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ITALY, 1920
AGE 13
PASSAGE ON "THE GIUSEPPE VERDI"

GUMB: This is Dana Gumb and I'm speaking with Mrs. Constance Weiss on the 22nd day of January, 1986. We are beginning this interview at 3:00 and we're about to interview Mrs. Weiss about her immigration experience from Italy in the year 1920. Okay, Mrs. Weiss, if we could begin with where and when were you born?

WEISS: I was born in Amata Catanzaro, Italy.

GUMB: Could you spell that for us?

WEISS: It's pretty hard because we learned to write as we pronounced the name. Amata is A-M-A-T-A. Catanzaro is the city. C-A-T-A-N-Z-A-R-O. It's very hard for me. I could write it fluently but I can not spell it. We were not taught to spell.

GUMB: Right, okay. Um, was this a big city?

WEISS: It was a small town. It was very primitive. And we did not have any facilities of any kind. We did not have any water in our homes or electricity. We used wood for our fireplace and cooked on it. And, um, we were a very happy family. We, um, lived together, uncles and aunts, cousins, grandparents. And the town was very small and everyone knew each other. and we all loved each other. It was very peaceful and beautiful. Mountainous. And rivers. And I had a very, very happy childhood.

GUMB: What did your father do for a living?

WEISS: My father was a tailor. And he also had a store where he sold materials for dresses and aprons.

GUMB: Okay. Did you go to school there?

WEISS: I went to school. It was a very small room. We had very poor teaching. And, well, it was primitive, very primitive. I learned how to read and write and a little bit of arithmetic and at the age of thirteen my father, my father who had made a home for us here a year previously, and I came with my mother and the rest of the family. Four children.

GUMB: Um, so you said your father already came?

WEISS: My father and my two oldest brothers, after the First World War where my father served for four years. He decided to take my brothers to America, my oldest two brothers to America, and make a way for the rest of the family. So my father and my two brothers, they lived in New York in one room. They cooked and washed and took care of everything on their own. And they saved enough money to get the rest of the family over. When we came to America we found a home. It was furnished. Rugs on the floor. My father made a beautiful Italian dinner and we were together for the first time in a long time.

GUMB: Why did your father come?

WEISS: My father came to America because there was no way of succeeding in our home town. And he said, after serving four years in the war, he had had enough of Italy and he had enough of struggling. And he thought that his family would be able to succeed in America and not in our home town.

GUMB: Why America? Why not some other place?

WEISS: Because America was the land of the free. The land of opportunity. Which we have found it to be so. And we love it dearly.

GUMB: Um, so how old were you when your father left?

WEISS: I was about twelve. Because a year later we came with my, I came with my mother and my sister and my brother. Let's see, we were four. Two of my sisters and a brother.

GUMB: So you were apart for a year.

WEISS: Yeah, we were apart for a year. And when we got to Ellis Island we were quarantined for nineteen days. And we didn't know what it was all about. And we found that my youngest brother had his head wrapped.

And we didn't know why. Nobody would tell us anything and we didn't understand English. So we were in the dark about everything. But they were very nice to us and only a few years ago I found out that it was my brother who caused the quarantine. He had a spot on his head that had no hair. And they thought he had a disease. Which was not so. So finally they let us go. But in the meantime my father and my two brothers would come with the ferry boat. Well, first on the ship, we were not let out of the ship right away. So my brothers and my father came over and hoisted baskets of fruit, with gum, and bananas, which we had never seen before. So we had a man from our town that came along with my mother and us, and he had been in America before, so he showed us how to eat the bananas and how to use the chewing gum. He would pull it out of his mouth and put it back in his mouth again and we would laugh. And he showed us how to peel the banana and put it in his mouth and eat it. (She laughs.)

GUMB: You had never seen chewing gum before?

WEISS: No, we had never seen chewing gum or bananas. Cause although we came from a southern country, we did not have bananas. So it was quite exciting for us children.

GUMB: Before you left Italy to come to this country, had you heard things about America?

WEISS: Um, well--

GUMB: Did people come back from America and tell stories?

WEISS: Oh yes. There were a lot of laborers that came to America and came back. And ah, well, they made some money and they came back and continued with their lifestyle. And they would go back again. Like my father had to do the same thing. He would leave my mother when they were first married with a child and one on the way. He had to come to America and make some money and go back so he can continue with his business. People there didn't pay, so everything, everything in his book was in red. And some people would give him oil in place of money. And, but he couldn't possibly use oil to pay his bills.

GUMB: Olive oil?

WEISS: Olive oil and food of different kinds. Produce.

GUMB: So, do you remember these people who went back and forth, I'm wondering what sort of expectation did you have about America before you went there?

WEISS: Well, I was too young to really realize. All I knew is that when I left it was heartbreaking to leave my grandmother, my cousin and all our aunts and uncles. And I cried all the way out to Naples where we took the ship, by the name of Giuseppe Verdi.

GUMB: Did you think that you ever were going to return?

WEISS: No. We had no intentions, no intentions, no money to ever think of returning. So we knew I wasn't going to see my grandmother anymore. And I loved her so much that it really broke my heart to leave her behind. So when we got to America, although I should say Ellis Island, I should go back to Ellis Island because it was interesting what went on in Ellis Island.

GUMB: We'll get to that in a minute. We're sort of working our way there.

WEISS: Oh, okay. You better ask me questions so I--

GUMB: It's alright, whatever way, but sort of a progression. Yeah, so you got a letter from your father saying come over? Do you remember?

WEISS: Well, I was too young to pay any attention to the negotiations that were going on. All I know is that my father sent us clothing and money so that we can come to America. We were wearing costumes of our home town. Costumes. So we wanted to wear the American clothing when we got here.

GUMB: Can you describe the home town costumes?

WEISS: Well, it had a long skirt and an apron over and a top with lace and a head piece. And with the hair combed in a different way altogether than--so we looked sort of odd if we came to America dressed that way.

GUMB: These were the day to day clothes in the village?

WEISS: Yeah, it was days, or anyday.

GUMB: What kind of head piece did you have?

WEISS: Oh, it was a white, a white long piece that we made into, oh, it was long and we folded it to go back, back of our head. And it sort

of covered half of our hair. And it was attractive for the town but we were not proud to come to America with that outfit. (She laughs.)

GUMB: Well, why not?

WEISS: Well, we wanted to look like the Americans. (She laughs.)

GUMB: So what did your father send you? What were the clothes like?

WEISS: Dresses. Dresses like they have here in America. And um--

GUMB: You weren't reluctant to put these new dresses on?

WEISS: Oh no. Oh no. We were very proud and then when we got to Naples, which our uncle accompanied us into Naples, then he bought me new shoes and different things. And I'll never forget when I came out of the store with these new shoes I wasn't used to them and I tripped. And I, and I got my shoes already ruined. And I remember him saying, "Oh, how terrible. You spoiled your new shoes already." (She laughs.)

GUMB: How did you get from your village to Naples?

WEISS: By train. First we had to do a lot of walking. Miles of walking. And then we got on a train and it took us about a day and a night to get to Naples. And that's where we stayed over night. We did some shopping and then we took the ship.

GUMB: Right. The Giuseppe Verdi. Do you remember if the family had to go to any kind of office, like an American Consulate or anything like that?

WEISS: No, those things I don't remember. That would have been very difficult for me. We were, at the age of twelve, we were very, what would you say, everything bright and educated. No, way behind everything. So we just followed, followed the leader let's say.

GUMB: So what was the voyage like?

WEISS: Oh, the voyage. I didn't mind it at all. Didn't bother me at all but I remember one night, why, some of the, we were all sleeping in one great big room, I don't know whether you call it a room or whatever it was, it was a very primitive ship. And some of the women would kneel and pray because the water was a little bit choppy or they were a little bit nervous about the ship sinking. But I was

laughing because I thought it was funny. (She laughs.) I wasn't afraid of anything. I didn't know any better.

GUMB: Do you remember what class that was?

WEISS: Third class. I remember that. I remember seeing a whale spewing water from his head. That was the most exciting thing of the whole trip. And I remember eating at long tables, very crude and very primitive. We ate on those tables.

GUMB: What kind of food did they give you?

WEISS: That I don't remember.

GUMB: Do you remember what sort of possessions the family brought along?

WEISS: Not very much. Whatever we had. All the, whatever we had in Italy as far as furniture or clothing or anything, we left everything behind. Not even a special doll. I left it in the drawer of the furniture that we left behind.

GUMB: There weren't any special possessions that the family

wanted to bring?

WEISS: No, we came absolutely with nothing.

GUMB: Do you remember how long the voyage was?

WEISS: About two weeks. Roughly.

GUMB: Did you meet other people on the boat? Do you remember?

WEISS: Not really that, we did want to go to the second class after my mother was feeling sort of sick. But we couldn't do it.

GUMB: What, just to get a clear, who was traveling together? It was your mother and?

WEISS: A friend from the home town was traveling with us. And he had been in America before so he gave us a little understanding about the basket of fruit.

GUMB: Oh, right, when you got in the harbor. What did he have to say about America? Do you remember?

WEISS: Well, I was too young for conversation so I don't know really, but if he was coming back to America I'm sure that he liked it.

GUMB: Right. Okay. All right. When the vessel first started to approach land--

WEISS: Which was in New York, right?

GUMB: Right. Do you remember what your first impressions were?

WEISS: Um, I don't think so. I was too young and, as I said, very, uh, let's say uneducated about anything. So I didn't pay any attention to anything at all like that.

GUMB: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

WEISS: No I don't.

GUMB: Okay. You just heard about it later?

WEISS: I heard about it later, yeah. I always wanted to go to the Statue of Liberty but some how or the other there was no way that we could get there some how.

GUMB: All right. Do you have any recollection of what the vessel, where the vessel actually landed in New York? Do you remember anything about that?

WEISS: Um, it was crowded, a crowded area. Very crowded. That's all I remember.

GUMB: Do you remember how you got to Ellis Island, what the procedures were?

WEISS: Well, from the ship we got to Ellis Island. How we got there I don't remember either. But I remember when we were there that they fed us. And we slept in a great big auditorium like, on a bed like a hammock type of a bed. With a mattress on it. One on top of the other.

GUMB: In a big room?

WEISS: In a great big room.

GUMB: With a high ceiling?

WEISS: Yeah, right. And it seems that they had little bit of

ladders to go to the second portion of the sleeping area.

GUMB: Was it very crowded? Do you remember?

WEISS: It was crowded. I remember one thing, that whenever we went into the dining room, you had long tables, and we would walk into this door and we would, to go and get our seat we would have to travel from one end of the table to the other end. And we had sugar and bread and a plate on the table. And these people that had never seen sugar before or they were so starved for sugar, well, they would take the sugar and put it in their pocket. It belonged to the people that were going to use that seat. So, and they took bread.

GUMB: And then they'd go to another table?

WEISS: Yeah, and then they'd continue on to their seat. Because the benches were so long. So I didn't like that at all. And one day when we were in another room, away from the dining room, this old woman had like a duffle bag with a string on it. And she dropped it and the string came apart like, and she spilled all these sugars on the, on the floor. and at that age I thought, "Oh, that is a terrible thing to do. She's the one that took all the sugars that belonged to the other people." So then after that the people that were responsible for the food, they handed us the sugar and

the bread at the door. So no one would be cheated of their own sugar and bread.

GUMB: Was the sugar in a container?

WEISS: No, the sugar was in little squares. Wrapped up sugars.

GUMB: Oh, sugar cubes, yeah, right.

WEISS: Yeah, I'm sorry to say, sugar cubes.

GUMB: In a little piece of paper.

WEISS: Yeah, right.

GUMB: Right. Easily pocketed.

WEISS: Yeah, they pocketed them. Well, you know, these people never had anything. We were very fortunate in our home town. My uncle was a farmer and we were provided with all the food we wanted.

GUMB: And what kind of bread? Do you remember anything about what kind of bread?

WEISS: You mean at Ellis Island?

GUMB: At Ellis Island.

WEISS: White. White bread. And it was cut in big chunks like that. Not in slices.

GUMB: Had you had white bread before?

WEISS: No, but we had white bread in Italy. My mother made her own. And we had corn bread.

GUMB: Okay. Um, well, you mentioned that your brother had, they put a bandage on his head?

WEISS: Yes. Because they thought he had a disease. He was four years old. They thought he had a disease and they kept that bandage on his head to see what would develop. That's what I found out only about a couple of years ago from my older brother who is eighty-four.

GUMB: How did he find out?

WEISS: Well, he knew, he was older. He was a lot older than, and no doubt he found out through the grapevine or whatever you call it. I mean, this was information I never knew.

GUMB: I wonder why they would put a bandage?

WEISS: In other words, I guess if there was disease of some kind it would develop under the bandage by being incubated. That's my idea. I wouldn't know.

GUMB: That makes sense. So, uh, he was pulled out during the medical examination?

WEISS: Yes. And he was in another room with probably a dispensary or whatever you call it.

GUMB: Do you have any idea what kind of, sort of disease they were suspecting, or the name of it?

WEISS: No. No.

GUMB: What do you remember about the medical examination?

WEISS: I don't remember anything about that really. All I know is that we were in good health, otherwise they wouldn't let us come through.

GUMB: You don't remember what they checked and, you know, what they looked at or anything?

WEISS: No. I remember on the ship that we were to take a bath and in our home town we had no water in our rooms, in our homes. So we had a metal tub and we would bathe in that. We would make our own hot water and cold water combination. But when we went into this room my mother was with me and she turned on the hot water, not knowing that there would be cold water with it. So she said, "Oh my God," she said, "We can't take a bath here, this water is too hot." So we got out of there. We washed our face and we got burned, you know, with the hot water. And we got out of there without taking a bath. (She laughs.) And I remember using the toilet and that thing made so much noise it scared me to death. And I said, "Oh my God, I'm disturbing everybody on ship." (She laughs.)

GUMB: Oh, this was on the ship?

WEISS: Yeah, I'm sorry, I'm going from one thing, I'm continuing on what I remember.

GUMB: You had never seen a flush toilet before?

WEISS: No. No, we did not have any facilities like that in our home town.

GUMB: How did you know how to work it?

WEISS: Well, that's the idea, we just tried it and then it flushed and, no, we pulled the chain, I remember that. We pulled the chain. And that made such a noise and I thought I was disturbing everyone there. I was so conscientious about things like that. And I didn't like it. (She laughs.)

GUMB: So um, how much time did you end up staying on Ellis Island?

WEISS: Twenty, nineteen days. I learned that from my brother.

GUMB: Do you remember what, what a typical day was and how you occupied that time?

WEISS: Oh, I remember that we were taken outside and some of these youngsters had a dancing recital. We were entertained by these youngsters. And that was my dream. Of becoming a dancer like those youngsters. I thought, I thought that was terrific. It was beautiful.

GUMB: What kind of recital was it? What sort of dance?

WEISS: Dancing, you know, by these little ballet dancers. They were probably taking dancing lessons and they, that's what I imagine.

GUMB: These were American kids?

WEISS: Yeah, American children that came to Ellis Island to entertain the foreigners, yeah.

GUMB: Do you know, did you have any idea what group was doing this?

WEISS: No, no, we were not, since we didn't speak English, we

didn't even know how to say the word "no" or "yes" so it was very difficult for us to know what was going on.

GUMB: I wonder how it was communicated to your mother that there was problem with your brother?

WEISS: Well, evidently my father and my brothers must have got information somehow.

GUMB: Were you, did you see your father and brothers while you were on Ellis Island?

WEISS: No, we saw them on ship, well, on the ferry boat when they came to see us.

GUMB: When you were staying--

WEISS: Oh, when we were on the boat, yeah, on the ship rather.

GUMB: Yeah, on the ship. Right , okay, when they passed the food up, the bananas and the chewing gum.

WEISS: Yeah, but outside of that we didn't see them. My mother

was feeling very bad and my mother was feeling very sick just waiting and waiting and not knowing what was going on.

GUMB: Not physically sick?

WEISS: Mentally. And physically because we're not, we were not used to the food and whatever they gave us was strange to us.

GUMB: How was the food different?

WEISS: I couldn't say. We were brought up on vegetables and beans and all these legumes of all kinds. And um, very little meat. And very little milk. Our land was very mountainous and rocky. So we couldn't have any dairy foods. So we had goat milk once in a while and many times my mother would give us just coffee and bread and our diet was good but poor. We had the natural vegetables from my uncle's farm and well, he would slaughter a pig for us once a year. My mother and father would prepare all the bacon and sausages and all these things that we'd smoke up in the kitchen and we would have that for the winter.

GUMB: How was the food on Ellis Island different from that?

WEISS: Well, I don't remember what the, actually, outside of the bread and sugars and things like that I don't remember what we had.

GUMB: Okay.

WEISS: I wish I could remember a little more.

GUMB: You just remember it being upsetting or being different.

WEISS: Different. That's about all.

GUMB: And not being used to it.

WEISS: Oh, and they had jelly there, which we didn't use. And they had butter there, which we didn't use. We used to use oil in Italy for our bread. And we didn't have any jellies.

GUMB: What kind of jelly, do you remember?

WEISS: Grape jelly. Different kind of jellies.

GUMB: You were talking about the dancers, you know, the little dance recital that took place. Do you remember where that was?

WEISS: Outside in one of the open terraces. That's what , I can still see it.

GUMB: By the ferry slip, where the ferry came in?

WEISS: Um, I don't know. It was just outside in the open. And it was just like a large terrace where these little girls would dance.

GUMB: That was one day, how about, do you remember anything about--

WEISS: The other day I don't remember. It was sort of a monotonous, doing whatever you wanted to do. Walk here and there and actually those nineteen days were really lost in my mind because there was nothing exciting.

GUMB: Nothing to do.

WEISS: Nothing to do, no.

GUMB: Okay. Um, let's see. Do you remember anything about, do you remember anything about what kind of, the other examinations, the questions that officials asked?

WEISS: No, no. That I think my mother, and evidently they must have had a translator for her, would take care of. And this other man that was with us.

GUMB: You talked about the food that your father and your brothers gave to you when you were sitting in the ship, you know, out in the harbor. How did he get it to you?

WEISS: Oh, hoisted it up by rope. They must have thrown a rope down, this is my imagination, that's the only way you can do it. They must have thrown a rope down. They tied the rope onto the basket handle and pulled it up.

GUMB: Right, but he was close enough that you could see him?

WEISS: Yes.

GUMB: You could make him out?

WEISS: Yes.

GUMB: Okay, all right, well, back on Ellis Island, do you remember if your mother had to exchange money there?

WEISS: No, no. See, I was much too young to pay any attention to things like that.

GUMB: How did you finally get the word that you could leave? Do you remember?

WEISS: That I don't know. All we know is that you were free to go and naturally my father or brothers, they came to get us.

GUMB: Do you remember where you met them?

WEISS: No, I do not. But I remember getting to Brooklyn and I don't know how we got there. And my father had a wonderful dinner for us. And a nice home. It was a two family house. They had put a, how would you say it, money down, payment. And uh, it was furnished with a bed for every one of us. Every room had a bed for two.

GUMB: This is the end of side one.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

GUMB: This is the beginning of side two. Okay, Mrs. Weiss, what was your overall impression of Ellis Island? What kind of feeling do you have about the place, did it feel like a prison?

WEISS: No. No I did not. I felt free. It didn't bother me because I was too young to understand anything. We were not educated and so to me it was just another day and we were glad when we were home with my father and my two brothers.

GUMB: Did you ever feel like you might be sent back?

WEISS: No, No, I never had that feeling. I was never worried about anything.

GUMB: Do you remember, did you have any impression of how the officials there treated you, you know, what their attitude was? Did you have any feeling about that?

WEISS: I thought we were well treated. But as I say, since we didn't speak English it was very difficult to understand anything and no one would come to us and translate anything so we were just loose like bunch of sheep. (She laughs.)

GUMB: Okay. Do you have any memories of the other people on Ellis Island? The other immigrants. What were they like?

WEISS: Well, they were just like farmers with kerchiefs around their head, long skirts and looking very shabby. And uneducated. And just like all the foreigners looked in those years. And we probably looked the same.

GUMB: But you had new clothes, right?

WEISS: We had the new clothes. Yeah, we were very fortunate that my father saw to that. My father was a wonderful man and he made way for us to come to this country and I really wish that he was living today to hug him and kiss him and say, "Thank you dad, for doing this for us."

GUMB: What time of year was it that you were on Ellis Island?

WEISS: It was in May.

GUMB: So it wasn't cold weather.

WEISS: No, it was nice weather.

GUMB: All right, I think you might have talked about it already, but uh, just to get clear, the kind of sleeping accommodations that you had on Ellis Island.

WEISS: Yes. It was like a hammock type of bed.

GUMB: That's right, and it was in a big hall.

WEISS: Yeah, a great big hall.

GUMB: Had you ever seen a hammock before?

WEISS: Oh yes. No, not before Ellis Island we did not have hammocks in our, we had straw beds. My uncle used to make underneath the fig trees and that's about the only thing I remember. I remember we had, my uncle had a beautiful farm and he had a farmhouse and he would build these straw beds underneath the trees, with the figs and grapes entwined. And my

cousin and I would lay there and just look at the beautiful fruit and we would eat and eat of it and just enjoyed ourselves very much.

GUMB: On ellis Island were the men and women in different places?

WEISS: It seems so, yes.

GUMB: Do you remember guards on Ellis Island?

WEISS: Uh, not really.

GUMB: Okay, so you don't really have the feeling of being watched or anything.

WEISS: No,no, no. I felt very free. I think we saw the first black man in our life on Ellis Island. I had never seen a black man in our home town.

GUMB: Who do you think he was? Did you have any idea?

WEISS: Didn't phase me. (She laughs.) See, I was like an innocent child. I didn't know anything so it just didn't phase me. I knew he was a different color but it didn't seem to make any difference.

GUMB: Do you know, was it another immigrant, this black person?

WEISS: No, the attendants. Attendants.

GUMB: So um, you don't recall where you finally met your father?

WEISS: No I don't.

GUMB: Okay. So you finally arrived in Brooklyn, at the home in Brooklyn, and uh, what were your first impressions of this new place?

WEISS: Oh, we thought it was wonderful. It was a beautiful place.

We thought, "What did we do to deserve such a beautiful place?" It was a five room, six room railroad flat on the second floor of a two family house. And my father had a couch and chairs and tables and beds and some of the convertibles from a couch to a two-sleeping people.

I'm not speaking very good English (she laughs). I could do a lot better if I knew it wasn't being heard (she laughs).

GUMB: So how was this place different from the old country?

WEISS: Oh my God, from day to night. I mean we had a home, we were very lucky, we had a home in Italy. It was, the first floor was my father's shop and then we had to climb up a flight of stairs and we were upstairs in one bog room where there was a bedroom, living room, everything there. Then we had a kitchen up further with another bedroom. The kitchen had to be high because we had to smoke our meats for the winter. So the smoke had to get out of the window, so that's the reason why the kitchen had to be on the top floor. So coming to Brooklyn, why, this looked like a palace to us.

GUMB: Were there any, any problems of adjusting, or anything you had to adjust to?

WEISS: Oh yes. My father had to get the water to come in, adjusting the water flow. We had electricity put in after a few years, because we had gas.

GUMB: You personally, did you have problems adjusting, you know, making the change?

WEISS: Oh, I'm sorry, sorry. No, no I did not. I did not. I loved America from the time I got here.

GUMB: Wasn't it very different coming from a little town in Italy to Brooklyn, New York?

WEISS: No, I just loved it. Loved everything. I loved the children I played with. And I'll never forget the time I was taken to school. Some friends of ours lived in the neighborhood and my father knew them. And they took me to school because I didn't know the way. And since I was a little foreign girl they were ashamed of me. So they didn't pick me up on the way home. And I got lost. Then I was crying and trying to walk around and walk around to find my way home. And I couldn't find it. And I was crying. So this little girl came up to me and she said, "What's the matter?" I still remember the word, "What's the matter?" And I couldn't say anything because I didn't know how to say anything. So then the following day I went back to school. They put me in the second grade. I was thirteen years old. I knew some Italian, which helped me. And in one years time I learned how to speak English pretty well. And from then on I had no problems.

GUMB: How did you get home when you were lost?

WEISS: I walked for two hours and finally I got home.

GUMB: These friends, or I shouldn't call them friends, these girls wouldn't pick you up because you were a foreigner?

WEISS: Well, they were not too proud of the way I looked, probably. And, uh, they just didn't want to be bothered with me or something.

GUMB: How did you learn English? Was it difficult learning English?

WEISS: Not for me. I learned it very quickly. But I said to myself, I said, "If it's the last thing I do I'm going to learn English or I'll go back to Italy." That was my attitude. And I made sure that I did.

GUMB: So you were put into the second grade class.

WEISS: Yeah, and this little girl in front of me, in front of my desk, we had one desk after the other, I was sitting in back of this little girl, this little girl would turn around and teach me how to read. And that's what I remember about school. I went to school about three years and I was so self conscious. I felt so uncomfortable in school because I was the tallest, biggest girl in the class. That gave me a terrible inferiority complex. So when I was sixteen I said to the teacher I wanted to quit. And

I remember her saying, "Why do you want to quit?" I said, "I just want to quit." I wanted to go to work. So, um, she said, "Well, okay, but it would be nice if you continue." They put me in a vocational class. I learned how to make beds, learned a little cooking. And then finally I quit and I, through a friend got a job in New York. Doing some sewing in a tailoring department. Then I wasn't happy there because I was not allowed to talk to the woman next to me while we were working very hard. And I figured I could talk to the woman next to me. But they didn't like the idea. So the man was continuously complaining. So I said, "I'm sorry. I don't want to work here anymore." So the following day I got the newspaper and I found an ad in the paper, "finshers wanted". Another tailoring department which was the Ender Brothers on Fifth Avenue and 48th Street. So I answered the ad and this man, the foreman or whoever he was, he said, "Oh, I have already hired a woman." I said, "Well, maybe you don't like her work. Why don't you take my telephone number and call me if you're not pleased with her work? You might like mine." (She laughs.) I was very, what would say, brazen. And the following day I got a call from this man to come to work. And I worked there for ten years. Not doing sewing. I was managing the whole tailoring department. Gradually from sewing I was taking care of the whole system there. Which made me very proud. I was making thirty-two dollars a week and when men were making fifteen and twenty and in fact my husband was an office manager and was making twenty-five, so I was very proud of myself. And I met my husband in a cafeteria on 48th Street where he worked only a

block away from me. So there was an empty chair next to him in the cafeteria. He saved it for me because he had seen me going in and out. He said, "One of these days I'm gonna get acquainted with that girl." (She laughs.) And that's how I met my husband. And three years later we got married.

GUMB: Going back to starting school and going through school, it was sixteen that you decided to quit. I would think by that time you wouldn't feel so self conscious, but you still felt self conscious?

WEISS: I still did, yes. I think that comes with, I think it's inheritance in the family.

GUMB: Well, did it have something to do with being a newly arrived--

WEISS: No, I don't think so, I think it was inherited. Because my mother was more self conscious, most of my family were.

GUMB: As far as school--

WEISS: Yeah. But I tried, I enrolled in the evening school but after working the whole day from eight o'clock until six, plus the two hours

travel by train, subway, I was so tired by the time I got to the class that I was not able to concentrate. And I could not attend school and get anywhere with learning. But I did have the ambition to learn and I more or less educated myself as much as I could.

GUMB: How did you become a citizen?

WEISS: Through my husband. He had become, he was a citizen already. And through him I became a citizen. I was so happy.

GUMB: Did it feel different becoming a citizen?

WEISS: Much, absolutely. I wanted to be an American citizen.

GUMB: You didn't feel like you were closing a door?

WEISS: No, no. When I left Italy I left it. And America was my country from the very beginning.

GUMB: Did you, how long did it take before you began to feel like an American?

WEISS: Not too long, really. Not too long. In fact I got away

from my own traditions, my own kind of food. I got away from everything. You can see I married a German man. and my family, my brothers and sisters all married different nationalities.

GUMB: Are there any customs that you keep up that came from the old country?

WEISS: No. I love America. And I feel like an American. In fact I forget that I am an Italian.

GUMB: Italian American.

WEISS: Yeah. Yeah.

GUMB: Okay, do you have any idea what life would have been like if you had stayed in Italy?

WEISS: It would have been a struggle. You would have never been able to succeed and progress like we did here in America. All my brothers and sisters were all successful. and I thank God for that because one of my brothers was a carpenter in Italy and he was so good in his work and he was a foreman in the shop with one hundred twenty-five people. My other brother who was an apprentice under my father's guidance, he learned how to sew and

he was a fine tailor like my father. And then he went to California where he had his own business and he made naval uniforms. Then in his retiring years he took up art. He was so good that he had a one man show in five years time and competed with artists that had been in art all their lives. We were very proud of him. Another young brother, also in Texas, he had been in real estate. He has made an excellent living. He's a um, what do you call it, not a designer, what do you call it, I can't remember the name. He did drawings.

GUMB: Draftsman?

WEISS: Draftsman. Yes. He was a draftsman. So was another young brother of mine. Also a draftsman for Sloans, Fifth Avenue. he went to Leonardo Da Vinci Art School and at the age of sixteen he did some beautiful, beautiful work. Sixteen, seventeen years old. He did beautiful work. After working all day long he went to school to study art. I have one charcoal drawing that I would love to have you see it.

GUMB: Okay, all right. This is the end of the interview with Mrs. Constance Weiss.