 1905.

SIGRIST: May 26, 1905.

MERITAI: Yeah, and then from there while my father was working here, my mother became pregnant and she wanted her children to be born in Italy.

SIGRIST: Lets talk about your father.

MERITAI: All right.

SIGRIST: First of all , what was his name?

MERITAI: Well my father name was Ludwig, Ludovico, Meritai and he came in 1898, I believe it was.

SIGRIST: What did he do in Italy before he came?

MERITAI: Oh, in Italy he was a mason, stone mason in buildings and when he come over here he followed more or less along the same line except that when he come over here he was able to get a job at the big Schovill Manufacturing Company in Waterbury.

SIGRIST: I see.

MERITAI: And he worked there for quite a few years.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about his family in Italy.

MERITAI: Oh, his family in Italy. He had one. His mother was living and he originated from Lucca, Italy.

SIGRIST: Could you spell that please?

MERITAI: L-U-C-C-A, Lucca, Italy and he was there for, well, he was born there. And, of course, his mother had property over there and she, when we went over there we stayed with her.

SIGRIST: What was your Dad like as a person?

MERITAI: Oh my dad was quite a good guy. He was about 5'9", five feet nine and he was happy-go-lucky guy and he liked poetry.(he laughs) And he liked poetry and every once in a while he'd come out with one of his silly little poems but we enjoyed it because when he told it it was funny. And then his mother, uh, father died when he was very young but the mother kept everything going and finally he didn't have any work in Italy. He went to France and from France he came to the United States.

SIGRIST: How long was he in France, do you know?

MERITAI: Oh, he was in France about three or four years because he could speak French quite well. (he clears his throat)

SIGRIST: Was he plying his trade as a stone cutter in France, too?

MERITAI: He followed that but I'm not sure what he really did when he got over there. But then he was able to get on board a ship and he came over here and, of course, he stayed here.

SIGRIST: This is in 1899?

MERITAI: 1898, I think it was.

SIGRIST: '98.

MERITAI: And he went for his citizenship papers right away and he received them and then he went on from there and then he sent for my mother. She came over in 1903, I believe.

SIGRIST: How did your father meet your mother?

MERITAI: Well, they knew each other in Italy because Lucca is right near Pistoia, which is a local town around Florence.

SIGRIST: Could you spell that?

MERITAI: They originated from Florence. Pistoria is P-I-S-T-O-I-A. Pistoia.

SIGRIST: And your mother was from this town, also?

MERITAI: She was, well, yes. As a matter of fact, her mother and parents died early but the uncle who was, uh, he had a wheat mill with the big stones that roll and another wheel and they crush the oats and the flour. They make flour out of it and then the flour they bagged and they brought it to the mill with the old, uh, broccio, broccio, which is a two wheel wagon with, pulled by horses and I was, when I was over there I was young enough to be able to remember part of that.

SIGRIST: So her family was rather comfortable, if they had...

MERITAI: Oh yes. She, my mother, was very comfortable over there because the uncle took her as his daughter more or less and she had everything she needed or wanted.

SIGRIST: What was her name?

MERITAI: My mothers name was Esther Breschi. B-R-E-S-C-H-I.

SIGRIST: What was her temperament like?

MERITAI: Oh, she was a happy women, always full of fun, you know, and she was very sharp and always gay and always having fun with everybody. She was very well liked.

SIGRIST: I see. Did she have black hair?

MERITAI: Yes, uh, no. She had brownish-black hair, I guess you might say, and she liked people and she talked to people and she was one of the five sisters. Now the other girls I don't remember their names. My mother's name was Esther. The others I don't recall their names but...

SIGRIST: What year did your father send for her?

MERITAI: 1903.

SIGRIST: When were they married?

MERITAI: Right as soon as she got off the boat they went to the priest, the court, and they were married.

SIGRIST: So they were married here.

MERITAI: Yes. They were married here and she became a citizen because my father was a citizen at that time .

SIGRIST: Now your father, I'm sorry, what company was he working for in Waterbury?

MERITAI: Schovill, S-C-H-O-V-I-L-L. A big manufacturing...

SIGRIST: And what was he doing ?

MERITAI: On machinery. He was an assistant, what you call it? Mill rights where they put the machinery together and all that stuff.

SIGRIST: Now was there a large Italian population in Waterbury?

MERITAI: Yes, there was quite a few Italian people in Waterbury, in that area, too. So as I grew up I went to school in Waterbury and, uh...

SIGRIST: Now, were you their first born ?

MERITAI: I was the first born and the original in this country. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: So, now why did your mother, when she became pregnant again, want the child to be born in Italy?

MERITAI: Well, my mother told me that they had talked about it and when y father made his first million then they would all go to Italy . You know when I say a million, when they made money they would all go back to Italy (clears throat) and which my mother, being pregnant wanted to go to Italy and

stay with her uncle who was well-to-do and have my sister born over there. So we went to Italy, my mother and I and my sister Martha was born November, sixth of November in 1906.

SIGRIST: Now your father stayed here in America?

MERITAI: Yeah. He stayed and worked. He had to work because he had to pay for all those trips across. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: How did you think your mother felt having made that journey pregnant without him?

MERITAI: Oh, she was energetic and she wanted to go and she said " We're all going back to Italy and we are going to do this," and she was the leader of the family.

SIGRIST: Do you think she missed Italy ?

MERITAI: Oh yes. She did because over here she didn't, they didn't have too many friends and they, she had all her friends in Italy and her relatives and she had my father's mother over there and we stayed at her place quite a bit when we went over. So she really wanted to get back to Italy with the family.

SIGRIST: Well, talk to me a little bit about growing up in this Italian town? First of all, can you describe this town?

MERITAI: Well, in this Italian atmosphere, well, I didn't have much time to grow up because I had made all my trips over to Italy during that time.

SIGRIST: Yeah. You were there for about four years in Italy.

MERITAI: No, well, oh, in Italy?

SIGRIST: Before you came to America.

MERITAI: No, in Italy, at different times I was there. The first time Martha was born and she and I came back not too far from there. I had a date here written. (he refers to his papers)

SIGRIST: I see. So you actually made multiple crossings, then. your sister Martha was born and then you came back to America.

MERITAI: Oh, yes. When Martha was born, she was born in Pistoia and the hospital she was born there is still there. I've been over there and I saw it but, anyway, Martha, my mother and I came back here.

SIGRIST: So your mother literally gave birth and then you got back on the boat and came back to America.

MERITAI: Yeah, well, yeah, within five or six months.

SIGRIST: Your mother was an intrepid woman.

MERITAI: Oh, she was. She was really something and she's here and, of course, she became pregnant again being home with my father and...

SIGRIST: So that would of been 1907 by the time you got back here?

MERITAI: That would of been in nineteen, oh well, my sister was born sixth of November, 1906 and then about four or five months later we come back.

SIGRIST: Yeah, so that would of been 1907.

MERITAI: So that would have been 1907 Mother, Martha and I came back to the States. And, of course, after a few years she was pregnant again and she wanted to come back to Italy to have the baby born over there and we did come back. Martha, I and Mother, we went to Italy and this time we went to Lucca where my father's mother was and Joseph was born there. (he clears his throat)

SIGRIST: What year was that?

MERITAI: 1909 I think it was. (he refers to his papers) Yeah, 1909.

SIGRIST: Joseph was born in 1909.

MERITAI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you, how long did you stay that time before you came back?

MERITAI: Well I stayed about a year, I think.

SIGRIST: Do you have any remembrance of that?

MERITAI: Because I remember my grandmother, my father's mother's area. I used to go out and play and they had a creek there used to go over and into the creek and play and then in the mornings we had, we used to go over to the creek and pick up snails. The snails in the damp mornings, there used to be a lot of them out and we used to go and pick them up and then we'd roast them and have snails for breakfast. (they laugh) But, strangely enough, they were very delicious, they were. I remember that

SIGRIST: Talk to me about your grandmother. What was she like ?

MERITAI: She was a little woman. She always dressed in black clothes, of course in those days. But, she, I'd say was about five feet seven inches tall and she was very good to us and then a little later on, when we came back, she passed away and I lost track of her, of course.

SIGRIST: Was your grandmother a good cook ?

MERITAI: Oh yes, they were good cooks but in their own style. And when you say the Luccese style, Lucca style, they were always, everything was good no matter what you did with it or how you cooked it.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit the sorts of things that they ate?

MERITAI: Well vegetables, soups and once in a great while meat. Not too much meat.

SIGRIST: Why?

MERITAI: Well because it wasn't available to us at that time, you know.

SIGRIST: What kind of house did you live in ?

MERITAI: Well, the house was a small house, a wooden, like a log cabin type of house but we had quite a bit of ground. We used to run around that ground all over the place and we enjoyed living there while we were there.

SIGRIST: Was there a grandfather also or... ?

MERITAI: No, they had died early. Matter of fact my father's father died when my he was seven or eight years old.

SIGRIST: So who is living in the house now? It's you and Martha. Joseph is born. Your mother, your grandmother.

MERITAI: Lucca?

SIGRIST: Yes, Lucca. So there's five. Anybody else in the house?

MERITAI: No, nobody else.

SIGRIST: Did your grandmother keep animals at all?

MERITAI: No. We had a chicken I remember. The chicken was there but I don't remember anything else. My mother's uncle had, the well- to-do one, had horses and all that type of thing.

SIGRIST: Did you visit your uncle?

MERITAI: Yeah, we visited there but when Joseph was born he was born in Florence. From Lucca they took my mother to the hospital in Florence and then from Florence she came back to her grandmother's, I mean her mother-in-law.

SIGRIST: I see. Talk to me a little bit about being a child from two worlds as a little boy? Did you speak English, also ?

MERITAI: No, I don't think I spoke English. I think I really kind of fell to the Italian side because I can read and write Italian even today but at that time I didn't see any difference that I can remember. I used to play in the

fields there and go and hunt for snails in the morning. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: What about religious life? Talk to me a little about your mother and your grandmother and their religious beliefs.

MERITAI: Well, my mother and grandmother, they were very good to each other. They loved each other and, of course, my mother was easy to love and care and with her uncle and all those other people, her relatives her sister, we used to get together once in a great while and go over times.

SIGRIST: Did you go to church at all?

MERITAI: Oh yeah. No, in those days we didn't but later on we did. My mother was very, very religious. When we moved to Connecticut, she used to go to church there and also when we went to Pennsylvania she went to church for a long time, every morning sometimes.

SIGRIST: So she was a very devout woman.

MERITAI: She was very religious, yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you , getting back to Italy because you were there for about a year before you said, before you came back. You talk about your family getting together occasionally. Can you maybe describe a Christmas or an Easter celebration for me?.

MERITAI: No. It didn't, those times never seemed to happen where it attracted my attention.

SIGRIST: That's just not something that stood out in your mind

MERITAI: I'm sure they did but it isn't that Christmas over there at that time wasn't as I know it today.

SIGRIST: Yes, that's true. It was a different thing. Well, all right, let's talk about, now you were there for about a year and then you came back in 1910.

MERITAI: Then we come back with my sister, my mother, Joseph and myself.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the boat ride?

MERITAI: Yeah. At one time we had those shelves, those folding things where you bring it down. It's a bed, you can make a bed out of it. Three stories high. I was always on the top one, of course, and I never remember getting seasick although my mother and my sister did get seasick.

SIGRIST: You'd think your mother had been back and forth enough times it wouldn't bother her any more but... (he laughs)

MERITAI: Yeah, she was doing all right there. She took hold of things and ran the show. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollection of playing on the boat at all?

MERITAI: Running around the deck there, yes. I remember that part of it. There were other children there, too, and we used to play with them but not too clear of a picture of that time.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, let's bring you to Ellis Island because you were here for three months and it was this trip, the 1910 trip, that you were here for three months.

MERITAI: Yeah. Well, in 1910 my mother told us there was so many people coming into Ellis Island and it was crowds all over the place and you couldn't find a bunk to sleep in and it was a little hectic. She was very upset for a long time and they wouldn't let my father come in to see us because of all these sicknesses.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me, set this up a little bit for me. First of all, how did you find out you were going to have to stay here for a while?

MERITAI: Well, I had the earache. When we landed, my mother, Martha, myself and Joseph, I had a earache. I had a mastoid and they operated on my ear. I still have the operation. They kept me there and during that time Martha got the earaches on her ears and they operated on both her ears. And while she was getting better Joseph got scarlet fever. Now by this time it was already about two months that we were waiting to better and get out of there. Well, anyway, Joseph got scarlet fever and he passed away there.

SIGRIST: Here at Ellis Island?

MERITAI: At Ellis Island. And I remember Martha got very sick because she had developed the measles on top of her ear trouble and they brought her to the upper upstairs of this place of Ellis Island. There used to be a second deck up here and at that time my mother was getting a little hysteric. She was, she couldn't see her husband. they wouldn't let him in and the children are sick and now the baby died so she had a rough time.

SIGRIST: What do you remember of your experience of being in the in the hospital here?

MERITAI: The only experience I remember is that when Joseph was sick I went to

see him and I was trying to hold him but they wouldn't let me go near him after awhile because of the scarlet fever and then he died and that was the last of it. And the bad part of all this was that we don't know where he was buried, what they did with him or anything. That's the bad part about it.

SIGRIST: Your poor mother through all of this.

MERITAI: She was in very, very bad shape.

SIGRIST: Now was she allowed to visit you?

MERITAI: Oh, yes. She could visit me and Martha, too. Once they took her upstairs she couldn't even go upstairs and she couldn't find out what was going on.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about where your mother stayed during all this on the island?

MERITAI: Yes. We were all, she was down on the main deck where other people were. They had rows of beds and that type of thing the way I remember it and she could only see us while we had the ear trouble which wasn't so dangerous as catching a disease. But when she went upstairs with the measles they wouldn't let her go up. (he coughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember the doctors?

MERITAI: No.

SIGRIST: Or any of the staff?

MERITAI: No, I don't remember any of the doctors.

SIGRIST: When, did your father even finally come? Was he ever allowed?

MERITAI: He had a lawyer and he tried to and he went to New York City down at the Battery to try to get over here and they wouldn't let him over and, of course, he was fit to be tied to, too, but...

SIGRIST: Let me ask how you felt as a child being in this situation? Were you frightened or were you excited?

MERITAI: Yeah. I wanted to see my father and my mother and I used to cry but evidently we just couldn't do anything about it and my mother is the one that did all the suffering because she, there was no way, nothing she could do. She was trying in different ways. She wrote letter to my father and tried to find out if we could get a lawyer but they wouldn't let him in.

SIGRIST: When your mother got older, I'm just curious, did she ever talk about this experience?

MERITAI: Oh yeah. She talked about it and said how we suffered and how they were very ungrateful to the ones who were sick and had these conditions. (he pauses) The doctors would say, "You have to do this, you have to do that," and she had to do it and she wanted to do it but nothing ever seemed to work out. (his papers rustle)

SIGRIST: How long were you finally here?

MERITAI: We were at Ellis Island, it was three months when they released us to go to the Battery to be picked up by my father.

SIGRIST: Do you remember being released?

MERITAI: No.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing your Dad?

MERITAI: Yeah, I remember.

SIGRIST: Describe that scene for me.

MERITAI: When I saw him, of course, I grabbed him because we hadn't seen him for long time and my mother, of course, and we all wanted to get home. We were anxious to get home and in those days there was no bridges and tunnels. We had to take the ferries whenever we crossed the river and the train, we took the train, I think, at the Grand Central Terminal that took us to Waterbury, Connecticut.

SIGRIST: Had he known that Joseph had died?

MERITAI: Only, yeah, my mother had written to him and told him about that.

SIGRIST: So he had knew ahead of time.

MERITAI: Yeah, he knew that when he picked us up in New York City.

SIGRIST: Did he bring any gifts?

MERITAI: No, we never thought about that. All we wanted to do was be with each other. No, we never had any gifts like that.

SIGRIST: What was, when you went to meet your father and then you went to

Grand Central Station to get to the train, what was your impression of New York City?

MERITAI: Well, New York City, I remember not too much about New York City but the Grand New York Central Station was a big palace in those days. And we got off the train and we got off in Waterbury and then we went home. We lived in a small place on East Main Street.

SIGRIST: Can you walk me through the place that you lived in? Sort of walk me through the rooms ?

MERITAI: No, it was a three story house and we had our rooms on the third floor and that's where we lived.

SIGRIST: How many rooms did you have?

MERITAI: We had, I think, three rooms and the house was right near the school that we eventually went, started going to in kindergarten.

SIGRIST: Was there electricity in the house or gas light?

MERITAI: No, it was, we had the lamps. I'm not sure if it was gas or not but we had lamps.

SIGRIST: Did you have a bathroom?

MERITAI: Not directly in the house. Outside, we had a bathroom outside the rooms.

SIGRIST: Who were the other people who lived in this building?

MERITAI: Oh God, I don't remember that.

SIGRIST: Were they immigrants?

MERITAI: No. Maybe they were but I don't know.

SIGRIST: I see. All right, well let's talk a little bit about the neighborhood and tell me a little bit about Waterbury at that time.

MERITAI: Well, Waterbury is quite a big city, even at that time, and a big manufacturing city. I remember Will Rogers, not Will Rogers, but Roger's Silverware Factory was there and Schovill's and we used to go to a big church nearby and I know we used to go, we had cold water up where we were living, we used to go down on Silver Street right across from the silver factory where the Rogers Silverware was. They had a well there, a big steel tank, and the tank was always running full and then they had a spigot where we used to go with our gallon jugs and get fresh spring water from there.

SIGRIST: So you had no running water in your, or there was running water but you had no pumps.

MERITAI: We had water. I don't remember now if we had spigots and all that but I know I used to go down there for that drinking water.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay in that third floor flat?

MERITAI: Oh, I think we stayed there about three or four years.

SIGRIST: Oh, so a good chunk of time.

MERITAI Yeah, quite a while.

SIGRIST: Did you have your own bedroom?

MERITAI: Because by that time, no. I think the children all slept together.

SIGRIST: In one bed?

MERITAI: Yeah, and the school was nearby.

SIGRIST: How was the apartment heated? Do you remember?

MERITAI: Oh, we had a regular coal stove, a combination cooking and coal burning stove.

SIGRIST: We are going to pause now and Peter is going to flip the tape.

MERITAI: All right. (end of cassette tape side one)

SIGRIST: All right, I would like to talk a little bit about your Americanization. It seems like you were an Italian child up to this point. Let's talk first about school. You said there was a school nearby and you just (interview is interrupted) O.K., before we paused we were just about to talk about school.

MERITAI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You're just of school age or just about?

MERITAI: I was going to kindergarten and then from kindergarten I remember going into the first grade. And the first grade, all the ildren, we used to

play around, run around the school, play tag and that type of thing and I enjoyed it very much. And then one day we were running around and my teacher's name was, and I still remember her name, Mrs. Wood. She was a nice lady. She was a kind lady. We were running around and all of a sudden she grabs me and she stopped me and she looks at me and she says, " You know, you have the most beautiful brown eyes I have ever seen. " (he laughs) She told me that. I remember that still. Mrs. Wood.

SIGRIST: Now, you said you went to kindergarten.

MERITAI: Yeah, and from kindergarten I went into first grade.

SIGRIST: How did you learn to speak English?

MERITAI: Oh, well during that time I automatically picked it up and began to speak English but we always spoke Italian in the home because my mother couldn't speak English and my father, oh he could speak a little bit but not to well.

SIGRIST: 'Course he had been in America for over ten years at this point.

MERITAI: Yeah, but he did speak French very well and so we worked from there. And I finally began to speak a little more clearly and more English and then we went in the third grade and from there wasn't too much work in that area and my uncle was working in the mines up in West Pittston, Pennsylvania.

SIGRIST: Now explain to me who this uncle is.

MERITAI: All right, my uncle is the brother of my mother and he's the one that used

to take me in this broccio with the flour.

SIGRIST: This was the wealthy uncle in Italy ?

MERITAI: He used to work with the flour mill there and he used to take me up on that horse and wagon and I used to go with him so I remember him well and he was good to me.

SIGRIST: When did he come to America?

MERITAI: Oh, he came to America I think in the, 1915 or '14, somewhat around there.

SIGRIST: Was he older than your mother?

MERITAI: Yes, he was a little older than my mother. I think he was about four or five years older and he came to America and he worked in the mines up in Scranton, West Pittston, and that's when my father wasn't working. He used to tell him, "Come on up here. You make good money according to the number of cars you load up," and all that type of thing. So we went to West Pittston.

SIGRIST: Well, this leads me to ask you this question. Were there times your father was laid off work?

MERITAI: No, he was still working at Schovill's but you made more money and, of course, we were interested in the more money so my father went up and about two months later we moved to West Pittston.

SIGRIST: So you're going from a city in Waterbury to rural Pennsylvania.

MERITAI: To West Piston, which is sticks in the coal region.

SIGRIST: Tell me what that was like being a city boy going to the country?

MERITAI: Yeah. As a matter of fact one thing why I liked it so much, we lived on Luzerne Street and right on the corner from where we lived there was a Uneeda Biscuit factory there and every Saturday I believe it was they used to put out all the barrels of broken cookies out for the people to take and we used to live high on those cookies. And right behind us was Lackawanna Railroad and the Susquehanna River, were there, Lackawanna Railroad across the bridge over to the other side, and when we didn't have anything to do, if we didn't find cookies, we would go along the railroad track and pick up any coals that fell off the cars, you know, we would pick it up and take it home, so we were always scheming up something.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about where you lived in West Pittston?

MERITAI: Well, in West Pittston, that is where we went to school in West Pittston and my sister gets angry at me because I ask her the name of her teacher and she didn't remember. I say, "Well, I remember." I said, "My teacher was Miss Hawk and your teacher's name was Miss Hunter and," I said, "that's why I couldn't forget it." Hawk and Hunter and, of course we used to kid around about that, too. But, uh...

SIGRIST: Did you live in a house? Did you live in an apartment?

MERITAI: We lived in a house right off the railroad track and it was a small house with three or four rooms. I don't remember how many rooms we had. And then, of course, the coal region was going slow. There were strikes and different things like that, so we moved to New Jersey because there there

was work in the tunnel, in the Brooklyn tunnel from Brooklyn to New York City. They were opening up that tunnel and there was a lot of work there so my father went to work for them.

SIGRIST: This was quite a bit later.

MERITAI: Yeah. Later, after we left Pennsylvania we went there and he worked there for a long while .

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever work anywhere along the line?

MERITAI: No. (he laughs) Never, well, she would wash clothes for people and try to earn a little something extra like that. That mother of mine, was the strongest woman, I think, that ever existed.

SIGRIST: Did she like America ?

MERITAI: Oh yeah, she liked it once she got into it she liked it but she had to get away from all that sad part of going to Italy. She had the idea that we were going to all end up in Italy but it didn't work out that way.

SIGRIST: Was she always hoping for that, though?

MERITAI: Yeah, but no, after so many years she gave it up. She said, " We're here. This is where we are going to stay."

SIGRIST: Did she ever attempt to learn English ?

MERITAI: Oh, yeah. No, she didn't do it, try to learn it. She just learned it in the course of the everyday talking to other people. So for many, many years. She had a little list of broken English but she could speak quite well.

SIGRIST: But your parents still maintained Italian in the home? They didn't even speak English in their home?

MERITAI: No, only when we were there and we would speak in English and she would try to and it was getting to the point where she would try to answer us in English but (he pauses) it took a long time and even when I went into the service she used to write to me in Italian and, of course, I used to write to her in Italian, too.

SIGRIST: Did your parents ever try to have any more children?

MERITAI: No. No, they did have, after Joe passed away, she had another daughter, that's right, and her name was Giocanda, which was my grandmother's name, my father's mother and she had, she was named Giocanda Florence Meritai. And after when she was about twelve years old she became sick. She had diabetes and it developed into tuberculosis and she passed away at sixteen years old.

SIGRIST: What year was that?

MERITAI: Sixteen years old, well, she was born in 1911. 1917, '16 or '17.

SIGRIST: She was how old when she died?

MERITAI: Sixteen years old.

SIGRIST: So she would have been born, so she would of died in the early thirties.

MERITAI: She was, well, let me see now, she was...

SIGRIST: 1911 to 1921 she would of been ten.

MERITAI: She would have been ten.

SIGRIST: So '21, she would of died in '27.

MERITAI: Oh, then she was, 1911 at '21, '25, '26, it was around there.

SIGRIST: I see. This was traumatic for your mother?

MERITAI: Oh yeah, for all of us. We loved her. She was another one like a happy-go-lucky girl like my mother, you know and she was always full of fun and we had started to call her "Babe" but her name, every one said, "We're not going to name her Babe. We're going to name her Happy." She was always happy.

SIGRIST: I'm sorry, what did she die of?

MERITAI: She had diabetes. Then it turned into tuberculosis.

SIGRIST: I see. Were you out of the house by this time? Were you out on your own ?

MERITAI: By that time, at different times, I was out because I used to work. I used to go to Yonkers for a while with one of my cousins and I worked up there for about a year and a half, two years and that was during World War I.

SIGRIST: What were you doing in Yonkers ?

MERITAI: I, my cousins worked there. They were, they took care of the mash to make, they used to make alcohol. American Sugar Refining Company.

It was a government controlled corporation and my two cousins worked, they were retired, they didn't retire. They finished up with World War I and they went to work for American Sugar so they got me a job up there and I was one the tub washers. But the tub washers, the tubs were about two stories high and big, monstrous things and we had big, high pressure hoses to wash them down.

SIGRIST: What was the very first job you ever had?

MERITAI: Oh, the first one? The first one, at the beginning of World War One I had gotten my working papers. I was fourteen years old and I had gotten my working papers in order to leave school and go to work and the first job I got was in a little machine shop and they used to make tools and different kinds of things and what they specialized in was bracelets, the prisoner's bracelets. And all I had to do is, they had these small barrels and they were on a hinge on a roller and a belt would come down and roll the barrel like that (he gestures) but inside the barrel I had put so many pounds of emery. Emery is a powder and you put all these bracelets in there. They were rough steel-looking bracelets and you turn them around for about eight hours and they became like polished chrome. So that was my first job.

SIGRIST: How did you get that job?

MERITAI: Oh, I don't know. I was looking for work and I go to the place to, place right there near town where we lived and they said, " All right, do you have your working papers?" I said," Yeah, sure." So I showed them my working papers and they took me on and I worked there for a little while.

SIGRIST: Did you remember how much you got paid ?

MERITAI: Oh no. I think I got about uh, less then one dollar a day. I used to make about five or six dollars a week. Those days were nothing like today.

SIGRIST: That certainly is one of the most interesting jobs I've ever heard. (he laughs) That's interesting.

MERITAI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me...

MERITAI: The emery and the bracelets, I'll never forget them.

SIGRIST: Why don't you tell me a little bit about your parents in the later years.

MERITAI: Well, my mother used to take up laundry because we never had enough money. My father worked. He worked for a big corporation, a coal company and they used to take care of the yard and keep all the coal piled up right and he worked there for a good while and then his back started getting bad. He was kind of humped over a little bit so he worked whenever he could but didn't do too much.

SIGRIST: I see. And your mother pretty much just kept house .

MERITAI: Yeah, she kept house and we managed to bring in enough money to supply and I always, when I got my pay, I would give it toher but she was good to me. She made sure I had a quarter every weekend. (he laughs) She used to give me a quarter. I didn't care because...

SIGRIST: Your sister Martha?

MERITAI: She was very good.

SIGRIST: Was she brought up speaking Italian?

MERITAI: No. She graduated from school and then she went to a school, shorthand typing, that type of thing, and when she was of age she did get a job with the Guaranteed Trust Company in New York City right down on Wall Street, so she had a good job. And her job was exceptionally good because she could read and write Italian and she would type Italian letters by going to school and learning that. So she worked in the Guaranteed Trust Company for a long time and then from there the Guaranteed Trust Company was going to lay her off and they said, "We have another job for you. We're going to transfer you to the American-Italian Bank," at the time the Bank Of Italy because she could, she was very good at speaking Italian and writing. The Bank of Italy took her and they loved her because she used to write in Italian and she could speak it fluently and she worked with them for quite a while and then...

SIGRIST: So having a foothold in these two completely different cultures really worked to her advantage, didn't it.

MERITAI: Oh yes, oh yes. We were on the other side but she fell into the side of the intellectual side and she was quite a girl.

SIGRIST: In our few remaining minutes why don't you kind of briefly recap your own military experience for us when you were an adult.

MERITAI: Oh yeah, well, in 1940 I was working for the Mack Company.

SIGRIST: You would of been thirty five at that time.

MERITAI: Then from there I had to get a job because of the war going on. The Mack

Company wasn't important. I had to get a job on government manufacturing for the war effort. Well, I managed to get a job because I knew engines quite well. I managed to get a job with Eastern Aircraft out in Linden, New Jersey and they were building the F4F, the "Wildcat" airplane.

SIGRIST: F4F.

MERITAI: F4F, the Wildcat. So I got in there. I was working on the engine part of it, putting the engine on the airplane and all that type of thing. Then I get to actually working on the ignition system and all that electrical part. I became quite learned on that type of thing and I worked on there for a little over a year. Then I was in a draft call so I went into the Navy. I was going to go into the Marines and they said, "Well, we would like to have you but you're a little too old for the Marines. We would rather see you get some other Army or Navy." So I went to the Navy and they accepted me and I got in Navy 19 March, February of '43.

SIGRIST: Were your parents living at that time?

MERITAI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How did they feel about you going into the military?

MERITAI: Well, they liked the idea because I wasn't making a lot of money outside so I went in there and we didn't have to worry too much about anything. So I went in the Navy and went to Newport, Rhode Island for three months and then they sent me to, they asked me, they interviewed me. They asked me, "What did you do in civilian life?" I said, "I worked for the Mack Company and I was a mechanic. Then I worked for Linden Aircraft on the airplanes." So they asked me different questions. They had the

book there and they asked questions and they have the answers to those questions right there and they said "What kind of engine did it have?" I said, "An 1830 Pratt Whitney engine," and different questions about that. And then they said, "What was the first firing order?" because I told them I was working on the electrical system the magnitudes and all that. "What was the firing order of the engine, 1830 engine?" and I said, "1,10,5,14,9,4,13,8,3,12,7,2,11,6." The guy looked at me and he says, "I don't believe it! I don't believe it!" because that's the actual firing order. That's what I was working on when I was at the engine. So he says, "We're going to send you to school." So they sent me to Memphis and I went to aviation school in Memphis and I stayed there a couple of years and they sent me to, I made a few trips, different places they'd send me away to break up the continuity of that being at the school and then they, then the war came and I got out and I stayed out for about a year and a half and then I went back in.

SIGRIST: Back into the Navy?

MERITAI: And I stayed until I retired.

SIGRIST: I see. Wow. I guess my final question for you is are you happy your parents made this decision to come to America initially?

MERITAI: Oh, yes. When I think about it now they were hectic days but there's no place like being over here no matter what they tell me over there. I see what's going on all over the world over there. But the part I didn't mention before was that my mother, thinking we were going back to Lucca, she registered me when I was a child there, she registered me in the town hall of Lucca. Well, when I got to be eighteen years old I got my papers from Lucca to go serve in Mussolini's army.

SIGRIST: Sure.

MERITAI: I still have it home and that was quite, and even then I was saying, "Boy, how lucky we were to be over here."

SIGRIST: Well, it's interesting. Your mother, as she comes across to me, always still had maintained that tie to Italy. The fact she wanted to have her children born in Italy. She couldn't abandon herself to America.

MERITAI: Oh, yeah. She wouldn't, she couldn't avoid it. Yeah, it was well, I really, when I think about it I couldn't blame her because she had so much good over there and coming over here she had some very hectic times.

SIGRIST: Yeah, interesting. Well, I want to thank you for coming all the way from Pennsylvania to come here.

MERITAI: Oh, listen, it's been a pleasure for me to come here because maybe fifteen or twenty generations from now (he laughs), fifteen to twenty, it would be interesting to let them know a little something about it.

SIGRIST: Sure, sure. I agree with you.

MERITAI: And I appreciate this very much that you invited me here for it and thank you very much.

SIGRIST: Oh, it's our pleasure. This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service with Anthony Meritai.