

KECK-132

ANGELA MARIA PIRRONE WEINKAM

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SICILY (BORN ITALY), 1924

AGE 12

PASSAGE ON "THE GIUSEPPE VERDI"

DALLETT: My name is Nancy Dallett and I'm speaking with Angela Weinkam, on Tuesday, February 4th, 1986. We're beginning this interview at 12:25 and we're about to interview Mrs. Weinkam about her immigration experience from Italy in 1924. This is side one of Interview Number 132. Let's start back at the beginning of your story and could you tell me where and when you were born.

WEINKAM: I was born September 12, 1913, and as far as I can remember, I was either born in Milano and then went to Messina as a little baby, it's one of those. I don't quite remember and my sister might remember but I don't so uh, but I was born in Italy and we did live in

Messina and my father had a haberdashery store or sort of a general store and when I was twelve years old my father came back to Italy. Well he came to America first with my eldest sister, Nellie, and they came here to America and they both worked and made enough money so that my father could come back to Italy and collect the rest of his family. My sister stayed here in America with relatives and so that was 1924, I think it was May and we came, my father came to Italy and got us all dressed up. He bought beautiful dresses for all of us including my mother and we boarded the Giuseppe Verdi from Palermo and came to America and I could remember the voyage, it was very pleasant but I remember getting seasick. And so I don't think I enjoyed the trip very much, but in those, you know, when you're twelve years old it really doesn't matter that much. And when we came, when we arrived in America, my mother took sick on the ship, she had blood poisoning from the vaccination, therefore they could not let my mother and us, who were on the passport with her, see my father had his own passport where he was allowed to disembark, but my mother and all of us children were taken to Ellis Island. My mother was hospitalized there and they, she did get good care and very fortunate, she lived. They thought she was going to die. And because of that, we had to stay with her and make sure that she lived so that we can come to America and live with my father. So we were there thirty-one days and I remember very vividly that we went to school, almost every morning, a few hours each day. But we went to breakfast every morning as well, everybody went in the big mess hall and everyday we'd get

either an apple or an orange, everybody got that, children or adults, and then from there they would take us to this classroom and that's where I started to sort of pick up the English language. Then three days a week they would take us, the ladies, or nurses, whatever they were, the people who worked there, uh, and bathe us, give us new underwear, clean underwear and sometimes they'd even give us a dress, although my father would bring the dresses 'cause he was in the dress business in New York. But they would rather he didn't, they would rather we would wear theirs because they would launder them and so forth and which was good. They would take us to the playground and I remember being on the swings and the sea-saws, and they would take us for walks on the island, you know, and at about three-thirty in the afternoon everyday we'd get a glass of milk and two uh, graham crackers. That was everyday. And we just sat in the halls and the women slept in the dormitories, the men, we were separated, the men slept in other parts of the building. And husbands and wives would get together, but not get together really, there was a big wire fence that separated the women from the men, they could talk to one another. That to me looked like a prison, you know, because my mother, well my mother didn't have a husband there but there were other people who had, you know, husband and wife and they couldn't never get together even to eat, we still had to go separated, the women went then the men went. And, gee, what else can I say.

DALLETT: How about your mother? Did you get to see her?

WEINKAM: My mother, well we got to see my mother in the hospital, yes, they would take us, you know. My sister I think would go in every day to see my mother, but they didn't want the younger children, you see my sister was, like I guess, she must have been sixteen, so she was allowed to visit my mother, but we younger ones were not, so I didn't get to see mother maybe once or twice during the whole period. But we would, my sister would tell us, you know, that my mother was doing well and so on and then if my mother did die, then we would all have to go back to Italy, because we had no one here who could take care of us children. And finally the word went around that even if my mother did get better, she wasn't able to really take care of us, what, the State would have to take us on, so the word was that we had to go back to Italy.

DALLETT: How did you get that word? Did your father tell you that?

WEINKAM: No just rumor, no, just, you know, you hear rumors and we met this rabbi there and my sister told me this over the phone, she said this rabbi, he was dressed with the black, you know, how they used to dress year ago, I think some of them still do in New York, and he intervened for us and he said, "Now you can't make this,

these people go back, the father has a business, the mother will get better and they came all the way and spent all this money, you must make them get out and go on their way." And my sister said he was so nice to her, she remember right, very well. So then we were allowed to leave and my father did not have an apartment for us, we lived with relatives until my father was able to find and apartment and we lived in a cold flat apartment on Lexington Avenue, approximately, I would say, 106th Street or there about, in New York city. And uh, I guess we all used to huddle in the kitchen, we had a coal stove, my mother cooked on a coal stove in 1924, which to me that seems far fetched but it was true, that's how we lived. The bedrooms were not heated, we would just wear warm clothing and uh, we lived there, like today I say, "Gee how did we live there without heat?" But we did and we survived, none of us got sick, we didn't even get colds. And then we went to school. I went to P.S. 72. I graduated from P.S. 72 in Manhattan and then I went to vocational school, I learned to be a millinery and although I didn't practice because then I ended up working for my father. And then as the years got, went by, we got more educated and we had, we learned how to

speak English better than we when we first arrived and I guess I was fourteen or fifteen years old and my father had this Professor Guanieri, he was a vocal teacher, he was an opera singer, Fernando Guanieri was an opera singer and he taught my brother and I to sing. And we did, we studied with him for eight years and we sang at Carnegie Hall, at Steinway Hall and we were in small operas, you know, nothing big. My brother and I, my brother would have been a tenor just like Pavarotti is today, really, I'm not bragging but because he did not like the life, his wife was very gracious, she was very willing to go along with it, but he thought, "No this is not the life for me." He had to travel and do, you know, what entertainers have to do and so he, he just sang, what would you say, just for pleasure? And he gave up his career as a singer. And I also, I got married and so therefore when the children came I sort of gave up on singing also and I don't know what else you'd like to know, ask me some questions (she laughs).

DALLETT: Okay, let's go back, let's go back to your childhood, in Italy. Do you remember?

WEINKAM: Oh yes, I was in the third grade, it was very nice, it really was, I mean we uh, let me say that we remember Mussolini when he first came into power and he was very good for Italy. He did a lot of good for Italy. I remember that uh, other children in the town uh, had no shoes to wear and he made sure that those children had shoes, they were not allowed to go to school unless they had shoes. He put in the water line for people to have water in the house where they would have to go, and I remember my mother going to the huge fountain in the center of town where everybody went to get their water with these big jugs, you know, and we cooked on a coal stove, we didn't have, we didn't have electricity either, we, I think that we had these, uh, gas or oil lamps and we lived near the beach about a block from the beach, actually at that time we were living, if you want to put that down, we were living in Santa Teresa, Santa Teresa de Riva. And that's right on the ocean, the Adriatic is it, I don't know, I think it was the Adriatic and uh, I remember a very happy childhood.

DALLETT: Do you remember when your father came to America and took your sister?

WEINKAM: Yes, I remember my father came one time, to visit, he didn't stay, he came to visit.

DALLETT: Did he have brothers and sisters who were here?

WEINKAM: Yes, brothers and sisters over there. Well no, no while we were still in Italy, this is during my childhood days, I remember my father coming to visit us and I think at the time, he sold the house that my mother, that we lived in or whatever, he was preparing to bring his family to America and uh, when he left, well, we didn't know my father very well and my older sister Josephine, she didn't remember him so she thought he was a stranger and she wouldn't kiss him or, you know, she would shun away from him until my mother told us, "That is your father and he's going to come back and he's going to take us to America," and so forth, you know. But uh, I went to school there and I was in the third grade and in the third grade in Italy, it's like being in the sixth grade here because I could write a beautiful letter which today, children in the sixth grade cannot write a decent letter and in those days I was doing very, very well in school and when I came here it was really, I was sad about it but, you know, we didn't know what to do about it, they put me in the third grade, twelve years old, that's really, you know, really bad, so that held me back and I didn't graduate from grammar school until I was sixteen because of that. I remember being in the class, in the first class, it was all foreigners and the teacher asked everyone of us, "How long have you been in America?" And the girl before me said, "Two Years." So I listened 'cause I wanted to learn so much and when she asked me, "Angela, how long have you been in America?" I said, "Six years, ." (they laugh) instead of six months, because

I heard her say two years, so I said six years and everybody started to laugh, 'cause I was only there six months. And uh, again, we were just a happy family, you know, maybe today it wouldn't be as happy as we were then, you know, things have changed so much but in those days we were very happy and uh, my father was very strict. My father never had to talk to us, he just looked at us and we knew what we wanted. And as I grew up, my mother and my sister and my brother Peter, they went to work in my father's dress establishment. I was home with my other two younger brothers and we all went to school and when we came home we were to go upstairs in the apartment. We had moved to better, we had steam heat in this other apartment uh, we lived on 106th Street and Fifth Avenue near Montefiori Hospital and we had a lovely apartment there and I was to, my mother would leave something for me to start cooking and I had to clean the house and make the beds. My mother would make her bed but we had to, I had to make my brother's 'cause boys in those days didn't want to do anything, but I said, "Now come, we have to share the work," and so when my mother and father came home uh, dinner was started if there was anything to be started, and the table was set and God forbid I left, if I didn't put the salt and pepper shaker on it. We had to have a fork and a spoon and a knife even if you didn't need the spoon, it had to be at the table and uh, as I said we just toed the line, you know.

DALLETT: What had your father told you about what life was going

to be like for America, in America for you?

WEINKAM: No, I don't remember, but he said, "You're going to like America, its a very nice place to live, you're going to have nice clothes," although we always had nice clothes in Italy, so, to us that wasn't really a great change.

DALLETT: How did you feel then, when you were packed up to leave, do you remember actually leaving home?

WEINKAM: Yes, we do, I do, my grandmother, we left her and we were crying so. Also I remember very vividly, we had a cat that was gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous and the morning we left she walked down the beach and we were looking for her just to say goodbye to the cat and she died. We found her dead on the beach, that was, and we all cried and cried and we got on the train. Oh, you know, how did it, well I think that she died of a broken heart. And uh, I remember us children going down the beach and trying to pick her up and grandmother was saying, "no, no, don't touch her." And today I can't swim because I'll tell you why. My grandmother and my mother they were afraid we would walk down to the beach

and drown or something would happen so they would say, "Don't ever go down to the beach, there's a big huge man, he comes out and gets you." And until this day I'm afraid of the water. So, I don't know what else--

DALLETT: Were lots of other people coming to America or were you used to that idea?

WEINKAM: No, we were the only one family that was leaving at the time from our town. I imagine other people were leaving in other countries, you know, other places, but at that time we were the only family and everybody came to the railroad station and, you know, waved goodbye to us and it was a very sad time.

DALLETT: Did you bring some special things from home? Do you remember packing up anything that you wanted to bring with you?

WEINKAM: No, not really. No, I can't remember that.

DALLETT: Okay, how about more at Ellis Island, what kind of a school, what kind of a setting was it, where you began to pick up--

WEINKAM: Just a classroom, just a, it was just one classroom.

DALLETT: And how many children would have been in your class?

WEINKAM: Oh, maybe, if I remember correctly, uh, twenty. There were quite a few, twenty, thirty, between twenty and thirty.

DALLETT: How many brothers and sisters did you have then that would have been going to class with you?

WEINKAM: My uh, my brother, my brothers went to the other part where the men stayed there and my sister and I went to the school.

DALLETT: So your brother didn't go?

WEINKAM: Mostly I did because Josephine was fourteen, no I think, no she was sixteen so she didn't go to the, she used to come just to be with me, but she'd had her schooling in Italy, she was like in high school in Italy so what they taught us there, what she could pick up was just the A-B-C's, you know, and saying the American numbers, you know, instead of uno, due, tre, quarto, she learned to say one, two, three and so that's about the extent that Josephine came, just to see if she could learn some, some of the English. Actually that's what they were teaching us, really, you know, just

the vowels and A-B-C-'s and how to, you know, the numbers.

DALLETT: Now what language would the teacher be speaking in?

WEINKAM: English. They didn't speak any other language but English.

DALLETT: And the children were from what countries?

WEINKAM: Oh, all over, all over, all different. Polish, Germans, uh, there was uh, a few other children that were also Italian, from other parts of the cities of Italy. Oh, there was one girl who came from Milano, so we sort of, since my mother and father did live there for awhile, but I couldn't remember, I didn't remember anything about where she was telling me she came from because I was too young to really know, so.

DALLETT: Do you remember, do you have any recall of literally how the building was set out, where that classroom was?

WEINKAM: Ah, downstairs on the first floor. See there's, when you went in there, there was like a huge hall and there's the stairway, a wide , a very wide stairway going up to the second floor where the bedroom, where we slept.

DALLETT: So you did sleep up in that dormitory?

WEINKAM: Oh yes, the dormitory around and there was a balcony, there was a balcony and other than staying, once we got up in the morning, you know, we never went back to the dormitory until at night or if we needed something to take. Other than that, everyone would just sit out in the halls, they had benches, or you could go outside and sit. But at milk time, at three-thirty, everybody better be upstairs in the hallway or you wouldn't get the milk and crackers 'cause that's the only place they get served. If you were outside, well you just missed it because they weren't going to come out looking for you, you knew that three-thirty was milk and cookie time and you just better be there. And uh--

DALLETT: So did you see--

WEINKAM: I don't remember at night, there was really no activities whatsoever, just everybody just sat and talked with one another, or read a book or the newspaper or things like, I mean there was no movies or anything like that.

DALLETT: You don't remember any entertainment, people coming into the--

WEINKAM: No, no.

DALLETT: Do you remember would you have been expose to uh, new groups of people coming in, on a daily basis?

WEINKAM: Well yes, when they first came in, yeah, different people would come in and we'd just greet them you know, I mean, and you try to make friends, but, you know, its very difficult because everyone is speaking a different language, you see, uh, so if I met some Italian speaking then we would kind of get friendly because of the language, but then the language barrier stopped us from getting friendly with other people, you didn't know what to say in their language, so it made it very difficult to make friends.

DALLETT: Do you remember any other new foods you were introduced to? I guess graham crackers were a new thing, anything else new?

WEINKAM: Well, yes there were. Well the thing we didn't like in the mess hall was everything was served on one plate like today we, it's called a blue plate, well we weren't used to that, if we had a vegetable it

was on one plate and if we had spaghetti that was on another plate, then the meat came and that was another plate. We didn't eat the meat and the spaghetti, even though it had the tomato sauce or whatever, so what we did, this, my brother, he was a genius, he said, we didn't like to eat, so lets say that they would bring something else to eat, he'd say, "Turn the plate around and just wipe the bottom," and we would eat what whatever was coming next on the bottom, on the other side of the plate 'cause we couldn't eat on the same plate that they served whatever, spaghetti or meat or whatever it was, and so I remember that. We all turned the plate over and wiped it with, with the napkin and I remember they had uh, cloth napkins, I don't remember having paper napkins here, they had cloth napkins, nothing fancy, you know, it could have been a white piece of cloth of some kind, you know, but we did. And uh, the food wasn't bad, we, we didn't like it because, of course, we liked my mother's cooking so uh, we didn't like the oatmeal, we thought that was mush (they laugh). But we had, someday we'd have the scram-, most every morning they'd have scrambled eggs and sometime they'd have bacon with the scrambled eggs and other days we'd have some kind of cooked cereal, like grits and thing s like that.

DALLETT: How about your mother, you say she got blood poisoning from the vaccination?

WEINKAM: Uh-huh, from the vaccination, yes.

DALLETT: Was that, did she get the vaccination before?

WEINKAM: She was in Italy, that vaccination was done in Italy before you boarded you know, and uh, like now you have to get your vaccination a few days before departing, in those days you just got on line, you got your vaccination and they put you on the boat, you know, there was no such thing as you get your vaccination before. So, everybody was on line that was getting on the Giuseppe Verdi and we were all vaccinated and my mother was unfortunate, she, I guess the needle wasn't sterilized or whatever happens, I don't recall, but that's how she got the blood poisoning after the vaccination.

DALLETT: Do you remember anything about the medical examination that you had to go through? Did they check--

WEINKAM: Well, they would just, on Ellis Island they checked every one of us, you know, just routine. They checked the heart and the lungs and these women would like undress us and then, you know, tell us, "Now get dressed again," and so on, but that's about all. And we were all very healthy.

DALLETT: How about the day, do you remember the day that you left Ellis Island?

WEINKAM: Yes, yeah, we were--

DALLETT: How did you get the news?

WEINKAM: We were all excited, well my father would come and visit us, he'd come every weekend. My father would come there, we got to see my father every weekend but he didn't stay there, he was just a visitor.

DALLETT: Could your sister also come to visit, your sister Nellie?

WEINKAM: Ah, well, my father didn't want her to, see, you know, no she never did, just my father came. And uh, the day, we knew my father was coming and he'd tell us, "Be ready," and he brought me a velvet uh, a mauve velvet dress with embroidery and I thought, "Oh that is beautiful." And that's the dress I wore when I, you know, came out of Ellis Island and naturally we were all excited and my mother was able to walk out of Ellis Island, you know, and my father came with my uncle who

had a car and we all went in his car and we stayed at my uncle and aunt's house. I don't exactly remember, uh, week, two, or something to that effect and then my father found the apartment for us to move in.

DALLETT: Do you remember what it was like when you first were staying with your uncle?

WEINKAM: Well my uncle and aunt had three children of their own and here of course, six more, no five more 'cause my one sister was staying with my other aunt. And so they just made room, we managed until my father got an apartment and we used to have good times.

DALLETT: Do you remember what it was like to get used to? Was it very different from where you'd come from to get used to the city?

WEINKAM: No, no, no it wasn't because we didn't have heat in Italy either, you know, so we got into this cold flat apartment, so to us it wasn't a shock 'cause we were used to that, you know.

DALLETT: Okay, this is the end of side one, Interview Number 132 with Angela Weinkam.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DALLETT: This is the beginning of side two of Interview Number 132 with Angela Weinkam. What was your name when you came through Ellis Island?

WEINKAM: Uh, Angela Maria Pirrone.

DALLETT: Pirrone. And was there any change to that name at Ellis Island or at any time?

WEINKAM: No, no, not until I got married.

DALLETT: And when did you become a citizen?

WEINKAM: 1930, uh, about '38, 1938.

DALLETT: How did that come about, was that--

WEINKAM: Oh, well it just happened that everybody was studying to

become citizens, you know, and uh, I remember going somewhere, I don't remember, where they gave you a book so you could learn what the questions and answers were to get your citizenship papers. and we went to New York. In New York City, somewhere, I don't remember, but down, was downtown, near City Hall or whatever it was, you know, where everyone went to get their citizenship papers, and incidentally I still have my citizenship papers with my picture.

DALLETT: Oh good. (They laugh.) Was that something you were looking forward to or was it just a matter of--

WEINKAM: Oh yes, oh no, no, no, we did, oh yes, I was looking forward to that, yes, because I wanted to vote, you know, and, you know, you get educated and you want to do more to improve your lifestyle. So it was a happy occasion when I got my citizenship papers. Life was very good, I've had very pleasant, very happy life, ups and downs like everybody else has, you know (she laughs).

DALLETT: Did you ever think about what, how your life would have been different had you, had you stayed and not--

WEINKAM: No, I think it was better that I came to America, yes. I've been back and things are much, much better in Italy now. Oh yes,

everybody's, almost anybody there we spoke to could speak English. Not fluently but the important things and conditions are much, much better. Oh goodness, it's like being in America Really. Yeah, living conditions are excellent.

DALLETT: Did you ever see your grandmother again then?

WEINKAM: No, she passed away. But I did get to see my aunt who was one hundred and one years old and they had a beautiful cake for her, it was absolutely, I had never seen a cake like that here in America. It was so decorated, so beautifully, uh, and she was dressed so pretty with pretty dress and lace collar, you know, and to be one hundred and one when she cut her own cake and she lived with her daughter. Her daughter said that she, she'd make, clean her own room and help with the cooking at one hundred and one. So I have expectations of living a long life (they laugh). Well, all the Pirrones lived a very long life. My father was eighty-four and all my, his brothers and sisters were either, in the eighties, eight-five, eight-nine and uh, now they're all gone. But I still have aunts there in Italy and some cousins.

DALLETT: How about when you were working with your father, he had
a--

WEINKAM: A dress factory.

DALLETT: A dress factory. And that was in New York?

WEINKAM: Yes.

DALLETT: And what did, you said you studied to be a millinery.

WEINKAM: Well I, yes, but then I took up designing and I did some designing for my father, dress designing and that was my life's work really.

DALLETT: Was there a large Italian community that you were involved with or--

WEINKAM: Yes, yes, my father moved his factory from New York to the Bronx in the very Italian neighborhood, to be specific, it's Belmont Avenue in the Bronx and he moved his factory there, yeah his factory, and you just keep going, you know, that's your way of life. Then I was singing and so I didn't have to work as much after I got married and then the children came, you know.

DALLETT: Did you continue to bake and cook in the same style, Italian style?

WEINKAM: Yes, yeah, its very much like I do today, I mean its a little different today, but we cook my mother's, we would go to my mother's house every Sunday for year and years, we would go to my mother's house for dinner. After mass we'd all go my mother's house and my mother had a large table that would sit like fifteen, twenty people and my sisters, the boys went to the wife's family after they got married and the girls, us three sisters always came to my mother's house, every Sunday, and we had dinner there and mother would cook up this big dinner and she was really great. My father was a very picky eater so she had to make sure he'd like what she cooked, you know. And uh, we'd have like a four course dinner, you know, it would be either soup or spaghetti and a salad and then we'd have the meat and vegetables, you know, and dessert everyday, you know, that's why we got so heavy.

DALLETT: And have you continued to sing, do you still sing?

WEINKAM: Ah, I did, not now anymore. But let me go back, 1960 no in 1963, I still continued, I took singing lessons after the children were grown up, I went back and I started to take singing lessons again and I had a job working in a nightclub and I sang every Saturday night, right Henry? (Her husband agrees off-mike.) And every Saturday night-

DALLETT: Was that here in Florida?

WEINKAM: No in, in Huntington, Long Island. I sang there for fourteen months in Davey Jones Locker, every Saturday night, I'd get all glamorous, you know, I was like a size ten and, and I did it really for financial reasons, you know. It was good, it was good paying and so I devoted my Saturday night to that and every Thursday I'd take singing lessons from uh, what was her name, Henry? Same name as your friend Bill. (Her husband responds off-mike) Wagner. Mrs. Wagner. I would drive to New Rochelle from Huntington, Long Island, I'd drive to New Rochelle and take my singing lesson from Mrs. W--again?

DALLETT: Wagner.

WEINKAM: Wagner, and so you have to keep up. Singing is like anything else, you have to keep in training if you're going to be good. So every Thursday I would take my singing lesson and learn some new songs, I sand classical, show tunes, and I was very well like there. And the Davey Jones' Locker was more of a family type restaurant, the same people, more or less, came there and everybody would sit at the piano bar and I would take requests, you know, whatever they wanted me to sing, I would just sing and -

DALLETT: Can I put in a request?

WEINKAM: (She laughs.) Oh, I haven't sung in a long time. You lose it really, you know. People say, "Oh, come on Angela, sing." You can't, you just can't do it, you know, sometimes at a wedding, you know, there's a band and they can play some of the songs I can sing or then maybe I'll do that but I'd rather not because its not the same anymore.

DALLETT: I just have really one other question and that is, do you have any of the original papers, uh, you mentioned you had your citizenship papers.

WEINKAM: I do have my citizenship papers, that I do.

DALLETT: Any other, passport, visa?

WEINKAM: No, no, my sister might have though, if she has I can contact you, maybe we can get them to you 'cause she's going to stay--

DALLETT: Okay, but you did have that one photo?

WEINKAM: Yes, she's going to stay here about a month and then go back to the Bronx, so I can mail them to you, you know.

DALLETT: But you do have the one passport picture?

WEINKAM: Yeah, the one I showed you, that's right.

DALLETT: And photographs of your father before he came to this country, your sister Nellie in Italy.

WEINKAM: Yeah.

DALLETT: okay. I think I've asked you everything I need to unless there's anything you want to add.

WEINKAM: Really nothing more that I can thin of.

DALLETT: Okay. Thank you very much.

WEINKAM: You're very welcome.

DALLETT: That is the end of side two and the end of Interview Number 132 with Angela Weinkam and the time is 1:07.