

EI-997

FATHER JOSEPH ROMANI

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AGE 16

PASSAGE ON THE CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

PORT: GENOA

RESIDENCES:

TORINO, IN PIEDMONT, ITALY

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PORTLAND, MAINE

LEVINE: Okay, we're going to start now. I'm here with Father Joseph Romani, who came to this country from Torino, Italy, in 1924, in October.

ROMANI: In October.

LEVINE: And he was, at that time, sixteen years of age and traveled on the Christopher Columbus, the ship. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here in Portland, Maine, on the Eastern Promenade, conducting this interview. Okay, Father Romani, would you say again your birth date and where you were born?

ROMANI: I was born December 18, 1907, at 7 o'clock in the morning. And I started...being December, it was cold, and my mother was alone, in bed, ready to deliver. But it was snowing outside and the midwife cannot, they could not come then, on account of the snow. But there was a nun, a sister, Sister Antoinette, who was very friendly with my mother --a Sister of

Charity. And (pause) my mother told me – of course, I am the on...she was the only one to tell –she told me that I was in a hurry to come. So she screamed and called Sister Antoinette to come in, and she delivered me into her hands. And I started sneezing and coughing because it was cold, and my mother had bought fifteen cents worth of charcoal to warm up the water for the time of the washing the baby. And so my birth cost twenty, uh, fifteen cents. And then after that, Sister Antoinette washed me and wrapped me in swaddling clothes, as was the custom at that time. Then she put me under the arm of my mother to take my first sleep outside her womb. And that's how I was born.

LEVINE: And then where were you when you were born? Where were you born?

ROMANI: This was in Torino, Italy. Torino is in the north, north of Italy, in Piedmont, right under the Alps – between the Alps and the hills and the river Po.

LEVINE: Did you stay in Torino up until the time you left for the United...?

ROMANI: Oh, no. I...One of the things that my mother did when she saw that I was coughing and sneezing, she told Sister Antoinette to please call...call the pastor to baptize me right away because she was afraid I would, I would not breathe for a long time. She already had lost two boys that way. So three days after the birth, the pastor came and baptized me right at home.

LEVINE: You were then the first child who lived? The first child your mother had who lived?

ROMANI: That lived, yeah. I lived after the other two had gone. And, unfortunately, my mother had seven children, and two boys died, and three girls died. None of them lasted more than six months.

LEVINE: I guess that was pretty typical in those days.

ROMANI: It was hard, I suppose so.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROMANI: ...especially in those places, the poor people. My father was in the service, and, in fact, he was in Eritrea, which is a part of Ethiopia, Africa. So he wasn't around to help in any way.

LEVINE: Did he send money for your mother and the family?

ROMANI: So the nun, the Sister, took care of everything. She was a Sister of Charity, you see. So she stayed around, helped my mother – she cooked for her something. And then...I can't dwell any more on this part of my birth...

LEVINE: Okay.

ROMANI: ...because that's all it was.

LEVINE: What was your mother's name?

ROMANI: My moth...Adeline.

LEVINE: And you remember her maiden name?

ROMANI: Oh, well, my mother was...that's a very interesting story, too.

LEVINE: Okay.

ROMANI: It's because she herself was the daughter of a nobleman called Pautrier. There are many, many French names in Piedmont, which is just Savoy, Savoi. And she joined the Carmelite Nuns. And her brother also, Mario Pautrier, went to college. Then a disaster happened. One of the workers in my father, in my grandfather's factory was drunk, and the foreman brought him to the office of the owner. Said, "This man here is drunk and he causes trouble." And the owner told him, "Send him home." The man was so upset by the dismissal that he took a knife and went back to the office of the owner, my grandfather, stabbed him in the neck and killed him. His wife was so upset that she died of a heart attack about a week after. So the property remained in the hands of her sister, which would have been the aunt. And...but the two children were the heirs of the property according to law. So the aunt went to take the boy and the girl, the son and the daughter, home, so they could come and inherit the property. So that's why the nun, my mother, had to leave the convent. And when they got back to the home, the aunt made the steward, who was a man from Lombardy, and his sister, who was the housemaid, and the aunt made the steward marry the daughter and made the maid marry the son. So they got married, and that's when they went for...my father and my mother went for the honeymoon. They went as far as Sicily. They had plenty of money.

LEVINE: Well, why did the aunt make them marry each other?

ROMANI: So that they might inherit the property and make good use of it.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMANI: As long as she was a nun, she could not have that property.

LEVINE: I see.

ROMANI: But then when they got to Sicily – Palermo – they ran out of money. And they had to return back. And they found out that the lawyer who had made the deal, he sold the property and went to Paris so as to be out of...he stole it. And there was no money left for the two children. And sure enough, all that could be done was for the steward, who was Giacinto Romani, and he went to work in a shoe store so as to make enough money. And from riches to poverty, they had to rent a place in the city of Torino, in a very poor, poor place. And that's where I was born.

LEVINE: Ah, I see.

ROMANI: The two boys that were born before me died. I was the third.

LEVINE: How do you spell your father's name? Chinchinto, is that...?

ROMANI: Giacinto, how you say it.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMANI: G-I-A-C-I-N-T-O. Giacinto.

LEVINE: Yeah, and how about your fath...your mother's maiden name?

ROMANI: My mother's maiden name was Adeline Pautrier.

LEVINE: P-A-

ROMANI: P-A-U-...

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMANI: ...-T-R-I-E-R. That's all, E-R.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

ROMANI: Pautrier. Nowadays they call it Pautrier.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And do you remember, was it Sister Antoinette, Annette, who...?

ROMANI: Antoinette.

LEVINE: Antoinette. Did you know her as you grew up, when you were a young boy?

ROMANI: Yes, I'll tell you about it.

LEVINE: Okay.

ROMANI: So I was born in a very poor place on the first, street floor. And as I said before, Sister Antoinette took care of me. That's why when somebody says, used to say, "Oh, you son of a gun," I'd say, "No, I'm not son of a gun, I'm son of a nun!" (Dr. Levine laughs.) See, son of a nun. Alright. Well, I grew in poverty of course – and I remember...of course, all...most of this was told me, was told back by mother.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: That's alright.

LEVINE: Right.

ROMANI: But the first experiences I had was with a mouse. The place was so shabby and dark, the only light was one light of a candle. And when I was two or three years old, like that, I just played on the floor like all kids, you know. And once I saw a mouse on the floor going towards the place where we had a sink. And I wanted to go and catch him. My mother saw me. She, “Don’t kill that mouse. That’s a mother!” In fact, the little mouse was...delivered three babies. And she put them there. And my mother said, “See, that’s a mother. See, you don’t try to kill her or anything. Don’t even scare her. And, in fact, she took some bread, made some crumbs, you know, and put the crumbs there, so she can feed the mother, the babies.

LEVINE: Wow.

ROMANI: See, mother is important, even if it’s a mouse mother. And the mouse became so friendly, I can still see her little eyes, you know, looking up. She would come at the table where we were having our meals or anything. Then she would climb up and my mother would say, “Give her to eat, give her something to eat, because she has to feed the babies.” Always, a very kind, very...because a mother is important.

LEVINE: And what about Antoinette, what do you remember about her as you were growing up?

ROMANI: Now, that’s only one episode.

LEVINE: Right, uh-huh.

ROMANI: Then we were so poor that we had to go...and as I grew, my mother would send me to the convent where they had the soup kitchen. And we would get our soup. And I remember one day when I went, Sister Antoinette was in charge. And she saw me at the end of the line. She said, “Joseph come right

up!” And the poor, the poor men grumbled (bah, bah, bah) that I should be favored. Then she told the woman that was dishing out the soup to put a hunk of meat with it, not only broth. She always favored my mother and favored me. Then later on, many things happened, of course, as I grew.

LEVINE: When did you know that you were going to try to be a priest? Did you know that early on, or was that something that you just...

ROMANI: I tell you.

LEVINE: Okay.

ROMANI: When my mother took sick, and she got a pleurisy, so she was sent to a hospital, a sanitarium, and I was left alone in the house. So every now and then I would go, I went practically every day. I would go to visit my mother, only walking.

LEVINE: About how old were you then?

ROMANI: Well, I think I was 8 or 9. And I walked there, then I would say, “Mama, when will you come home?” You know, and she told me, “Son, I never come home. The Lord wants me to go to Heaven to take care of my babies.” She had had three baby girls, and they all lasted about six months.

LEVINE: Do you know what they died of?

ROMANI: They died of...who knows? Lack of food or lack of care, misery. So I start crying because my mother was not coming home. And she taught me again another lesson, “Son, when God calls you, don’t cry.” So I stopped crying. Then on the way home - she was on the fourth floor - and I looked back. My mother was at the window saying goodbye. And again I felt like crying, but I

didn't want God to see me cry, so I threw myself on the floor and put my face in the grass, so that He would not see me. And I cried and cried and cried. Then I never saw my mother again. She passed away. That's where Sister Antoinette again comes in. She took over and she sent me to an orphan home called Casa del Solei, that is, the Sun House. And there, for me it was like paradise because we had food, we had the recreation and everything.

LEVINE: Yes.

ROMANI: Will you stop a minute?

LEVINE: Sure. Okay we're going to pause here. (Pause) Okay, we're going to be resuming here after a cold drink. And we were talking about Sister Antoinette and how she came back into the picture and you went to the orphanage.

ROMANI: She found an orphanage, put me to the orphanage. That for me, it was like heaven, paradise, because it was a beautiful place. And also then, I met a wonderful Superior; her name was Valentina, Valentine. And she also had compassion on me for losing my mother.

LEVINE: Did you ever hear from your father during that period at all?

ROMANI: Very seldom. See, my father, my father...see that was a period of war for the Italians. So he was...in the First, he was at war with Ethiopia -War of Eritrea, they called it – in the First World War. And he was made an attendant to a colonel. So we, I, we seldom saw him.

LEVINE: Did he ever visit you in the orphanage?

ROMANI: Maybe once or twice.

LEVINE: What did you think of your father, as a little boy?

ROMANI: Huh?

LEVINE: How did you think or feel about your father when you were a little boy?

ROMANI: I could hardly now remember him.

LEVINE: Hm, yeah.

ROMANI: Couldn't think of it.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROMANI: That's why I can only remember women. They were kind to me, with my mother, Sister Antoinette, the Sister Valentina. And there in the orphanage, orphan home, I had an interesting experience. Boys and girls were playing in the yard, playground, and there was a certain distance, I was...I saw a boy pulling the hair of a girl. And I didn't like the violence of it. I always was very sensitive. So I went there. I slapped him in the face and gave him a kick. "Get out of...! Leave her alone!" And there was a custom in that orphan home that at four o'clock the Sister – that is, the Superior, Valentina – would give a reward for the conduct of individuals and would give, would give, you know, first...the highest award, and then the...what do you call, the chocolate...?

LEVINE: Oh, candy?

ROMANI: Huh?

LEVINE: A candy? A chocolate candy?

ROMANI: Chocolate, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: A little chocolate, like a Hershey's...

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: ...chocolate, you see?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: You know, and it comes in little...

LEVINE: A little bar of chocolate?

ROMANI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

ROMANI: She would give one, two, or three. And when the time came that day, this girl got three of them, the highest, and I got two.

LEVINE: Now why did she get three?

ROMANI: Because she behaved herself well. She didn't fight or anything like...

LEVINE: I see.

ROMANI: ...and the Superior wanted to make her happy after the experience she went through.

LEVINE: I see.

ROMANI: I suppose so.

LEVINE: Well, you must have felt pretty good after that, huh?

ROMANI: Now, but not the end, the best part is this - that she got three, and she came to me. She says, "Come here." She put one in my mouth, a little...Then one day, we were playing hide-and-go-seek, and I climbed up – of course, you have to have an idea of that place, magnificent trees and flowers and everything – and I climbed up the wall and I walked - I crawled - all the way under a tree to hide myself. And after awhile, I heard some leaves fluffing and I looked out. There she was – Uchia, her name was Uchia – and as she came by and she said, "Do you want to give me a kiss?" Girls were girls, oh yeah. Oh, I said, "Oh no. My guardian angel told me not to kiss the girls." "Oh," she said, "my guardian angel doesn't mind. I'll kiss you then." So she gave me a kiss. Then I jumped off the wall under the tree and I put my arms like that, "You jump, come down with me." And she jumped into my arms. That's one episode that I remember.

LEVINE: Well, did you stay friendly with Uchia?

ROMANI: What's that?

LEVINE: Did you remain friendly with Uchia while you were there?

ROMANI: Now wait a minute. When I left, because the boys were allowed to stay until they were twelve, and I had to leave. And Sister Antoinette sent me to the

Oratory of St. John Bosco, the Salesians, to do my studies. Third, fourth grade and so on. And anyhow, my girl friend, Uchia, never forgot me. Probably she thought that I would stay around until I could get married. The fact is that I went to the Salesians, then Sister Antoinette decided what...they asked her after a year, first I, too, "What do you want to do? What do you feel like doing?" I said, "I don't know. We have to ask Sister Antoinette." And she said, "He will be a priest."

LEVINE: How did you feel when she said that?

ROMANI: She decided everything also because my mother had told to her, "When I get to heaven, I'll take care of my babies and I'll ask the Blessed Mother to make you both priests, you and your brother, so that you'll be good boys, and when the time comes, you come to heaven with us." So we are on the way to heaven.

LEVINE: So you had a little brother in the orphanage too?

ROMANI: I had a brother that survived, and he is Mario.

LEVINE: Mario. Was he in the orphanage with you?

ROMANI: He was in the orphanage with me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And he became a priest as well? Wow.

ROMANI: And, oh, we follow the directives of my mother. So after a year, Sister Antoinette...they asked, see, they asked me if I had intended to become a Salesian or...I said, "I don't know, ask Sister Antoinette." I never made any decision on my own. She said, "Yes, he'll be a Salesian."

LEVINE: Now what was it about the Salesians that was particular to them?

ROMANI: They take care of boys. They take care of boys, yeah. St. John Bosco is a, was a priest who took care of boys. And I happened, while I was in there, that they call it the Oratory.

LEVINE: Why do they call it the Oratory?

ROMANI: Oratory at that time – and also now – it meant a place for prayers, a place of prayer, educate the children, educate boys in a Christian way. And I remember while I was there in the Oratory, I was in charge. Besides playing and everything like that, they give you little jobs to do. In charge, they put me in charge of the room where Don Bosco himself used to be, the founder of the place.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMANI: And I had to sweep and to dust. And I remember that I sat down where he used to sit. I still remember that.

LEVINE: What was his name?

ROMANI: Don Bosco, Saint John Bosco. He was canonized St. John Bosco.

LEVINE: So was he a hero, did you look up to him as a kind of a hero?

ROMANI: Sure, I know, I was fascinated, of course, sitting there where the saint was. And so much so that later on – of course, this is skipping a lot – I even saw a picture of the Pope. This was, this is it there, and he sat in the same chair where I sat and where Don Bosco used to sit. It's just such a privilege.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: Yeah, very interesting. But anyhow, when the time came to decide what I would...then this Sister Antoinette decided he becomes a Salesian, so they sent me to a place called Panango. It's up near the Alps, and I was there for two years.

LEVINE: What age did you go there? How old were you when you were sent there?

ROMANI: Eleven or twelve. Then after I reached...after two years, they asked me, "What do you want to do now?" As usual, I said nothing. I said "Ask Sister Antoinette. She decides." So she said, "He becomes a Salesian." And so they trained me, they trained me, but I was...and among other things, when Uchia, my girl friend, heard that I was going to be a Salesian, she got mad because she was waiting for me to come out and get a job and get married.

LEVINE: How did you feel about becoming a Salesian? How did you feel about...?

ROMANI: I felt...

LEVINE: Fine?

ROMANI: ...I felt right because, as long as Sister Antoinette decided, it was like my mother deciding, yeah.

LEVINE: And did you...what were those two years like for you when you went to the Salesian...

ROMANI: I was just fine, oh yes. I...they prepared us, then at a certain time, at the end of the year, the school year, they asked the boys if they'd like to go to the missions. And when they asked me, there was a...as usual, I said, "Ask

Sister Antoinette.” Said, “Yes, let him go to the missions.” And they called a bunch, they had a bunch, at the time they called it the dismissal, see, when they send you, or the departure. And, of course, they had to examine the boys for good health to be able to travel. And I didn’t pass the exam. I wasn’t fit. I was too skinny. So the doctor decided to send me to bed in the infirmary and they feed me special eggs and wine. At that time, they thought...well, finally, he gave the permit to travel. But when there was a so-called expedition, they left me out with a few others, so we were called The Leftovers. See, I didn’t know, I learned later, it was diabetes. And my brother just found out two years ago that my grandmother had the diabetes, and she died at 92. Pretty good, huh?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: But she passed it on only to the males, not to the females.

LEVINE: So did your brother get it, too?

ROMANI: My brother has it, my father has it - had it - and I had it, and I have it still. But they didn’t know it was diabetes, whatever it was. It was...my brother just found out. I have the letter that she, that they wrote to me telling us this story.

LEVINE: Did your brother stay in Italy?

ROMANI: Yes, but I’ll tell you about him later. The fact is that a certain priest, Salesian, Father Zoline, from the New York Province, Eastern Province, came around looking for vocations. And they told him, “Well, we have only a few leftovers.” He said, “I’ll take the whole bunch.” And Sister Antoinette decided as long as you take him to America, it’s alright. But not India, because India is just too, too hard for him. So that’s why we were made to

pack the few things we had. They gave us everything, because we had nothing. They put us on a train, the trains put us to Genoa, the seaport, Genoa to Palermo in Sicily, from there to Gibraltar, Gibraltar to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Now was this priest with you and the other boys?

ROMANI: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay. I thought of a question. When you went to the Salesians, that was the first time you really had been around men and boys. I take it that was all men and boys. Were there nuns there?

ROMANI: Only...only boys.

LEVINE: And were there any nuns there?

ROMANI: No nuns.

LEVINE: So that was really your first experience...

ROMANI: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: ...being with men and boys...

ROMANI: Men and boys,...

LEVINE: ...rather than women.

ROMANI: ...priests or brothers and boys.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROMANI: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay, so then you...do you remember anything about the voyage?

ROMANI: Well, the voyage, as usual, I was so sick that I had to stay in bed most of the time - seasickness. Then this was October, 1924, and I was already 16. Then I remember the ship, Christopher Colombo, where we came near Ellis Island when we saw the Statue of Liberty. The people said, "Ooh, how beautiful she is!" They thought she was the Blessed Virgin. Everybody, everybody was happy in the whole ship. They were mostly from the south of Italy. Then we got to Ellis Island. We landed and Father Zoline had to send us all to the...what you call the...?

LEVINE: The inspections?

ROMANI: Huh?

LEVINE: The inspections at Ellis Island?

ROMANI: Yeah, where they admit the people.

LEVINE: Right. To the register room, or the Great Hall is where they...

ROMANI: Yeah, where they examined...

LEVINE: Right.

ROMANI: ...if they are fit to enter.

LEVINE: Right.

ROMANI: And Father Zoline knew that I was very weak, and he was afraid that they would send me back, they would not accept me. So he just hid me behind him. And when the man called, he said, “Well, forget about him, he’s alright.” He cheated a little.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: So we all were admitted.

LEVINE: Can you describe what Ellis Island looked like? Can you remember seeing it? Can you remember what it was like when you were there?

ROMANI: Very, very little. It was very plain. We just got into the hall, the house, the building, and, you know, the mind at that time is concerned with what’s coming next, not with seeing the sights.

LEVINE: Do you know what you expected when you were first coming to this country? Did you have any idea of what your life might be like here?

ROMANI: Well, we knew that America is the right place to go, healthy, and so on. And in fact, when we all passed the exam...what is the name about it...? Anyhow, they put us on the train – this was at the end of October – to the Salesian house in New Rochelle, New York. You know where New Rochelle is, right?

LEVINE: Okay, we’re going to pause here while I change the tape, and then we’ll continue.

END OF TAPE ONE

START TAPE TWO

LEVINE: This is the beginning of Tape Two, and we're talking about having just arrived, gone through Ellis Island, and arriving by train in New Rochelle, New York, at the Salesian...

ROMANI: That's it.

LEVINE: Right. Okay.

ROMANI: We arrived at the end of October so that the next day was...what do you call it? November, the first of November?

LEVINE: You mean a holiday?

ROMANI: Huh?

LEVINE: A holiday?

ROMANI: Yeah, the first of November.

LEVINE: What's the first of November? Well, Halloween is the end of October.

ROMANI: Ah, Halloween!

LEVINE: Oh, okay, uh-huh.

ROMANI: At the end of October.

LEVINE: Right.

ROMANI: Well, we arrived there, and the first reception was Halloween. And I remember the first Halloween we had. Where we were, we went to, all the boys in the school, went to dining room, and they served so-called chicken. And then somebody began to make noise. "Woo woo! Woo woo! Woo woo!" We looked up and what looked like chicken was rabbits. They couldn't buy enough chicken, so they bought rabbits. So we ate rabbits. We didn't know the difference. It sounded alright, tasted good. I always remember that. The first Halloween was a surprise.

LEVINE: Did they do anything else for Halloween, to celebrate Halloween?

ROMANI: Yeah, they celebrated - singing, a little dancing, the boys. You have been in New Rochelle, haven't you?

LEVINE: Yes.

ROMANI: Yeah, it's a nice place.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

ROMANI: And the Salesians have a beautiful spot right on the water.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So how long did you stay in the Salesian monastery or...was it a monastery?

ROMANI: It's...no, it's a, it's a high school.

LEVINE: A high school. How long were you in the Salesian high school?

ROMANI: Why, we stayed there maybe three years because there we had a high school, and we had, above all, we learned English. We had to learn English.

LEVINE: How was that for you? How was learning English for you?

ROMANI: Yeah...and one of the boys came to teach English to us. They gave a native boy – usually the boys there were all, were Italians from New York, Italian-American, so they could translate both. And the first English word that I learned was “dumb.” You know why? That’s because he told me to say something and I didn’t pronounce it right. So he asked, “Are you dumb or something?” Then I asked, “What do you mean by dumb?” And he translated in Italian. (laughs). So I...the first thing I learned about English was the word “dumb.”

LEVINE: (laughs) What’s the translation in Italian? What’s the word for it in Italian?

ROMANI: Ignorant, *ignorante*.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: Ignorant. But after a short while, they put us in a classroom, and the teacher was, of course, an Italian. He spoke English. His name was Teresio Domingo. And I remember one episode that he pronounced certain words in a very so-called funny manner, so much so that I started to giggle, ha ha ha, it sounded so funny. And he said, “Stop it! Stop it!” And, at that time, I naturally, I didn’t, couldn’t get much idea what “Stop it!” is. “I tell you, stop giggling, mind you.” And I kept on giggling even more. He came down from the desk, took me on my hand, put me outside, outside the door. And there, there was a priest nearby who saw me outside the door, and he came by. He said, “Come here, come here, come with me.” See? Yeah, well, later on, he was my Master of Novices. And he said, “Don’t worry about it.” And, among other things, he said, “Just say a Hail Mary, let’s say a Hail Mary, so you...everything will be alright.” And we said a Hail Mary. And...

LEVINE: It's not time yet. It's a quarter of.

ROMANI: Of four?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: Oh, good.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROMANI: See, the coincidence is, he...well, I better just...that's when I met Father Domingo. Then I'll tell you the rest.

LEVINE: Okay.

ROMANI: So after awhile, we were admitted in the novitiate to become a Salesian. And a few things happened there, but nothing, nothing special, except that one winter, the boys were out using sleds. And the high school and the novitiate are up the hill a little bit, so you go down...and I was on a sled. I went down; at a certain point I lost control and I went against a tree. That's where I hurt myself very badly, but I got over that quite well. So nothing special happened. Finally we were admitted to the Salesians for the first three years; they call it probation. And then, also there, when they call you, "Do you want to be a Salesian?" "Well I don't know, ask Father...I mean, Sister Antoinette." "Course, she was the other side of the world, but she wrote "He has to be a Salesian." She was really taking care of me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. When you were at the Salesian school, did you go into New Rochelle? Did you go into the town? I mean, in other words, were you always in the...?

ROMANI: Always in New Rochelle, always in the high school.

LEVINE: But did you go into town? Did you go into the shops? Did you go into the...?

ROMANI: No, no, now and then they would take us, they would take us into the city, into New York. And also into the town – New Rochelle is a nice town.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember things that struck you as different in this country – in New Rochelle or in New York City – that you had never seen before?

ROMANI: Yeah, it was a new world. It was America, see? But the fact is that, after three years, they had to divide these Leftovers, divide them, and send some West. They were just opening the school, the province of the West, San Francisco. And they decided to...they selected the very enormous day. “You go to the West; you stay East.” So we were divided like that. And I was chosen to be, to go West. There was, again, the experience of the train. You had to go to the station, then take a train. And the train went from New York to Chicago, then south – the Santa Fe – and then to San Francisco.

LEVINE: Well, you got to see the whole country. You went across the entire...

ROMANI: Yeah, so...looked around, you know, and... Years after, I went on my own to see the country, but this is the first experience. And, since I was very weak anyhow, most of the time I slept. I know the one, one event, kind event, was that we had the berth, the lower and the upper berth. And I looked so weak, there was an old man in the lower one. He said, “Never mind, you stay right down here; I go up.” See how kind people can be? So I had just laid down and...what do you call that, the train...?

LEVINE: The sleeper? In the sleeper?

ROMANI: No, there is a name.

LEVINE: Oh, the Santa Fe?

ROMANI: Yeah. In the...the wagon where the sleeping part is.

LEVINE: Oh, sleeping compartment, I don't know.

ROMANI: No, there is a name.

LEVINE: Oh. Pullman?

ROMANI: Pullman. And there, of course, we looked all around, but I was always a little dizzy. I slept most of the time, I think. Then we got to San Francisco. In San Francisco, the Salesians have St. Peter and Paul in Filbert Street, 666 Filbert Street. And the boys were divided. Some went Filbert Street, St. Peter Paul; others went some other place. And that's where I was given a class, the third grade, to teach English.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMANI: I learned it myself a little first, then I went to teach them.

LEVINE: Well, now, were these immigrant children who had just come over, who you were teaching?

ROMANI: What's that?

LEVINE: The children in the third grade, were they children who had immigrated?

ROMANI: Oh, they were all children of immigrants in San Francisco. The Salesians, they were taking care of the immigrants.

LEVINE: Ah.

ROMANI: Even now. And then, I remember one thing. San Francisco is a very foggy place. Usually the fog stays on until ten o'clock. And I developed pleurisy. I suppose I was already inclined to that, but...so they sent me to a hospital. I forget the name of the hospital. But there, the nun at the place, that was in charge, came to me as she visited everybody. But when she came to me said...and she said, "Don't be afraid." Again she said, "Pray your Blessed Mother, she will take care of you." And after six months, they call the doctor to decide. He says, "He's not fit for anything. We have to send him to some dry place." They had the choice between Tucson, Arizona, and Deming, New Mexico.

LEVINE: So where'd you go?

ROMANI: You heard about it?

LEVINE: No.

ROMANI: But Deming, New Mexico charged 60 dollars a month. Instead, Tucson, Arizona, charged only 45 dollars a month. So they sent me to Tucson, Arizona, the sanitarium, Ocelet's St. Mary Sanitarium. And I was there for six months.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMANI: I think we stop now.

LEVINE: Okay, this is a good place to stop. It's just four o'clock. Okay, we're going to stop here and then we'll continue one day next week. When's convenient for you?

ROMANI: When you come again, you call me.

LEVINE: Yeah.

END OF FIRST SESSION

LEVINE: Okay, this is now the second session of an interview with Father Romani, here in Portland, Maine. And today is the 12th of May, 1998. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. We're going to continue where we left off, and it was that you had been sent by the Salesian Order to San Francisco, and then it was discovered or it was thought that you had pleurisy and you were sent to Arizona. So let's pick up the story there, okay?

ROMANI: In Arizona, the doctor had given me up. He had no hope for anything.

LEVINE: He thought you were going to die of whatever it was?

ROMANI: I thought I would, yes. And, as Divine Providence provided, there was an Italian young man or boy, who himself had been very badly treated. He came from Calabria and he was uneducated altogether. Could hardly speak English, could hardly speak Italian. But, nevertheless, he was a good worker. At that time, some American enterprisers went to gather as many workers as they could and they brought them to America.

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMANI: And they employed them, paying them the minimum wages.

LEVINE: Doing what kind of work, do you know?

ROMANI: What's that?

LEVINE: What kind of work he was employed doing?

ROMANI: Any kind of work, any kind of work. Here in Maine, for instance, you have them all over the state. The Italians were established in that manner. They raise families. Take, for instance, in Ray, in Millinocket, in...all the way out to St. Francis, Calais, everywhere. And they paid them with the minimum wages. So one of them left Maine and went to San Francisco. Then, he chose, in order to get there, he went to work on the Santa Fe, the railroad. And he made about...he used to send money all the time to his father and mother. But he still, when he came down on the railroad, he came down to Los Angeles. And there somebody cheated him. He deposited his money, about \$5,000, in a bank. But since he could not speak English or anything, the man took advantage of him. And when he went looking for his money... said "What? What do you mean? What money? There is no money." So he was very brave. He just took his clothes off and he was wearing just a pair of pants, a jacket, and no shoes, and started walking. And he walked all the way to San Diego. Then from San Diego, he went down to Mexico. And he would just make a living by working in the farms for somebody, and then they gave him food. So then he kept going, and he went...he came to Tucson, Arizona. For him it was the same country. Then he learned that there was an Italian boy that was Brother Joseph Romani. So one day he came to the door and he called me *companerlo*. *Companerlo* means...

LEVINE: Compatriot.

ROMANI: Friend.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: After a few months, he called me, said "Come down here." And he showed me, he had made an imitation of the Shrine of Lourdes in France.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: You have seen it?

LEVINE: I have seen pictures of it, uh-huh.

END OF SIDE A, TAPE TWO

BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE TWO

ROMANI: And, since he worked for nothing, so he asked the Sisters of the...what do you call the...

LEVINE: Was it a monastery? Well, it was a hospital...

ROMANI: Sanitarium (coughs).

LEVINE: Sanitarium, uh-huh.

ROMANI: ...to buy his statue of Our Lady of Lourdes. Then he built it, he built that shrine, and put the statue in it. And one day he called me and said, "Nobody ever come over here." And he said, "Who is that?" I said, "That's the

Blessed Virgin.” “Who is she?” “The Immaculate Conception.” “Alright.” Then he had a pail of cement and the tiles, you know. “Write it down here.” And he put it - “The Immaculate Conception” – I put the tiles there. He had put all the whites, and then I put the blue tiles.

LEVINE: To spell out “Immaculate Conception?”

ROMANI: To spell out “Immaculate Conception.”

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: Then after a few days, he says, “Nobody ever come over. Take all your things. And you don’t have to tell anybody. Come along with me.” Then he called a taxi, and it took us to the railroad station. And I was dumb, kind of. I just followed, followed him. He says, “Get on the train. You’re going to Los Angeles.” “Alright.” So I got on the train, the Pullman train, and again there was an older man on the first berth. “Oh, you look so sickly, you can’t stay in this second.... Stay right here.” And he went to the upper berth. And it took two days and one night to get to Los Angeles. When I got there, I knew there was a Salesian parish, St. Peter’s, in North Broadway. So I went there, the taxi took me there, no charge, nothing. Then the priest there in charge, Father Russo, took care of me there and then, not knowing what else they could do. So one day there came a visitor, Monsignor Ramon de Lemonte. And he was already going, after visiting. He had already his hand on the knob when I appeared, and he asked, “Who’s that skeleton of a man?” I was so thin. And Father Russo told him, you know, said “He’s a poor Salesian student. And he couldn’t make it, so...” “Wait a minute now.” He went to the phone and called “Charlotte, Charlotte, there is an Italian student here. Will you look him up?” She told him, “Yes, send him in.” So they called a taxi. And they took me to North Broadway- to South Broadway, I was in North Broadway – to South Broadway. There again, I was so weak

that they, the...Charlotte Lamont was a doctor, a medical doctor, and on the fourth floor, her office. And the...so I got into an elevator and I could hardly stand up. So the man in the elevator gave me his arm and lead me right there, then he rang the bell. There again, she came to the door and I was wobbling like – “Oh,” she said, “my son! My son!” Then she embraced me. This was in Italian voice – she was Italian. Then she said, “Well, what’s your trouble?” I said, “I don’t know. I am very weak, not strong.” And she told...said...among other things, she said, “You know a doctor cannot guess what is wrong and cannot guess what to do to help. So let’s pray our Blessed Mother.” And she said, “Hail Mary, full of grace.” And I said the other part: “Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of death.” “Alright. Now you’re going on the table.” And they examined me. On me she put, oh, what do you call those...?

LEVINE: Electrodes?

ROMANI: Huh?

LEVINE: Electrodes?

ROMANI: Yeah. Yeah...why, what’s that?

LEVINE: Electrodes?

ROMANI: Electrodes, yeah.

LEVINE: Electrodes, yeah.

ROMANI: And they were just beginning at that time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: She was the onl...the first...

LEVINE: Wow.

ROMANI: ...in Los Angeles to use them. And she felt now and then and sparks came out. "Oh," she says, "you have enough life." All in Italian, of course. Then they sent me back, she sent me back to St. Peter's Church with orders to take a dozen raw eggs a day. And she instructed me, "You're to take a dozen raw eggs a day. And make sure you just make a hole with a pin, make a hole, and suck it, suck the whole thing every two hours. Every two hours of the day, you have to take two eggs." And she knew that I had no money, so she paid for the eggs and everything. So I lived on that way. Then she wrote to the sanitarium, to the Sisters there, that I didn't have to go back, I was doing well in Los Angeles. So that's what...that was closed. After three months, I was sent back to the Salesians in Watsonville, California. In the meantime, while I was in Tucson, I learned Spanish. I was interested in Spanish. And then there came a call from the Salesians in New Rochelle if there was any Salesian in Watsonville who could speak Spanish. Of course, so many other things happened. They said, "Yes, we have one here." To teach English in Santa Tecla, El Salvador. So they told me, "Get ready, you're going to teach English." Is that connected to that? (referring to tape recorder).

LEVINE: That's fine, uh-huh.

ROMANI: And so I ended up in Salvador.

LEVINE: Were you healthy now?

ROMANI: What's that?

LEVINE: Were you healthy again?

ROMANI: No, I was still taking my raw eggs, but they didn't have so many eggs. They gave me only six, two a day - two a meal - to keep me healthy, keep me strong.

LEVINE: So you were taking those raw eggs for years.

ROMANI: Oh, yes. They kept me going, they nourished. And so, I was two years in Santa Tecla, where so many things happened.

LEVINE: Were you a full-fledged priest when you...?

ROMANI: No, not priest. Just a Salesian.

LEVINE: A Salesian. That would be like a Brother?

ROMANI: Like a Brother.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: But when I was there, I studied and they made me subdeacon, which is the grade, the lowest grade, then deacon, and so on. Now finally they sent me back to San Francisco. And there, the Superior, at a certain time, asked if I wanted to be an ordained priest. I said, "I don't know. Let's ask Sister Antoinette." And she wrote, "Yes, he'll be a priest." Alright. As I told you, she is the one that got instructions from my mother that my brother and I would be ordained priests, so that we would be good boys, and when the time came, we'd go to heaven with her. So the fact is that, at a certain time, Father Tricari, the Superior, sent me to Menlo Park, where the **Sulpicians** had a seminary. And that's where I was ordained priest by Bishop Armstrong.

LEVINE: How long were you there?

ROMANI: In Menlo Park? Oh, just about a month.

LEVINE: Oh, so you had already done all the things that were necessary in order...

ROMANI: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: ...for you to be ordained a priest?

ROMANI: I had to, I had to, you know, make other studies and so I was ordained priest. Then after a week or so, I had to go back to Watsonville, California by train. And they, they gave me – I had no money, of course – they gave me a little amount of money. But I started walking. And the priest came by, saw me walking. And he started to say, “Get in the car. You get in. It’s about 3 miles away.” So I got in the car and he took me to the train. I got in the train and...what do you call the...?

LEVINE: Conductor?

ROMANI: Eh?

LEVINE: Conductor? The conductor?

ROMANI: The conductor. That’s right. “Ticket, please!”

LEVINE: Oh, no.

ROMANI: And I got no tickets, got no money. “Oh, it’s alright, Father, it’s alright. Say a prayer for me and my family, that’s enough.” So I had a free ride all the

way to Oakland. Of course, and from Menlo Park to Oakland. There in Oakland, I got off the train and started walking. It's a long way from Oakland to Richmond, California. And there, I started walking, then I began to feel hungry. So I smelled a restaurant. I went in. It was a small restaurant, just about three tables. And I walked in. "Oh, welcome, welcome, Father." Then at the end, I said, "I got no money." "It's alright, Father, say a prayer for us." And they let me go. Then finally I reached Richmond and they...there was supposed to be a band welcoming me back as ordained priest. 'Course, I went there late, so they didn't have it. I walked inside and just had a little dinner and I got my raw eggs. And after that, they called four instrument players. And they had, instead of having a big band, just...well, they made a good reception. That was in California.

LEVINE: How did you feel at that point? How did you feel about...?

ROMANI: I felt happy because so many people were so kind. So many people were so thoughtful, since I had no money or anything. Just all free - food, everything. Then I was there about 3 years and the Provincial Superior sent me to Newton, New Jersey to be Master of Novices. You know they want...that's what, what that means?

LEVINE: Well, I think I know. Maybe you'd better say it for the tape. Master of Novices?

ROMANI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROMANI: And I was there for six years. Then again, my chest started to cause trouble, so they sent me to New Rochelle to rest. And in New Rochelle...from New Rochelle, they sent me to New York to a doctor, Dr. Golding, G-O-L-D. And

he says, "You stop teaching, otherwise pretty soon you will lose your lungs altogether." So they began to figure out where to send me. So many things happened, of course. Finally, I decided to ask Father Deligio Domingo, who was the pastor of St. Peter's Church in Portland, Maine.

LEVINE: How did you know him?

ROMANI: I had met him in New Rochelle. I think I mentioned it when I was in New Rochelle.

LEVINE: Was he also ill, or was he there to learn?

ROMANI: No, he was alright.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: Only thing is that he had been a Salesian, but when he was ordained priest, he wanted to go to his mother, back to Torino, where she came, where he came from. They...he had no money, so he went around in New York to the Italian church, Italian pastors. He collected enough money to pay for his trip by...of course, by...

LEVINE: Boat.

ROMANI: ...ship. And he went there to visit his mother, say Mass for her, and so on. And then when he came back, he was solvent. He was no longer welcome because he had broken the vow of poverty by disobedience.

LEVINE: But, you mean by getting the money to go...?

ROMANI: By asking for money, to have money to visit his mother. Altogether it was a lack of discipline. So anyhow, after a while, when he came back, the Salesians didn't let him have any place. So he came to Portland, Maine and he asked the bishop for a place to stay. And the bishop was very kind, so much so that he gave him....

END TAPE TWO, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE THREE, SIDE A

LEVINE: Okay, this is the beginning of Tape 3, and I'm speaking with Father Joseph Romani, and it's May 12th, 1998. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and we're here in Portland, Maine. If we...the tape ran out on the last thing. So I would like, Father, if you could start talking about Father Domingo coming to Portland, Maine, and how he was received.

ROMANI: Let's see...so when I had to take my sabbatical, they call it, year, I wrote to him, to Father Domingo.

LEVINE: Because you had met him in New Rochelle.

ROMANI: Because I had met him in New Rochelle. And I could have gone other places, but I thought of him as the one that I was familiar with. And he sent me a letter and he said...airmail at that time, and he told the housekeeper, Maria Spera – I remember this, she told me – said “Run!” to hurry up, go to the Post Office to send the airmail. I always remember that. “Run!” she told me. I ran to make sure that the letter – or the airmail - would get there on time. So I took the bus from New Rochelle. And the bus came out to

Congress Street, and, of course, I can't tell all the emotions of seeing all this new country. I didn't even know where Maine was. At any rate...

LEVINE: Did you like it when you first came into Portland?

ROMANI: I was impressed by the trees you see all along the road up, you know?

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Father, could you tell for the tape about when Father Domingo came here what his situation was, and what the bishop did for him here in Portland...

ROMANI: Right.

LEVINE: ...because we missed that on the tape?

ROMANI: Yeah. Yes, just as Father Domingo, when he came, he took care of the Italian community. That's why the bishop was very...was glad, in a way, to have an Italian priest and put him there to be the pastor of St. Peter's, the Italian parish. So when I arrived, I came up Congress Street, the corner of India.

LEVINE: That's where the bus came?

ROMANI: Where the bus came...

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: ...and stopped. Even now, it still does just the same. And I almost started to cry, because I saw all bricks. Then I went down to Federal Street, and there, at that time, the contrast between brick buildings and white...

LEVINE: Stone?

ROMANI: ...plastic buildings in New Rochelle kind of depressed me. And I said, "Look where I landed." But then when I walked, I rang the bell of the rectory, and there was this nice, young housekeeper, Maria Spera. She treated me very kindly, the same as Doctor Lamont had done in Los Angeles, like a good boy, as it were. And I was too pale...weak. So she asked me, "When do you have your big meals? At noon or supper?" I said, "Both!" She said, "It's alright, it's alright, because Father Domingo used to have just a small lunch and then a big supper." I said, "Both." So that's where I began to feel better. She was very, very kind. They gave me a room upstairs, and I made friends.

LEVINE: What friends? Who were the friends that you made when you first came?

ROMANI: Everybody. See, with the Italians, they would go out to see a young man.

LEVINE: About how old were you when you came to Portland?

ROMANI: That's...1945.

LEVINE: So...you were born in 1907. So...thirty-three, about thirty-three years old [actually, thirty-eight years old], uh-huh.

ROMANI: Then I was supposed to stay here one year. I went back to the cathedral to see Bishop McCarthy and thank him for having, allow me to stay in his diocese for a whole year – that's the practice. "Oh," he says, "oh no!" He says, "You're not going to go anywhere. Stay right here. I am the bishop." "But I'm a Salesian." "Never mind, we take you. Father Caughlin, come here. You take a note. You write to the Salesians and say that Bishop McCarthy wants Father Romani to stay in St. Peter's Church because the

Italians, community likes him and I want him to stay here with them.” And, among other things, Father Caughlin wrote, then he said that, in any case, that the Salesians. About two weeks after, he called me, “So,” he said, you see, “it’s all settled with the Salesians. Now you belongs to me, you belong to me. Sign here.” And he incorporated me with the diocese of Portland, Maine.

LEVINE: And how did you feel about that?

ROMANI: I felt happy! Because everything was going well. I was eating well, felt strong enough.

LEVINE: I wonder if over the years you never had enough to eat. Is that possible?

ROMANI: Well, it’s not, I mean, enough to eat but having the food that agrees with my diabetes.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh.

ROMANI: And so he incardinated me, they say, incardinate. To incardinate means “to belong to.” And the Salesians sent a few to tell me, “Why do you leave the Salesians? Why do you...?” “Well, the bishop wants me to stay here; I don’t know what to do.” So anyhow, I decided to accept the incardination.

LEVINE: Did it occur to you to contact Sister Antoinette?

ROMANI: By this time, see the Sister Antoinette had passed away, so I started to make decisions on my own.

LEVINE: Now what order was this St. Peter’s Church? It wasn’t Salesian.

ROMANI: St. Peter's Church is a diocesan parish.

LEVINE: But is it a particular order? In other words, were you a priest...

ROMANI: No, no.

LEVINE: ...in a particular order, like Jesuit or...?

ROMANI: No, no, no.

LEVINE: No.

ROMANI: It just, it was the bishop.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: It's a regular diocesan parish. And that's 1945.

LEVINE: Yeah, actually, if you were born in December of 1907...you were about 38, 38 years old when you came here.

ROMANI: Yeah, and I was happy to stay.

LEVINE: Yeah, you found a home here right away, it sounds like.

ROMANI: I...in St. Peter's Church.

LEVINE: Yes.

ROMANI: Shall I go ahead with some more?

LEVINE: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

ROMANI: Well, then I used to go bring communion to parishioners of St. Peter's in many places.

LEVINE: You would travel to where they lived?

ROMANI: Oh, yeah, I would bring it to them, mainly on Veranda Street. But I had a call to an Italian lady, Maria Tripaldi, right here, corner of Turner. And I drove there, then I tried the car to go up Mary Street. I couldn't make it. It was skidding; the 3rd of November, 1967. Couldn't make it. So I turned back, turned down. I came on the promenade. I didn't even know where the promenade was; I didn't do much traveling. But anyhow, when I turned, I saw a sign - For Sale. You can see here where the sign...there is a, the post is there. Now they painted it yellow.

LEVINE: I see it, uh-huh.

ROMANI: And I went down to Veranda Street...hold it a minute.

LEVINE: Okay, we're pausing here. (pause)

LEVINE: Okay, so start where you saw the For Sale sign.

ROMANI: So I saw, I came back, I turned around here, I rang the bell, and Dolores LeBlonde, the owner, "Oh, Father! Come in, come in." I said, "I notice this is for sale." "Yes!" And she said, "I'm selling it because I can't live here alone. My bro...my father...my husband died two months ago. My daughter is in Boston. And I can't live alone in this house." "So, how much do you ask?" "Well, it goes for \$21,050, but I can give you a clergy discount for \$19,000."

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMANI: Of course, I didn't have it, but I said, "I think I take it."

LEVINE: Right there, you said that?

ROMANI: Yeah, I said now. Then I went to the bank, Maine Savings Bank, at that time. And I borrowed the money. I borrowed \$500 down payment. Then after a week, about ten days, I borrowed the rest, and I paid it. I still have the check. I paid the whole \$19,000.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

ROMANI: And, of course, it wasn't anything like this, you know?

LEVINE: Oh, it wasn't?

ROMANI: No, for instance, this was all full of snow and everything – it was all open.

LEVINE: Oh, this is...now it's a closed-in sun porch, but it wasn't at that time.

ROMANI: And I – of course, it's a long story, but gradually I made a little money in the stock market. (Dr. Levine laughs.) Gradually, I put about \$80,000. I saw the porch...the porch was \$250, the glass.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

ROMANI: See, they had to take away everything.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: It was all rotten.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. When did you move in here?

ROMANI: And I used to come here only for my day off on Thursday. Then when – 1983 - I had mandatory retirement, you know. I had to retire, so I moved here. But in between, a young couple asked me if they could rent it. And they rented it, and they paid me so much that it paid for the whole...

LEVINE: Ah, that's wonderful.

ROMANI: ...debt.

LEVINE: That's wonderful. So it was in shape for you to move in in 1983?

ROMANI: Then it was ready for me to move in at no charge.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

ROMANI: Period. Now I stop here.

LEVINE: Okay, okay.

(PAUSE)

LEVINE: Okay, we're resuming here, having asked the question if you think coming as an immigrant to this country made a difference in the kind of person you were or the kind of personality?

ROMANI: A whole difference.

LEVINE: What kind of difference do you think it made?

ROMANI: When I was in a New Jersey church before coming here, I applied for citizenship, American citizenship. I had not tried before because I wasn't sure, as a Salesian, if they would let me stay here or not. That's why I became a citizenship...citizen. I have the card, I forget exactly at the time, but in 1945.

LEVINE: Before you came to Portland.

ROMANI: Before I came to Portland, so I came as a free citizen.

LEVINE: How did you feel when you got your citizenship?

ROMANI: I felt the same, nothing special, only that it felt more secure, because now I am a citizen. And especially when I got old enough, I applied for Social Security...

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMANI: ...and they gave me Social Security.

LEVINE: I see. And how did you feel when you became a citizen of the United States? How did you feel about your Italian heritage versus...?

ROMANI: No difference.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROMANI: No difference because, by nature, I am an Italian; in fact, I am Piedmontese from Turin. And then the environment in which I live are mostly Italians anyhow. And even here, there are many Italians. Then besides, everybody's friendly with a...not an Italian priest, but a Catholic priest, you see? Everybody, anyone, if I need anything, I call for help.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Well, you're very well-liked, besides being a priest...

ROMANI: Yes, everywhere.

LEVINE:you're very well-liked, uh-huh.

ROMANI: Yeah, I went...I was invited to forty-five different parishes in forty-five different cities and towns of Maine all the way to Calais, St. Francis, so on.

LEVINE: You mean to go there and to have that as your parish?

ROMANI: To say mass...

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: ...and preach in Italian...

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMANI: ...to satisfy the Italians that are all over.

LEVINE: So did you do that?

ROMANI: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Did you travel around? Uh-huh.

ROMANI: And I went and, of course, I went all around South Portland and every place.

LEVINE: Now, it's...is it still true today that a parish priest would go to someone's home to say mass the way you did when you first came to Portland?

ROMANI: Not to say mass, to bring communion.

LEVINE: Bring communion.

ROMANI: Bring communion to...

LEVINE: Is that still done today?

ROMANI: Oh yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: In fact, sometimes they call me still now, although I don't go anymore, because I tell them, "I am a retiree. You have to call the pastor."

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So how is your retirement? How are your years that you've been retired?

ROMANI: Well, for me, it's the beginning of a paradise. See, I have my own home. I am free, I come and go the way I want. Look at that lovely spot.

LEVINE: Beautiful, beautiful spot.

ROMANI: Couldn't have any better. In fact, now I have Miss Levine here in my Florida room (she laughs), and I invite her to come for lunch, and I hope she accepts, because it's time for lunch.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay, she will accept. Thank you.

ROMANI: Will you come for lunch?

LEVINE: Oh, I would love to.

ROMANI: Let's go.

LEVINE: Okay, wait a minute.

ROMANI: I'll take you to the place that you will like, Demillos, where the...one of the sons of Demillos rented this house...

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMANI: ...and gave me enough money paying rent for me to...

LEVINE: Fix it up. Wonderful. Oh, that's, that's wonderful.

ROMANI: So now...

LEVINE: Okay.

ROMANI: ...let's go down to Demillos for lunch.

LEVINE: My pleasure, thank you, okay. This is Janet Levine, and I'm signing off. I've been speaking with Father Joseph Romani here in his home on the

eastern promenade in Portland, Maine. And we are...Father Romani came from Torino, Italy, in 1924 when he was 16 years of age, and is 90 at the time of this interview, will be 91 in December.

ROMANI: That's right.

LEVINE: Right. Okay, signing off here.

(PAUSE)

LEVINE: Okay we're resuming here after a wonderful lunch and a little trip around Portland. And just a few questions. We went to see St. Peter's church, which, of course, is very dear to you.

ROMANI: The Italian church.

LEVINE: The Italian church in Portland. And you showed me the part that you had built on, the hall, and tell me what you said you told the children when you would stand up on the little stage and talk.

ROMANI: "God loves you, and waits for you in heaven." That's it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And we went to the cemetery. So your grave, you will be buried with the father who preceded you at St. Peter's, Father Domingo.

ROMANI: Father Domingo.

LEVINE: And then your housekeeper for so many years and her husband and her nephew, right?

ROMANI: Nephew.

LEVINE: ...and you?

ROMANI: And you.

LEVINE: And you. And that's where you'll be.

ROMANI: So that...I usually tell my friends my birth cost fifteen cents. My ordination cost five dollars. And my burial costs five thousand dollars. I already paid for it...

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

ROMANI: ...ahead of time to make sure...let's see, Maria Spera and I paid for it.

END OF SIDE A, TAPE 3

BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE 3

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Now when, I mean, when you think about it, you're obviously living to a ripe old age. But when the time does come, how do you think about your own death at this time?

ROMANI: Nothing. The only thing, I hope and pray that I don't have to suffer long before I die. I don't mind to die anytime. I'm ready to go anytime.

LEVINE: You are? You feel that way?

ROMANI: Oh yes. See, I am five minutes from the store now, ten minutes from the church, fifteen minutes from the cemetery.

LEVINE: Do you think about your mother at all, saying that she would see you, see her babies again in heaven?

ROMANI: Yes. Well, I always think of her. I have a lock of her hair.

LEVINE: Really?

ROMANI: No...no picture. And...

LEVINE: When you think of your mother, what comes to your mind about her?

ROMANI: What's that?

LEVINE: What do you think of when you think of your mother?

ROMANI: Oh, I think of all the beautiful things that she did for me. The way she rewarded me for behaving with a piece of chocolate. The way she told me about the mouse, "That's not a mouse, that's a daughter, that's a mother." That she told me to have grave reverence for mothers. And, if you remember, well...starting with my mother, then Sister Antoinette took her place and she guided me. Then Dr. Charlotte Lamont, she saved me from going back to the sanitarium. And she built me up with a dozen eggs a day. Then when I came to Portland, I had another little mother called Maria Spera. She took care of me for 50 years, so that I have only good mothers to thank God for.

LEVINE: And you mentioned, but the tape wasn't on, when you told about seeing your father again in Torino in 1950. Do you want to say on tape what he told you?

ROMANI: Well, he just, he said, “Son, you are a priest and you know a lot of things. But remember, I’m older than you are and I have more experience. So I know a lot of things about life.” And then he started talking about his experiences of life.

LEVINE: As a soldier? Those experiences or...?

ROMANI: As a soldier, later on as an attendant to the colonel at a time when we were very poor and my father would get a lot of good things from the colonel, a kitchen. So some days I would be by the door looking outside, and there was my father with a bag of things – fruit, that’s when I learned about the good oranges, apples – and we were so happy.

LEVINE: That’s when he was in Torino before, or he came back from the...?

ROMANI: That’s when he was attendant to the colonel after the war,...

LEVINE: I see.

ROMANI: ...First World War.

LEVINE: So after...before you came to the United States. But was your mother alive then?

ROMANI: Oh no.

LEVINE: No, she had died.

ROMANI: She died in 1921. And that’s where Sister Antoinette took her place.

LEVINE: Right. So you were really in the orphanage at that time when your father came back.

ROMANI: She put me in an orphanage.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: And that's where I lived the best years of my life. I told you about them.

LEVINE: Because there was good food and it was warm and...

ROMANI: Good food and recreation...

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ROMANI: ...and nice sleeping places. And the whole thing was a little...it was a villa left by Jewish family. A Jewish family donated that to build an orphanage, to use it as an orphanage.

LEVINE: Were there a lot of children in it?

ROMANI: Oh yes, over ninety or so.

LEVINE: Oh, wow.

ROMANI: Almost a hundred. Boys and girls. And that's why after awhile when I got out of the orphanage, a Jewish lady named Golia made me a steward in the house and doorkeeper. She took me up in a villa, a beautiful villa that she had on the hills. You know that Torino is between the Alps and the hills, along the river Po. She had a beautiful villa there, and her husband also. And then she, afterwards, she put me at the Salesian orphanage...Salesian

home. And that's where Sister Antoinette took over. Actually, I can say I became a priest because a Jewish family...

LEVINE: ...put you in the Salesian boys' home.

ROMANI: Yeah.

LEVINE: Or is it school? Wasn't it a school and a home?

ROMANI: Yeah. And...they were very, very, very kind. And I remember they paid me so that I could have a little money when I grew up. And when I left that home, my mother went to the bank to get the savings. There were twenty lire. At that time it was like five dollars, but it was, for us, it was great money. Then, as I told you, my mother developed tuberculosis. She lived in a miserable place and I told you this part.

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROMANI: But the main thing is that she had traced already my life. "Don't worry about anything. When I get to heaven, I ask the Blessed Mother to make you both priests so that you'll be good boys, and when the time comes, he'll call you to heaven with us." She never suspected that I would be living for ninety years and be in America and talk with a Ph.D. (Dr. Levine laughs) about this.

LEVINE: When you look back on your priesthood, what are the real highlights of it for you?

ROMANI: The priesthood?

LEVINE: Yeah.

ROMANI: Well, after the ordination, and then there was my Master of Novices in Newton, New Jersey. Then I came to Portland, Maine, and the highlight was being pastor of St. Peter's Church. You see how I had it painted and everything? Then I had the hall built and the rectory. And this is the highlights of it all; I'm resting tranquilly, free, independent...

LEVINE: ...in this beautiful house. Are there any...being a priest, do you think being an immigrant priest had any...made any difference, that you had immigrated here and were a priest here? Do you think that...

ROMANI: Oh, no.

LEVINE: ...made any difference, for better or worse?

ROMANI: When I immigrated here, I was a Salesian, as I told you. Then the Salesians sent me west to San Francisco, one thing and the other. But the vocation of the Salesian is mainly to be a priest. So, in due time, I was ordained priest in Menlo Park. And all I can say, to sum it up, I experienced the kindness of hundreds of people...kindness, friendliness, many there gave me money, some of them gave me free rides on the train, free rides in the car, free rides even now to a Demillos and to the cemetery. This is all free.

LEVINE: Well, I'm sure you give back in return in great measure, so it's...

ROMANI: For what?

LEVINE: I said I'm sure you give back in return. For what people give you, you also...

ROMANI: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: ...reciprocate in some ways.

ROMANI: Oh, I have helped a lot. When I was pastor there, I remember, for instance one case, people were poor, come and ask for money. They were given two or three dollars to go and buy food nearby. Remember the...across this...

LEVINE: Across from the church?

ROMANI: Across from the church, there is those stores, and then this is what happened more than once. As soon as I gave money and I closed the church door, somebody would be ringing, saying, "Father, here." I would get an envelope with twenty dollars in it...

LEVINE: Oh.

ROMANI: ...fifteen, twenty dollars. Every time I gave money, I received it back. And sometimes ten times as much. It was one of the beautiful things. And as the Lord says in the gospel: "Give and you will receive." And that was a fact. Every time I gave, practically after a few minutes sometimes, the bell would ring, someone would bring an envelope, ten, fifteen dollars, twenty dollars.

LEVINE: Well is there anything you'd like to say in closing, anything that has to do with your coming to this country, or the life that you've had in this country, or what you think about coming here, being here, anything?

ROMANI: That's the best thing.

LEVINE: I think you've pretty much covered...

ROMANI: Yeah.

LEVINE: ...everything in a beautiful way.

ROMANI: Sums up everything.

LEVINE: Yes, I think you have.

ROMANI: The finest thing is finding this house.

LEVINE: Yeah, it's lovely, it's perfectly lovely. And it's nice that you can enjoy it and feel good in it. Yeah.

ROMANI: And now you see. What better life could you have?

LEVINE: I don't know. I don't know. Okay, we're going to close here. I want to thank you so much for such a wonderful interview.

ROMANI: It's alright.

LEVINE: It's one of our finest, I can tell you that.

ROMANI: The what?

LEVINE: It's one of our finest, so I thank you. I've been speaking with Father Joseph Romani, who came at age 16 from Torino, Italy, in 1924. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off.

END INTERVIEW