

KECK-187

JEANNE BISIGNANO

BIRTHDATE: JANUARY 8, 1909

INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 18, 1998

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH. D.

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: EUGENE HYFLER, CAROLYN
LEE**

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: DOUGLAS TARR

THE NETHERLANDS, 1920

AGE: 11

SHIP NAME: *ROTTERDAM*

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RESIDENCES:

- **THE NETHERLANDS: RYSWYK**
- **THE US: EDGEWATER AND RIVER EDGE, NEW JERSEY**

LEVINE: ...July 18th, 1998. And I'm here in River Edge, New Jersey with
Jeanne

BISIGNANO: Bisignano

LEVINE: Bisignano.

BISIGNANO: Bisignano.

LEVINE: It's a, it's a "ya" with the

BISIGNANO: Yeah, Bisignano, the “gn” becomes that. Bisignano.

LEVINE: Bisignano.

BISIGNANO: Like the town of Gimignano in Italy, same thing.

LEVINE: Okay, and, let’s see. Mrs. Bisignano came from Holland in 1920 when she was eleven years of age on the Rotterdam.

BISIGNANO: Right, right.

LEVINE: And at the time of this interview, she is eighty-nine years of age, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service.

BISIGNANO: Right.

LEVINE: Ok, well, we’re going to, we’re going to do the whole interview again as though

BISIGNANO: Sure.

LEVINE: It hadn’t been done.

BISIGNANO: Hadn’t been done.

LEVINE: And I, I really

BISIGNANO: What will you do? Compare them?

LEVINE: Yeah, and

BISIGNANO: And, and integrate.

LEVINE: It'll all go into the collection.

BISIGNANO: Yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: And people can make use of

BISIGNANO: Right.

LEVINE: (?) the aspects (?)

BISIGNANO: Yeah, right, I see.

LEVINE: Okay, if you would say again please, for the tape, your birth date and where you were born in Holland.

BISIGNANO: My birthday is January the 8th, and I was born in 1909 in a little town called Ryswyk, Holland. It's R-Y-S-W-Y-K. The town is located between the city The Hague and the city of (ph) Delft. We lived on the main road, which led from Delft to The Hague. The main road, instead of going across the street, there was a canal. The road stopped. The width of the road stopped, and then you had a canal where the barges used to come in. My father, whom I hardly remember, I was four years old when he died, was in the importing business of coal. So barges of coal used to come in from Germany and they were, the coal was brought from the barges across the road into these large warehouses, and this is what his work was. But he died when I

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was four years old, and it was just before World War I, World War I.

LEVINE: Okay, so we're going to pause here for a second. We're resuming here, after putting the clock under a cushion. (laughs)

BISIGNANO: Right.

LEVINE: Okay. Let's, so, do you remember anything about your father?

BISIGNANO: Little things. When he died, my mother had four children. My mother came to America when she was thirty, thirty years old, and she brought four children. Twelve, eleven, ten and nine. But when my father died, I think we were five, four, three, and one, or something like that, so I don't remember much when you're four years old. I remember him, sitting on his lap. I remember him being very proud of, he had a, he had a rose garden in the back. But he didn't grow normal roses. He grew the tree roses. Have you ever seen them?

LEVINE: No.

BISIGNANO: Straight up stem, and then the roses come out. They're, they're very fancy. He, he didn't work, he was a gentleman. He had people working for him. The reason was that he was well-established when he married my mother. He had been married before and his wife had died, so he married a woman much younger than himself. So there she was with the 4 children when he died, which I think might have been around 1913, I would judge.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BISIGNANO: Yes, I think so. Then

LEVINE: Be careful with that.

BISIGNANO: Yeah.

LEVINE: It, it will, it'll pick it up.

BISIGNANO: Oh, I'll leave it alone. So

LEVINE: What, what was your father's name?

BISIGNANO: Christopher.

LEVINE: Christopher? And his last name?

BISIGNANO: Sablerolle.

LEVINE: And, just for the tape, if you'd spell it.

BISIGNANO: S-A-B-L-E-R-O-L-L-E. Funny with, with, what's the word I'm looking for, with computers today. My brother, who lives in Florida, got a letter from somebody in France, interested in my brother because of the name. And he gave the history of the name back to the time of the Huguenots. And my brother was not interested, so he didn't follow up on it.

LEVINE: Wow.

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BISIGNANO: But somebody, evidently, was tracing it.

LEVINE: Maybe, for the tape, because you mentioned it before we had the tape on, why don't you just say how it was that being Dutch you had a, you had a French name when you were born.

BISIGNANO: Why we had a Dutch, oh.

LEVINE: A French name.

BISIGNANO: Well, the reason we had a French name is because my father's family were Protestants. And they lived in France, and France, during the time of the Huguenots, drove all the, all the Protestants out of France. So they, most of those Protestants migrated up north. They went to Germany, Belgium, England, and his family wound up in Holland. So I don't know how many generations there were in Holland, but, but we were, we were Dutch. My mother was Dutch also. And she was a, she was an orphan brought up by her aunt and uncle, and

LEVINE: What was her name, your mother?

BISIGNANO: Strik. S-T-R-I-K. Cornelius Strik.

LEVINE: Cornelius Strik.

BISIGNANO: Cornelius Strik, yeah.

LEVINE: And were your mother and father both from the same area in, in Holland?

BISIGNANO: I think, I'm not positive of this, but I think that my mother, when my father's wife died, he had two children that were almost as old as my mother. In other words, my mother was twenty, and he gave his son the house where he lived and built a new house, and, for my mother and married my mother. And I think they met because she was his young housekeeper.

LEVINE: Oh.

BISIGNANO: I think she used to take care of the house for him. He was alone. His two children were out, so this is how they met. But then, for four years, she had children, you know? She had her hands full, but she too had, she didn't have to work very hard because we had a maid. I remember her very well. This far, this I remember. Her name was Elsa Van (ph) Coid. And we had a gardener. And my mother had a widowed sister who had a boy a year older than I, and they stayed with us, so the two sisters, my mother had the money, and her sister had nothing. And my father, evidently left my mother fairly well-fixed. When he died, this is what I heard my mother say. He said "Corey, you'll never have to worry financially." Well, he didn't know there was going to be a war. When the war broke out, all his Russian bonds, all his German bonds, weren't worth the paper they were written on. Now my mother finds that she doesn't have the funds that she thought she had, so she had to pull in the reins a little bit. Finally, the war broke out, and then she thought, "Well I just can't, I don't know what I'm going to do, I can't live in the way I was accustomed to living." So she wrote to her sister she had in America here and decided to come to America and make a brand new start, and this is how we happened to come to America.

LEVINE: Wow. Did she think she would work in America?

BISIGNANO: She had to work. She came with some money, evidently. Because, but she went to work, instead of somebody working for her. She had to work and support four kids. She, she had it, she had it tough. So, when we got here

LEVINE: Before we talk

BISIGNANO: Yeah.

LEVINE: About getting here, do you remember anything about those four years during the First World War?

BISIGNANO: I do remember that we had property adjacent to our property, and you know, you know what (?) are? (?) are the soldiers on the horses with the shaky hat, you know, with the, the fuzzy hats? Well, they, they were lodged in an area next to our house. There was a big space between our house and the house that was my father's that he gave to his son, so there was this open area, and I think that the government built some, not garages, but buildings to, to house these horses and the men. Now, people during those days had to put up the (?), except in our house there was not a man, so then you don't have to take in a man, you follow me?

LEVINE: Oh.

BISIGNANO: Because you can't protect yourself then, you see, so they never had to take in any soldiers of any kind. This, I remember, and I

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remember very well playing and the men putting us on the horses and letting us ride the horses. It was very nice. The house had one, two, it had, a, we had a canal in the front of the house, then the street, then a huge traffic canal, but we had a small canal in front of the house. And to get on to the street, we had a drawbridge.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BISIGNANO: It was a bridge maybe the size of the width of this room, and you had to push down on this (?), you had to push down on this rod to make this bridge go up, and you would make the bridge go up if you saw gypsies coming. If you saw gypsies, then you didn't want them to come on your property, you push this thing down, these are child, childhood memories. You push this rod down, and the bridge would go up, and you had a line that rang, that ran across the canal from the street to the house, and that line was your bell. If you wanted to ring our bell, you're on the other side of the canal, and you pull this wire, and the bell would ring.

LEVINE: Wow.

BISIGNANO: It was different.

LEVINE: Very different.

BISIGNANO: Yeah.

LEVINE: What, what did you know or what experience did you have with gypsies?

BISIGNANO: We didn't, except that they wandered through Europe in those days. They were always begging. So you, you tried to avoid them because they were argumentative, and they wanted money. But I remember one time walking to school and passing a group of gypsies that were sitting along the, like, the curb. When we came home from school, we walked by this area where the gypsies had been sitting, and we found money. As kids, that's, that's, you know, that gives you a great big impression, you never forget that. You found all this change that they had dropped there by mistake. But there, there were gypsies, yes. And of course, it, it insured your privacy, too. You know, you kept that bridge up, and nobody could walk in on your property 'cause we had quite a nice piece of property. It was not only a very nice house with a sort of a (?) roof, but adjacent to it there was, I don't know, let's just say a hundred feet of frontage, and that was nothing but, but fortune. My father raised apples and pears. He had, he was, he knew gardening very well. He grew pears on low, little, low trees that were like little bowers and the pick, you could pick them as you walked along the, the (?) like that. He grew strawberries, he grew tomatoes, he grew plums, he grew figs, he grew everything because he didn't work, you know? This was his pleasure.

LEVINE: Now, now, did he inherit this whole

BISIGNANO: Business? That I don't know.

LEVINE: From his father?

BISIGNANO: I don't know. His son, the, the son by the first marriage, inherited the business because my, my brother was only a little kid when

he died, you know. So, the son inherited, and I went back years later and that son was dead, but I met his wife, and, and the children. I met the family, and they had, they had a, a, a plaque on the wall. And I, I was sitting there talking to his wife, and she said, I said "What is that?" She said, "That is our family crest. I got it from France." Big stuff, you know? Very impressed.
(laughs) But, but I

LEVINE: Her family being the Sablerolle.

BISIGNANO: That's right. Yeah, that's what she told me. She said if, if you wanted one, she said you could apply for it. But I'm not out to impress anybody. Who cares? Whether you got a family crest or whether you don't, you know, in those days. But it's the same sort of thing that the man who wrote to my brother said that this name was honored in many ways because of what they did for some, I don't know. I have no idea. I was not that interested as a kid, you know? So anyway, my mother said the best thing to do is for us to go to America and start all over again. So

LEVINE: Now, were there cer-, were there, were there any ceremonies that you remember from Holland that surrounded maybe the death of your father, death or birth or marriage, any

BISIGNANO: No, I remember when my father died, we spent that day or maybe a few days with some relatives of his. I didn't see the funeral. I did not attend the funeral. We were not there.

LEVINE: Because children

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BISIGNANO: Didn't go. No, not like the Irish, they go. The kids all go to the funeral. In Holland, they didn't do that, no. So, and then the, my mother's brothers and sisters, I mean, they gave us a farewell party, you know, before

LEVINE: And what was that like?

BISIGNANO: Well, it was a very, well, family, everybody gets together. It was in The Hague where one of my aunts, one of my uncle's lived there. And it was a, you know, a big spread with the food, and I don't know who saw us off. I don't remember that. I don't remember that.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything your mother packed or that you personally took with you?

BISIGNANO: Me (laughs), it's, it's a odd thing. My mother, one, I only remember one thing, it's the most ridiculous thing. It was a bottle that tall, and it was a figure of a man, dressed up, and he had a black face. And it was a liquor bottle. A bottle that you would use to serve wine or something like that. She brought that. I'm sure she brought other things, but, I, I don't know. And I think one of my sisters took that. So, I don't have anything from Holland as such, you know. When you have four children to bring along, can you imagine going to Ellis Island with luggage for four kids, even on board ship, you know? On board ship, I remember we got on board ship, and in those days it took kind of a long time.

LEVINE: Did you remember traveling from your home to the port?

BISIGNANO: No. No, but I remember being on board ship and sitting at the table with, at, at dinner time, and, if the weather was rough, it was January, and it was rough, they had to put these racks on the table so that your plates wouldn't. And I remember at the end of the table there were two Englishman. (laughs) Silly thing, there were two Englishman who used to drink beer, and they used to put pepper in their beer. That impressed me. I don't know why I remember that, you know. But I can't remember the cabin, I don't know what it was like, I have no idea. And I think the journey probably, it was, it was cold, and I did see an iceberg, I did see that, but outside of that it was, it was a bitter, bitter January. It was so bitter that 1920, January 1920 was one of the worst winters in this country. And the reason I say that is that, when we came, when we arrived, the Holland-America line didn't dock in New York, it docked in Hoboken. That's where the Holland-America had their docks. And from there we had to go to Ellis Island. And the days that we stayed in Ellis Island, we never got outside, it was so, it was that big a cold. It was a real bitter winter. We spent all our time in this room, you know. The big room.

LEVINE: Do you remember, how would you describe yourself as an 11-year-old?

BISIGNANO: Curious. Curious. I don't know whether I mentioned it to you but I was very impressed with the Jewish men. Did I tell you that?

LEVINE: No.

BISIGNANO: This one thing I remember. So well. We, that, that large room, you know, at Ellis Island, they had the big long tables with chairs

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around, and people sat there all day long. Just day after day. That was the only thing you can do is just sit in this big room at the table. But the Jewish men fascinated me because they wrote backwards. This is an odd thing that that impressed me so. I had never seen that before, you know. But, staying on the island, I guess we could, we just played. And you waited for the, the men to call your name to see if everything was taken care of. Well anyway, they took us to from the Rotterdam to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Now

BISIGNANO: People

LEVINE: Were you traveling first or second class?

BISIGNANO: Second, but not steerage.

LEVINE: No, so you were traveling second class. So what, were your papers not in order, is that why?

BISIGNANO: No, the papers were in order. But the point is that when you bring in a widow with four kids, you want to make sure she doesn't become a charge of the, of the state. So they wanted to make sure that there was somebody here that would provide for my mother in case she ran out of money. So, when we arrived, they took us to Ellis Island and notified my mother's sister, who lived not too far, west New York. She came to the island, and they interviewed her, and then they expected her to put up some sort of a bond. And so, I think she got a bond on the house.

LEVINE: Oh.

BISIGNANO: Like collateral. And then I, I, I can't tell you how many days we were in Ellis Island. I'm assuming maybe four days. Five days at the most. And then we were released. So then

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the food or the living arrangements?

BISIGNANO: I re, (Laughs), one (laughs) the sleeping arrangements were in bunk beds. Bunk beds. And I think, I think the women were kept separate from the men, if I'm not mistaken. But my little brother, I mean, he, he was with us. We had bunk beds. The only thing I remember about food is that one day I had to put out my hand and they put in a hard-boiled egg. (laughs) The rest of the food I don't remember.

LEVINE: Did you, were you, were you aware of hard-boiled eggs?

BISIGNANO: Yeah, oh sure, because we lived in a farm, in a, a dairy country. We had eggs and buttermilk and cheese and all that sort of stuff. So, we, we were on the island, and then finally we were permitted to go home, to go, to leave. So my aunt came, and I think, it may have been the end of January, I don't exactly remember the date. 'Cause I don't remember the exact date when we left there. We left in January, we arrived here in January. The weather was very bad. And my aunt not being too familiar with the subway system, instead of putting us on the Broadway subway which runs on the west side of New York, she got us on the Lenox Avenue subway.

LEVINE: The Lexington, Lexington, on the east side.

BISIGNANO: Yes. And that, we, we had to go to Edgewater. You know where Edgewater is? That's right across from Grant's Tomb. You know where Grant's Tomb is?

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh..

BISIGNANO: And the little town across from there in Jersey is Edgewater. And there an old aunt lived there, and we were going to stay with her for a couple of days until we got a place of our own. So now, we're way out on 125th Street and Lenox Avenue, and the weather is so bad the trolleys are not running. No trolleys. So now we have to hike. My mother, the four kids, the baggage in my hand, across town on 125th Street. It was bitter cold, no trolley, we just hiked. Now, the thing I remembered about that was that I was impressed with the women. They had lipstick on, they were beautiful. See, I thought all American women were beautiful. I had not seen that in Holland. Evidently...

LEVINE: (?) women in Holland didn't wear lipstick at that time?

BISIGNANO: I guess not because I was impressed as a child. So we get, we get hiking across 125th Street, and we finally make it to the ferry, which was known as the Fortly Ferry. It goes from 125th Street, across the river to this little town called Edgewater. And in back of Edge, the town of Edgewater is only two blocks wide. It lies beneath the Palisades. Follow? Now, behind those two blocks there were these Palisades. And, for the commuters, they had a trolley line that climbed the Palisades, but instead of going straight up, it could not do it, it went like this, and it went like that,

and the trolleys had these overhead wires, I don't, that's before your time.

LEVINE: I remember that.

BISIGNANO: Alright. Now, we get across the ferry, and I see the Palisades, but what do I see? I see these trolleys climbing up. I hadn't seen any Palisades. Holland is flat as a pancake. So I'm impressed. This is America, look at that. There are trolleys with lights, and they're going up the hill. And there, at the top of the hill, of course it wasn't in action then, but in later months, there was Palisade Amusement Park. That was very famous in its day, you know? So, we, we, we went into this town, and my aunt and uncle put us up for a little while, and then my mother rented an apartment and bought the furniture, and that's where we lived.

LEVINE: And, and this was Edgewater?

BISIGNANO: Edgewater. In Edgewater. So then she knew that her money wasn't going to last forever, so she decided to get herself a job. But to get a job, you got to be able to speak English. She went to night school immediately. She learned the language, and we were put in school, the four of us kids. They put two of us in the fifth grade, and my, my older sister and I were in the fifth grade, and my brother and little sister were in the third grade. Well, in those days, foreign children were oddities. There were no foreign children. We were the only four foreign kids in the whole school. And we became an attraction. The teacher were interested, and we didn't know what the heck they were talking about, except that a map is a map. You may not call Germany

“Germany” but you call it something that sounds like that and Italy you may say “Italia” or something like that. And the other thing that is very similar is mathematics, arithmetic. I, I knew that, you know. So, I got into school, I think in February, and I graduated with, with the class just, just the same as the other kids. I learned to speak a little English. And of course when you’re in school, that’s all you can do. You listen to the other kids, and this is how you learn the language. That’s the best way to learn. Now my mother’s got four kids, and they’re all learning to speak English, she goes to night school, so we never spoke Dutch after that.

LEVINE: Really? Not at home?

BISIGNANO: Not at home at all. Not at home at all. No. We just, we had no Dutch friends, you know like Italians were congregating in Little Italy, and Germans were going to the German section in New York. Well, there are no Dutch people. So, we became really the oddity in our area, and people were interested in us, and they were very nice to us. So, my mother got a job, and she worked for Alcoa [ph]. And, when I

LEVINE: And what was she doing then there?

BISIGNANO: She had, it was up on the, on the top floor, the ninth or tenth floor, she had a little coffee shop, where people went during their coffee breaks and the lunch hours. And she made little things for them to eat, and this is what she did.

LEVINE: How, how did, she do that herself or somebody had that as a concession and (?)

BISIGNANO: Maybe. Maybe, but because she could understand what people were saying, because the Dutch have a reputation of being clean, you know, they're supposed to be very clean, she had no problem getting the job. So she worked there for, I think, six years. She met a man there who was the fire inspector and married. In the meanwhile, we're going to school, I went through the sixth, the seventh, and the eighth grade.

LEVINE: Was the, was the school very different in the way it was conducted?

BISIGNANO: In Holland?

LEVINE: In Holland?

BISIGNANO: In Holland, yeah, because we only got 2 weeks vacation in the summer. We learned a lot more. In fact, god, I shouldn't, I shouldn't brag, but when I, when I graduated from the eighth grade, I was number one. I beat all the American kids, you know? Because I had a very good foundation. You go to school early and not only that you go to school six days a week.

LEVINE: Six days a week and only two weeks vacation?

BISIGNANO: Well, you, you, and two weeks vacation. Yeah, you, you really, you really work. And we also learn how to knit, how to sew, how to crochet, how to put in patches. Saturday mornings, this is what you went to school for. These are the things you learned as a girl, and boys learn, I don't know what the heck boys learn. I, I, I don't, I don't remember that. But I know we had to learn

this, so the school system decides, in the fifth grade in Holland, I was taking French. By the time you get out of school in Holland, your, your eighth grade, you will have learned French, German, Dutch, and English. So, you see they were a little bit further advanced than we were, in those days. I don't know how it is today, I have no idea. But, so I had no problem with schooling. In fact, I was talking to my niece yesterday, she was sitting there, we were talking about school. And I have an old, you know how we used to get the autograph album in school? And I had the one that the teacher wrote, and it says "To my only honor roll girl." I was, I was (?) in the brain. I had, I had picked it up, you know? I had no problem learning, in fact none of it.

(TAPE IS SWITCHED OVER, APPARENTLY IN THE MIDDLE OF A TOPIC)

BISIGNANO: ...no, my, my mother needed help. You know, one salary and, and feeding five people and dressing five people, my older sister had gotten a job. She went with the Jersey Bell Telephone Company. And at fifteen, I had to get working papers, and I went to New York everyday, and I worked for Kresge's. You know Kresge's? In Harlem, when Harlem was white, you can't believe that, but Harlem was white once upon a time, there was a Koch's department store where you bought the clothes, and there was a (inaudible) candy every week, they had, they had a special every week. I remember this as a kid. You got three boxes of candy for a dollar, ninety-nine cents. You got like a box of peanut brittle and a box of caramels and a box of chocolates. And they used to put streamers on them, three of them, and that was in the window that was ninety-nine cents. And once a week, I would buy those three boxes of chocolates or whatever for us kids.

That was Harlem in those days. Then I worked there for two years.

LEVINE: Could you describe Harlem a little, anything about it? How, how

BISIGNANO: It was, it was, it was like white New York. There was no black Harlem. There was, there was all white. Eventually, it must have been after the twenties that the blacks moved in, and then, then they had the Hotel Theresa was there on Lenox Avenue and that became the first black hotel. And there was a school called the Eastman Gaines [ph] Business School, and I went there at night time. After work, I went with my, a friend of mine. And we went a couple of nights a week, and I learned this and this, you know, the usual bookkeeping and stuff like that. So then I got myself an office job 'cause I wanted an office job. I knew I didn't want to work in Kresge's. But the owner, not the owner, the manager of the store, he said, "Why don't you stay with us?" He says, "Some, someday, I'll, I'll see that you become a buyer," but (laughs) I, I didn't want to do that. I, I, I wanted to work at an office. So I worked in an office for two years, from twenty-five to twenty-seven, and then things got bad. It wasn't exactly a depression, but things weren't flourishing too much. So I was let go. So I had learned in, where I worked for two years in this place, I had learned how to operate a machine that was called an Elliot-Fischer machine, which is like the national cash register, in your day probably, in the county machine, and I learned that. So I learned that for those two years, so I went looking for a job with that. So I got back. And then I went to work for six years in another firm and met my husband and got married.

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LEVINE: And how did you meet him?

BISIGNANO: He worked there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BISIGNANO: He ran the accounting department. So that's how it happened. So it was nice, it was a nice, and then when, when I got married, in those days women didn't work, honey. Stayed home. I was home for six months in an apartment, and then we bought this house.

LEVINE: Now, did you, were you both working in New York?

BISIGNANO: Yeah. He came from the Bronx in New York. He was one of ten kids. And he waited 'til he was thirty-four years old to get married. I was twenty-four by that time. But things, I got married in '33, you know, this was the Depression was during that time, and he had to help his folks. They had, they had their problems. So, you couldn't get married, we, we wanted to get married, but we felt, you know, you gotta help your folks, that's the first thing you do. So, after six years keeping company, we got married. Then it worked out so nice because he was such a, it was such a good marriage, you know?

LEVINE: Now, was he an immigrant or his parents?

BISIGNANO: Was he what?

LEVINE: Did he or his parents immigrate to this country?

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BISIGNANO: His parents came from Italy. They came from a, a place called Spigliano. S-P-I-G-L-I-A-N-O. Spigliano, which is just below Naples. And there the people, there's no manufacturing there. There's no, they don't do much.

LEVINE: No industry?

BISIGNANO: No industry. Most of the people migrate. They, they leave. But his mother, Bill's mother, was a professional. She was a mid-wife. So she could make some money, but anyway, his father came to America first and left her home with four kids and pregnant with my husband, the fifth one. So, let me see. Papa came, and he worked for the New Haven and Hartford railroad. And after he worked here, I don't know how long, I, I didn't know them then, he went home and went to pick up his wife. And five children instead of four. He had never seen Bill. They came to this country, and she had five more, so he was one of ten children. These people had guts in those days. You know, you, you don't realize when you're young how brave my mother was. Thirty-three with four kids. Could you do it?

LEVINE: Maybe when I was that age, (laughs) but now

BISIGNANO: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BISIGNANO: Gutsy.

LEVINE: Yeah, very.

BISIGNANO: Very gutsy. Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, it was the hope of better life, I guess.

BISIGNANO: Well, it was, it was a case of where she, she couldn't live the way she was accustomed to, she couldn't stay in Holland because what would she do? She never worked. She had somebody working for her. And it was a, I don't know, I guess it was a blow to her pride.

LEVINE: But she was, she was willing to work.

BISIGNANO: Oh, yes. In fact, now we left our home in Holland. It was ours. And my father's will stipulated that that house was not to be sold until the youngest of the children turned twenty-one, and I think that was merely in case any of us wanted that house, we could buy that house. If at twenty-one nobody wanted that house, we could sell it. So, when my younger sister became twenty-one and we were all here, I sold that house. And it was left like to the four of us kids, but I split it five ways, you know. And then, my mother got the rent from that house. The people who rented that house all those years sent that money to my mother so she had that. Then when each of us became twenty-one, my father had left us money. And in those days, you know, when was I twenty-one, in 1930, a couple a thousand dollars was a lot of money. It was a lot of money. And so I got a couple of thousand dollars. So in '31 I went to Europe. I went for six weeks.

LEVINE: That's what you did with the money you got?

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BISIGNANO: Some of it. And the rest I, I, I saved. And then I worked, you know, I had a job, I ca-, I took off six weeks and, I went to Europe, I went to France and England and Holland and Germany. It was lovely. And I was thinking in bed the other night, I wonder why I took six weeks? And then it dawned on me that when you went to Europe in those days, you didn't fly across.

LEVINE: That's true. Two weeks

BISIGNANO: See, I remember the ship we went on, this is long before your time, was called the S.S. (?), and the S.S. (?) was part of the (?) line, which was famous in its day. And we went across, and it took five days and twenty-three hours, and they were so proud, they had broken some sort of a record. Five days, twenty-three hours. Now, we landed in Cherbourg on the French coast. And then we went around Germany, Holland, then England, and then we left England, and coming back, we came back on a slower boat, which first stopped in Boston, and I think it took twelve days. So there was twelve and six, almost eighteen days of your six weeks was traveling by ship, but oh what a joy that is, you know. There, there, there was not only nice meals, but they, they had a gym at twenty-two, you know, the gym, you played cards, there was entertainment. There was, there was everything. It was lovely, it was a wonderful vacation. It was great.

LEVINE: Now, did anybody's family, yours or your husbands, object to not marrying someone of the same

BISIGNANO: No.

LEVINE: Heritage?

BISIGNANO: No, I'll tell you why because Bill's oldest brother Joel, right, who's (?), he married a Swedish girl. Vincent married an Italian girl. Bill married a Dutch girl. Johnny married a French girl. So we had the League of Nations. My brother married, his first wife was German. His second wife, she's from Louisiana. My sister married Irish, and then when he died, she married English. Her first, her first marriage was Dunn, the second, second one was Barnes. My other sister was also a Dunn, not related, and the second marriage was McMillan. I'm the only one that only married one.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

BISIGNANO: So there was no, no.

LEVINE: Did your mother have the attitude of holding on to some of the Dutch customs?

BISIGNANO: No.

LEVINE: No.

BISIGNANO: No, because when she married after she was in this country six years, she naturally tried to please her husband, and he was of German heritage. His last name was Rippel. R-I-P-P-E-L. Rippel. German name. So she cooked the sauerkraut with this, with this, with the that and, you know. And they had one child.

And then she married for the third time at seventy-five. She was a gutsy woman.

LEVINE: Yes.

BISIGNANO: At seventy-five, I think this is kind of cute, at seventy-five, she said to me she wanted to marry this man. And I said, "What do you wanna marry him for?" I said, after all, I said, "You're seventy-five years old." "No," she said, "I have a feeling for that man." I laughed. I said, "Forget about your feelings." "No," she said, "Jeanne," she said, "You know, even if we have a few years together, it would be very nice." Well, she was seventy-five, and so was he. He lived to be eighty-five, and she lived to be eighty-seven. So they had ten years together. He had a very nice house, they got a little dog, and they were perfectly happy. And they weren't bothering they're children. Right? She was a very independent woman, and I think, do you have a mother alive?

LEVINE: Yes, I do.

BISIGNANO: Oh. Well, let me give you one word of advice. All you wanna know, ask her now. Don't wait 'til she's dead and say, "Why didn't I?" There are people that I meet through the library, through all sorts of other places, and we all regret that we, we didn't ask more. Because once they're gone and you think back, "Why didn't I ask her this or why didn't I ask her that?"

LEVINE: What, what are the things that you wished you had asked her if you

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BISIGNANO: Well, I knew she was an orphan, and I was wondering what her parents were like, I never met them. But I have a picture. Oh, I ought to show you this. Have you got a minute?

LEVINE: (?)

BISIGNANO: What? Oh, that's right.

LEVINE: Why, why don't you

BISIGNANO: Later on.

LEVINE: We've got about fourteen minutes left on the tape.

BISIGNANO: That's all right. I'll show it to you later on. I have a picture of the aunt and uncle that brought her up.

LEVINE: Oh.

BISIGNANO: Yes. Her aunt and uncle brought her up. One sister was old enough, she was married. The two boys living in orphan homes. The third brother, oh, he was older, and he, he went to the Dutch East Indies, which is Indonesia today. You know the Dutch East Indies, Jakarta, Surabaya, those places? He went there, and he married a native woman and had children. And he became, I think, the chief of police of Surabaya. But this is going way, way back, you know? My mother would be a, a hundred and one this year.

LEVINE: Oh.

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BISIGNANO: She was born, no, no, she was eighty-seven. Nine, eighteen eighty-seven, so that would be a hundred and eleven years old. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BISIGNANO: So long.

LEVINE: Did, had, did her mother and father die?

BISIGNANO: Yes. And left six children. But some went to the orphan home, some were older, they, one was married, one could take care, but my mother lived with this couple, and this couple lived in the town of (?). You know, that's known for its chinaware? And he was a fisherman. And I remember visiting there when I was a child, my mother took me to visit them, and they lived in what was probably, more like our senior citizens housing, you know? And they had a small apartment. They had, I don't even think, I, I don't know, I don't remember where the bathroom was. But I remember this, this room, and it had a center table like the living room, and she cooked. She served. In the, in this one big room, we sat around the table. And I remember that (laughs) you know the Dutch are potato eaters. And she'd have a bowl of potatoes. Little potatoes and a bowl of gravy. So you took your potato, and you dunked it in the gravy, and then put it on your plate, you know? It was so cute. She was a very nice little lady. And she was always so glad to see us. And I guess my mother loved her because she brought her up, you know? But, my mother didn't have an easy life. She had it nice when my father was alive. She had all the comforts that, that anybody could want. And when she got married again in this country, she didn't have to go

to work. You know, that's a different thing, she could stay home. They had one child, and so they had their own home. So that was rather nice. Then when he died, she married a man who had a house too. She worked in between those two occasions, but I guess she was satisfied with her life. And she, I can't say that she died a horrible death or anything like that. I think just old age crept up on her, and we got her into a nursing home, and I think she may have been there over a year or so. But I mean, we visited, and maybe every other day somebody went to see her, so she wasn't neglected or anything like that, you know. So, she lived with me for a year at one time, she lived with my sister a year one time, when my sister was a widow, she went to live with her. She lived with my brother when he was a widower for a while, and this is where she met the man across the street whom she married at seventy-five, so that's the way it was to be, you know?

LEVINE: When, when you first came to this country, can you think of any things that struck you as different, as new and different that you hadn't been aware of?

BISIGNANO: Hills. Hills. Palisades. I used to, in the summertime, go up on the Palisades. You know, where we lived, it was just two roads. Edgewater's two roads. One block wide, that's all. And then came the Palisades. Well we lived on the, on the west side, so in back of our house, there was just the Palisades. And we used to go up there, pick jack-in-the-pulpits. You know what tho, what they are? Flowers and things like that? We had a rabbit that we took care of. It was, we played jacks and (?) and all sorts of kids games, you know, it was nice, the kids were nice, and in fact, I came in 1920 and went to school in 1920, right? My first

girlfriend in the fifth grade was a gal by the name of Helen Lamb. L-A-M-B. Her mother evidently was divorced, but in those days you didn't say that. She was a widow, right? Now, the mother was tickled to death if the two of us played together because she didn't have to watch her all the time. So I used to spend every Sunday with her. After I had dinner at home, then I would go to Helen's house, and her mother would read the funny papers to us because she used to use very good dialects and things, she was very good at it. And I used to spend every Sunday there. I still talk to her since 1920. She is in a nursing home in Florida near Orlando, and she has Alzheimer's disease. Then the one year in high school, I met another gal by the name of Edna Nuby, who never married. She became the Dean of Douglas College, which is Rutgers, you know. And I talk to her at least once every three weeks. So I have these two from 1920.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

BISIGNANO: Isn't that nice?

LEVINE: Lovely.

BISIGNANO: Yeah, I think it's nice.

LEVINE: What do you think it is that has kept you friends for

BISIGNANO: We have the same interests. We don't like garbage and junky stuff. We don't look at, you know, stuff that isn't worthwhile. And especially the one who's, one thing that I liked very much when Helen's mother, when we were young, Helen's mother was interested in seeing that her daughter became well-educated.

And we were in the same grade. And if she was taking Helen to a concert somewhere, I paid my own way, but I went with her. I was exposed when I went to, to Holland, to Europe with them, the mother and Helen and I. We went to the opera in France. I saw (?). I, I went concerts. I went whatever place there was some culture. In London, I went to the theatre. And I was exposed to that. Then when I started at eighteen to go with my husband in later years, he was an opera buff, and he was a musician. He played. He played pi, piano like nobody else. He played an accordion. He, he was very musical. Loved theatre. And so, when we left work on a Saturday, we worked a half a day, we would go to the theatre. We'd go to the Paramount and then have dinner some place and maybe go to the theatre in the evening, you know? So it was very good, I, I was exposed to nice things. So I don't like junky things.

LEVINE: Do you think having immigrated here as an eleven-year-old, do you think that experience of starting a new life, do you think that that made a difference

BISIGNANO: I imagine so. I think it broadens your vista somehow. If I had stayed in Holland, well, I went to private school in Holland.

LEVINE: Oh, you did?

BISIGNANO: Oh yes. I went to private school in Holland, and because I went during the war, the war was on, there was, they made an allowance that, because of the war and leather was hard to come by, you were now permitted to wear what you choose, which normally was unheard of in a private school. See, but they had to give in a little bit because there was no leather available

during those days, so I got wooden shoes. So when you went to school, you wore like woolen socks, and you took these wooden shoes off, you stepped out of them, and you walked around in your woolen socks all the time, see. That was the difference.

LEVINE: Now did, who wore wooden shoes?

BISIGNANO: What?

LEVINE: Who did wear wooden shoes?

BISIGNANO: Oh, a lot of people in the suburbs. Oh yeah, they were very popular. You went to any of the farm districts, everybody wore wooden shoes, and even public schools, you wore wooden shoes. But I didn't wear just normal wooden shoes, don't get me wrong, that was, (laughs) I had wooden shoes that were painted black with little flowers in the front painted on, you know, yeah. I remember my sister being a year older than I, she was the first to go to school in Holland. It was different here, we went to school together, but in Holland, she went first. So the day she had to go to school, the maid we had, Elsie, had to take her to school. So, I said to Elsie, "May I come along? You know, I, I'd like to go too, and I'd like to see, so." Mother said, "Yeah, you can go if Elsie doesn't mind taking you." So I said, she said, "No, come along Jeanne." So, we went to school, and we went to the classroom where my sister was supposed to report. Now this was quite different from what we do here. She reported for school, and the teacher saw me, and she said, "Hello." And, she wanted to know about me. And I said, "I'm her sister, and I wish I could go to school." And she said, "There's no reason why you can't. You want to go to school?" I said, "Yeah," and she said,

“We’ll take you.” That’s different, right? The only thing is, you can’t come to school unless you have a pinafore. So, Elsie had to go home, (laughs) mile or so, go home pick up a pinafore, come back and then put my pinafore on, and then I could stay in school. And from that time on, I was always in school with my sister, though she was a year older. Different, isn’t it?

LEVINE: Yeah.

BISIGNANO: Yeah. So that’s how we happened to be in the same grade, and then here, they did the same thing.

LEVINE: And it probably suited you because you loved school, I mean, you always liked school.

BISIGNANO: Loved it. I’ll tell you the truth because I always wanted to be a mathematics teacher.

LEVINE: Oh.

BISIGNANO: And I couldn’t do that. See, when I, when I grad, when I graduated from public school and then I had one year of high school, then I had to go to work, and one night on the way home, I met the principal of the public school I attended. He said, “How are you doing, Jeanne?” I mean, they, they knew me. And I said, “I just wish I could go to school and become a teacher.” Well, the only night school that was available in this area of New Jersey was Patterson. And, to get to Patterson, you had to take a trolley car, but three different zones. One went to Leonia, one went here, and the next one went to Patterson. And I was working, so when I got off the ferry, if I had gotten on those three

trolley, I would not have made school in time, so I couldn't go to school. So I went to night school in New York and learned business stuff, but it wasn't what I wanted to do. I wanted to do that or be an opera singer, now (laughs) those are two very different things, but this is what I would have liked to done, you know?

LEVINE: Yeah, and did you sing?

BISIGNANO: What?

LEVINE: Did you sing?

BISIGNANO: I used to sing a lot. And my husband played. And no matter where we went, I mean, he played and I sang, you know? The whole neighborhood if we had parties here or family parties, in fact his family was very musical, he had somebody who played the sax, he had somebody who played the violin, he played, he had somebody who played the, the, they, they all played some sort of musical instrument, and his folks lived in a brownstone, you know, and it was like open house. Everybody came there, and they, they sang and they played, you know how Italians are.

LEVINE: (?)

BISIGNANO: Yeah, and the

LEVINE: Just before the tape runs out, what would you consider your greatest satisfaction?

BISIGNANO: My marriage. It was so good. It was so good. I, I, he was, he was a, a really sweet, I didn't know of anybody who didn't like him. They always said he was the best of them all. And I got him. I waited six years. And the odd thing is that I, from the time I was sixteen to eighteen, I was engaged to a boy in Vermont that I met on vacation. And I used to travel to Albany on a weekend and meet him there where his sister lived, and we'd meet for the weekend and then I'd go home, and then he'd go home. And once he came down and stayed here for a couple of months and got himself a part-time job just to be near me. Then I met Bill at the office, and I figure, I didn't want to be a farmer's wife in Vermont. And Bill said to me, "Are you sure this is wa, what you want to do is be a farmer's wife?" And I said, "No." So, he said, "You know, I gonna have a interested in you." (laughs) So, he had two friends who had tuberculosis, and they used to send people who had tuberculosis up to Saranac Lake, where the air is clear, and they used to sleep outdoors and get fresh air, and this is how they used to treat tuberculosis. So one weekend, he said to me, "I want to go up to Saranac Lake to see my friends." I said, "Well, I'm going up on the New York Central too, I'm going to Albany to meet Larry." So he went, he, he reserved a seat for me, we went up on the train, and I left him in Albany, he went to Saranac, but before I left, he said, "If you'd only give up Larry," he said, "Then I will be your boyfriend." So anyway, I told Larry then that weekend that I would rather not marry him, although I loved his parents, I said, "Because I don't think I'm cut out to be a farmer's wife." So anyway, when it came time to go home, Larry took me to the, to the train and met Bill, and then we, Bill and I, sat in the train, and Bill says, "I really want to talk to you." So we went out into the little vestibule in the train, he says, "Well, did you give up Larry?" I said, "Yeah." He said,

“Well, then, from now on, you’re my girl.” (laughs) That’s the way it was.

LEVINE: (?)

BISIGNANO: We, we were really meant for each other. It was a, a, a, a lovely, lovely marriage. It was forty-one years, which, you know, you count your, he’s gone twenty-five years, but I was fortunate. I had him for forty-one years, he left me quite comfortable, I don’t have any financial worries, and so, and the next best thing was all my travels all over the world, that was the second best thing that, wonderful, absolutely wonderful, and I’m surrounded by friends even now.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

BISIGNANO: I have friends, you know, once a month, I meet four friends, we go out to dinner. Last week, I had one, two, three friends came dropped, they just drop in. At three o’clock, I make a cup of tea, and they come in.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

BISIGNANO: It’s

LEVINE: Okay, we’re going to stop here because the tape is, is run out.

BISIGNANO: Good.

LEVINE: I, this is Janet Levine. I’ve been speaking with Jeanne

KECK-187/BISIGNANO

BISIGNANO: Bisignano.

LEVINE: Bisignano. (laughs) Got it.

BISIGNANO: Yeah. Bisignano.

LEVINE: Who came from Holland in 1920 at the age of eleven, and we're signing off here.

END OF INTERVIEW