

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

ELLIS ISLAND ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Leo Monzoni  
Interviewer: Dana Gowan  
Interview Number: 189  
Interview Date: May 30, 1986

MR. GOWAN: This is Dana Gowan and I'm speaking with Mr. Leo Monzoni on the 30th day of May, 1986. We're beginning this interview at 2:05. We're about to interview Mr. Monzoni about his immigration experience from Italy in the year 1921. It's interview number 189.

Mr. Monzoni, if I could begin with where and when were you born.

MR. MONZONI: I was born in [Feradefalco] province of Agrigento, Sicily. My father was a lend-lease landowner. He rented the fruit orchards from somebody, because when my father got married, according to him, and to my mother, he had no trousseau from his mother-in-law, because she was very poor. Her husband was a shoe repair man. And she promised my father some kind of money as a trousseau. Well, she couldn't do it because she just didn't have no money. She was very, very poor. In those days, being poor, it wasn't a big deal. It was poor, that's it. Well, my father got so mad, because my father had spunk, until the day he died. So my father says, "I'm going to teach my mother-in-law a lesson." So he took my mother away from the town of Maro to another province, and he went to [Feradefalco] purposely, not because he want to go there, because he was doing very well in Maro, but he went there just to get my mother away from her mother, so she wouldn't be able to see her, [. . .] See? And so, while my father was there in the gardens, I was born there. When I was born, I was fourteen and a half pounds, and I was almost seven and a half kilos. I was a little pup. And my father loved me so much that he bought, while there, a little pony, he made a saddle, I used to ride the pony, and he look at me as if I was a child from God, like a father would look, you know. Then when, one day when my father went to sell his fruit, his orchards, he was held up. And they took the money away from him, and he recognized the voice of this particular person, because he spoke so unique that my father was sure it was him that held him up, because he had his face covered. He went to the police, this man got arrested, and sure enough, the money that was stolen from my father was in this man's pocket. And so, they put this guy in jail. And he got so many months, or whatever. And so my father got scared, and he said, "This guy here is a tough guy, and when he comes out, he gonna cause me a lot of problems." So he goes back to the owner and he gives him back all everything, he says, "Take your property, I don't want it." He says, "Not only do I have my fruit stolen by people, I had to shoot one of them, and I thought I did kill one one day, because there was a big lump on the floor, and I discovered it was a bag full of food, the following morning," and my father says, "This thing happens, I don't want nothing to do with it. I'm going back home." So he went back home with us children, with four of us, or how many we were, and my father says, at that time, and I was thirteen, it was very bad in Europe, because no jobs, no nothing, and everybody was coming to America, was coming to the United States, here, America was a thing of the past. And the only way to get here was by slow boats--that's how they got here. Some boats took twenty days, eighteen days. So my father took a French line that took fourteen days, the S.S. Providence, that took fourteen days to get here. In fact, it took sixteen days, because it was stormy, it was very stormy, and we were delayed. And so my father sold everything except the house, that he bought from my mother.

MR. GOWAN: He came here because that man--

MR. MONZONI: That's right. He was scared that he would come out and he would cause him trouble. And so, he says--and there was that inspiration of coming to America, to make yourself, because everybody was saying that America was rich. America was rich. When the people coming here, a lot of the people never worked, and they lived four, five, six,

seven people in one room, you boarding, like they do right now. Years ago, that's what they used to do, there wasn't one person, they had one house, like this. They used to have ten, fifteen, twenty people asleep-- six over there, four here, eight there, and sometimes they used to feed them garbage, and they used to pay and they used to pay big money for it. They suffer here, the men, all alone, with no women. And so, my mother let--my mother stayed in Europe, with us, and my father came to America. After the war was over, my father want to call us here, in the States. And we got things arranged, and meanwhile, my brother was rented to farmers. He was only eight years old, nine years old, like it was a stable boy.

MR. GOWAN: He was rented? To farmers?

MR. MONZONI: They used to hire them out, rent them out, and they used to give my mother a little money for the service the boy did, feeding the animals or whatever. My brother--I was too young. My brother didn't care to go to school. That's what I'm going to talk about now. My brother, he didn't get to go to school, so my mother, 'cause she had to have some money, my father was here and she didn't receive much money from my father--why?

MR. GOWAN: Her husband, you mean?

MR. MONZONI: Yes, her husband.

MR. GOWAN: Your father.

MR. MONZONI: Yes. And so, my mother had to go to work, cracking almonds, nuts, by, with a stone, because years ago there wasn't no machines. Everything was hand work. And my brother was hired out to get a little money in. And he was a stable boy. And he didn't get to go to school. But I went to school. My sister went to school; she wanted to be a teacher, in fact. But she had to go to work also. And my mother had to go to work to get all the things together, the money, the payment on the house, after my father put the first put the first payment down. And so, my mother struggled.

MR. GOWAN: When did your father leave?

MR. MONZONI: In 1913 or 14.

MR. GOWAN: Before the war.

MR. MONZONI: Before the war. And then the war broke out, and there was no coming or going. But after the war was over, see, this thing happened.

MR. GOWAN: When were you born?

MR. MONZONI: I was born in 19--

[UNIDENTIFIED VOICE]: You're turning seventy-seven?

MR. MONZONI: I'm seventy-seven now. And I was born in 1908. And I--for getting my working papers--no, I was born in 1909, and for getting my working papers a year ahead of time, I changed the nine into eight. Because I couldn't get a job here. I couldn't get the working papers from the Board of Education here unless I was fourteen years old. And with falsifying the birth, they go by, and I apply, and I look as if I was fifteen years old, and I got the summer job.

MR. GOWAN: Do you remember your father leaving?

MR. MONZONI: I don't remember, no, I do not. I do not, no.

MR. GOWAN: So, your mother had to work, and your brother--

MR. MONZONI: My mother, to me, she was everything, because she always watch us. In fact, when we arrived to Palermo to get aboard ship to come here, I, with my brother, that's there, we strayed through Palermo, we got lost. And my mother was looking for us, she was screaming, looking for us all over, all over Palermo, because Palermo had a reputation of a very bad city, in those days. Black hands, and what have you. And the only thing was, that we met, that one man, and we ask

him where we were, and he says, "La, la, la!" "La" means "there." And that particular going--it wasn't the hotel where my mother was staying, because we had to wait there for the ship. And that's the only difference that we had. Then we find ourselves, and we were brought back to the hotel with my mother, and she was crying, that we got there. Next time she says, "Don't go; you stay here."

MR. GOWAN: In Palermo--you said Palermo had a bad reputation and there were "black" hands?

MR. MONZONI: Yes--well, in those days, in those days, they was that whispering talk that Palermo was the cradle of organized crime. Am I right or wrong? Well anyhow, this was what everybody was calling "Mafiosi," Mafiosi in Palermo.

MR. GOWAN: Yes, but that expression, "black hand"? Is that it?

MR. MONZONI: Well, the black hand, it was nickname in this country. But over there it was not called "black hands." Over there, called it "Mafiosi." "Mafiosi" means "wise guys." That's what they used to call them over there. But in this country, they gave them this word, "black hand." But in Europe, in Italy, it was not known as--it was known as "wise guys." Because when people from the small town go in the big city, the big city people [. . .] because they kind of restricted, you know. And our town was in the mountain, and they were farmers. That's the way they make a living. And when they go into a big city, you can tell a farmer, you can tell with the city-bred people, because there's a little contrast there. In point of view, just what we see here. If you see somebody who comes from a small town, and you see a city people, you can tell the difference. And this, we experienced it, and you create a funny feeling. Well, anyhow--

MR. GOWAN: Let's just go back. Your father left in 1913 or 1914.

MR. MONZONI: Yes.

MR. GOWAN: And when were you--when was your mother and brother and yourself, when were you able to leave?

MR. MONZONI: 1922 or 1923, around that time.

MR. GOWAN: So you had to live through World War One.

MR. MONZONI: Yes, in Europe.

MR. GOWAN: What do you remember of that period?

MR. MONZONI: Well, I remember that there was a confusion that you don't got no idea. People were going, coming. People were coming home with lice, boys, men were kept in a very, very bad manner. They used to come home full of fleas, lice, you know? And, it was bad, and because the island is Mediterranean, they, we used to have strange Germans coming in. It was, it's very hard to explain. I was too young to explain. But I know that I was missing my father, I was growing wilder with the kids. That's all I know. But I know that during the war, Sicily was right in the center of the commotion that there was there. People had a hard time there.

MR. GOWAN: Do you remember seeing fighting? Was there fighting in the area? In your area?

MR. MONZONI: We were kids; we was too busy. The only thing was, we used to see soldiers coming in. This and that. We used to go out. And we used to group up, eight, nine kids, and play soldiers, marching and all, like we used to see the big soldiers doing that. And we want to do the same thing. Because kids there, they don't have all these activities the way you have them here. In those days, you have toys to play with.

MR. GOWAN: While you were in school, and during that period, before coming to this country, what do you remember hearing about America? What--do you remember any--in school, learning something about

America?

MR. MONZONI: No. The only thing was, my father was here, and my mother was--tried to earn money to put together to support us, because my mother kept us very clean. My mother, she used to take bread for her, because she had an oven in the house. And she used to bake pastries and cakes for neighbors, for weddings and so forth. And my mother was able to derive that money to support us, because my father did not send us money enough. And my mother knew why. My father liked to play cards. Even when he was freshly married to my mother, and she knew this. And she realized that a man being alone here, my father followed the same, the same system of living. But my aunts, my mother's sisters, came to America before, also, and they put the money together, with some they got from my father, so that my mother could buy the tickets, to pay for the passport, to come here, meet my father. It wasn't my father's all money. It was part of the money came from my aunts, because they want to help my mother, because they love each other.

MR. GOWAN: What was your father's job here in this country?

MR. MONZONI: My father, he was in Italy the fruit grower. And a merchant. And when he came here, I don't know what he was doing. But, he was writing to us, now and then, not always, that he was in Pennsylvania during the war, that he was working in the mill, in the iron mills, he was working--not in the city. He was--they used to put 'em in trucks here, like animals, and used to transport them in many towns in upstate New York and Pennsylvania. And they used to dump them there, and they used to pay 'em. And my father used to tell me, many times, that he never knew where he was, or where the other people were, because they were taken there by trucks. Because they had to have men there to work. And that's it. And they used to get together, sit down, play cards, and it seemed to be that my father always lost. He never came on top; he always lost. This my father related to us, when he was in a good mood, and we sat down, and he used to talk [about] us.

MR. GOWAN: So when you finally got--when your parents, when your mother and aunts got the money together to come to this country, do you remember having to say good-bye to people, how--what kind--

MR. MONZONI: Well, my mother, she sold everything but the four walls to the house. She sold everything. She bid the people good-bye around there. They wished us good luck, and we put--we went on a horse and wagon, on a cart, and they took us to a station, but the station was away from the town, in those days. And we traveled by train, and finally we got to Palermo. And then we got on a train. When the boat came, we were stuck on the ship. They were spraying us with flea ointment, because the boat was very dirty. The boat was filthy. One day, they push all us all out from the lower deck, and they push us all upstairs, and they had to fumigate all the gosh-darn lower deck of the ship. It would smell terrible, because some of these people had ants, bugs, whatever, I don't know.

MR. GOWAN: What was the food like on the voyage?

MR. MONZONI: Don't talk about food, please, because my mother, she used to give us one lire each and they were selling, on the side, some special food. Because we couldn't eat the macaroni they was serving aboard ship. The food was garbage. And so my mother, she used to give us one lire each, we used to go buy [panotti]. You know [panotti]? It was a round bread cut in half with some kind of a stuff they have, goo, I don't know. And we were satisfied with that. But wine, they used to give us wine in those days, each table. And the wine was like water; I guess they used to mix with water. The food was terrible!

MR. GOWAN: What kind of accommodations did you have? Where did

you sleep on the boat?

MR. MONZONI: Just like decks, just like when we was in the summer home, and we got double deckers, and all. And the bus, like when you go in the bus, and you got sleeping quarters. You ever see those [. . .] accommodations.

MR. GOWAN: Like a bunk.

MR. MONZONI: That's it, just like that. I knew when they used that, because our mother, in our home, my mother, she kept the house, and there was four rooms in the house, and there was a bed for us, for my brother and I, for my sisters, my mother, she slept alone. And but when we got into the boat, we just like animals. I never experienced that.

MR. GOWAN: What was the group, the family group, that was traveling together? It was your mother--

MR. MONZONI: Just us! We knew nobody; we just met the people on board ship. We just say "hello, hello," but that's it. But nobody ask anything, because they going to America. They thought America was like Eighteenth Street, or Fourteenth Street. They didn't realize it was so big.

MR. GOWAN: I mean your family; what was it, your mother--

MR. MONZONI: My mother, and my sisters and brother, that's all.

MR. GOWAN: So, how long was the voyage?

MR. MONZONI: The voyage was fourteen days, and something happened, stormy, and it was delayed two days, and it took sixteen days. And then when we arrived here, the boat entered--well, I never did experience it 'cause where I was, where I was born, I never saw boats, 'cause in the mountains there's no boats. Then when we landed, through the night, after a while we saw so many row boats all around, all around the boat, with people, waiting, this and that. My mother says, "There's your father! There's your father over there!" I said, "I don't know who he is." We said, "We don't know who he is." It was my sister, my brother, and I, because the other sister was born here. After my mother came here. And she says, "That's your father over there!" She said, "You see, over there!" I says, "Who?" She says, "That fellow--man over there that's carrying a bag." And he raised bananas, the first time I ever saw bananas, my father, somebody sold him some bananas, or he bought some bananas, and he brought bananas with him, and he was on the boat with the others. It was an open row boat, you know. They must pay so much, each one, to be rowed there, to meet the people that come over, the members of families, where they were. And eventually, he said, "That's your father, over there." And, I saw a person there, but I forgot how my father looked like. Because my father was tall, my father was taller than you.

MR. GOWAN: Did he come on the boat?

MR. MONZONI: No! No, they were not allowed on the boat. So, come time that we marched out, when we march out in Ellis Island, all the passengers they were on the line, and they was inspectors on both sides. And they had something, a little thing like this, like a book, with little pages and so forth, and they called, "Monzoni, Leo, Calogero, 'cause my brother's name is Calogero, Charlie, American is Charlie. But in his native birth is Calogero.

MR. GOWAN: Can you spell that?

MR. MONZONI: Calogero, C-a-l-o-g-e-r-o. And I never knew this, because when I got my second papers here, and I was Americanized, they said to me, the judge, he says, "Sonny," he says, "when you were born with one name, you stay with that name until you die. You don't change the names." Well, this happened many years afterwards. So anyhow, we passed by there, and my mother--

MR. GOWAN: Would you talk about the inspector who--

MR. MONZONI: Yeah, now, I'm coming. Now, my mother, she was in back of us, and first came my brother, and that fellow, inspector, he took the little book, he opened it up, and he went like this to him in Italian to read, "the." Well, my brother was not able to read. And he was sixteen years of age going on seventeen. And in that particular day, those days, it was grownup, you know, that age. As soon as they saw he was unable to read, he was pulled out. And they didn't make me read because I was underage, and I went to school there anyhow; I went six years there. But he didn't get to go to school. He didn't like school. And my brother was pulled out. He let us go, and we went to a very big reception room. There we met my father. But my brother was not there. My brother was detained. My mother begin to cry. She says, "My son! My son!" So my father says, "Where is he?" She says, "They took him away." So, we had to go out in a desk, there was one man there sitting above, and we went, he says, "You gotta go for information," pointing a finger. So we went for information from there. They said because he did not know how to read, not because he was a military subject. In sixteen years of age, in those days in Europe, you was subject to military duty. He was not detained for that. He was detained because he was illiterate. He didn't know how to write or read, my brother. But that was his fault because he didn't care to go to school. But the idea is, that, that happened. My mother cried, and she cried, and she cried. Finally, my father took us, and we landed in my aunt's house. At the time she used to live at East Eighteenth Street in a two-family house, no, it was a four-family house, and she had a little apartment there, and I stayed by the window and I used to see people go by. I never saw so many people in my life. But my mother, she was crying because my brother was not there. And we didn't know what to do. My mother didn't know what to do. My father didn't know nothing--my father was just as dumb as a person that would land today. From overseas. Because they realized what had happened. My father used to work after the war, and he used to go play cards all the time, amongst all kinds of people, that he didn't have to learn--they all spoke Italian. And he felt it was not necessary to learn English. And he was restricted within himself. He knew nothing about anything. So, somebody says to somebody there, says, "Why don't you go to church, our church?" My mother didn't know nothing; my mother didn't know what's going on. What was going on. My father knew even less. He was totally--he was here such a long time, over eight years. So they told us to go to this church, on Fourteenth Street, off First Avenue. And my mother, she went there crying, with my aunt. The aunt told them the problem, that we came here to see my father, with all family, and they held my brother back. And the priest heard the whole story. He didn't say nothing. And we took for granted that he was going to take care. So during this time, my mother, crying all the time, every second day or so forth, she was allowed to go see my brother in Ellis Island. So they used to take her with the Second Avenue El to South Ferry. There, there was the boat, they used to take it to Governors Island--no, not Governors Island--

MR. GOWAN: Ellis Island.

MR. MONZONI: Ellis Island, and it was free. You didn't pay. And the boat used to go too many times, and my mother, she was allowed to see my brother twice a week. And that went on seven days, eight days, nine days, and she went to see my brother when she was allowed to. When she went there, on the fourteenth day or whatever it was, my brother was not there.

MR. GOWAN: On the fourteenth day?

MR. MONZONI: On the fourteenth day, my brother was--on the fourteenth or fifteenth day, my brother was not there anymore. And my mother ask, says, "What happened?" And she could piece together that my brother was put back on the boat that brought him here, that's the way they had those days, and he was returned to Italy, to Sicily. And that's what happened to my brother. He was returned. Now, in Sicily, we didn't have anybody anymore. We had no relatives, because my father was the only boy in the family. And he had no sisters, or nothing. The house was closed, it was closed. But somehow now--maybe God said to my mother, "Don't sell the house." She just lock it up, she sold everything, and it was four walls, there. That's it. The house was there. The house was big and it was wide, with a courtyard, and everything. So, my brother was shipped to Europe. And when my brother went to Maro, he did not know where to go, when he got there. He was just sixteen years of age, and he went to distant relatives. [Gorma]? You know [Gorma]? The fellow who lives in Staten Island? [Pachinello]. Well, his mother, a distant second cousin, she was--her boys were in this country. And my brother--

MR. GOWAN: This is the end of side one of interview number 189.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

MR. GOWAN: This is the beginning of side two of interview number 189.

MR. MONZONI: One incident I forgot. My brother was asked by the inspector there if my brother would like to go to school [. . .] by the inspector there, while being interviewed, if he would go to school here, and he did not answer positive. Maybe if he would have done so, maybe he would have been released. But he was not interested in school. This I remember, that he did say that. And under this technicalities, the inspector did not let him go by, see?

MR. GOWAN: Do you remember anything about any other questions they asked him?

MR. MONZONI: No, that's all, that's all of them. That's all--many, many, many years afterwards, see?

MR. GOWAN: So after he was pulled from the line, you never saw him again on Ellis Island?

MR. MONZONI: No, no, only my mother saw him two or three times, and I did not, no.

MR. GOWAN: It's hard to believe that they would separate family, like this.

MR. MONZONI: It happened, it happened. It happened. And my brother went to Italy, and my mother, after few years, she got very ill. Meanwhile, my brother got married. And, we were a bit pacified that he got married, because he would build a home of his own. But it didn't work that way. He seemed, something happened to his wife, that she was carrying for three or four or five times, but she could not bear birth. But then she died anyhow, his wife, she got pneumonia. After that, so many years went by, that my brother with his wife, like two little poor souls, came over and say hello to us, here in America. They came to say hello to us, they came. My mother, she cried, she cried when she saw my brother. He looked just the way we saw him so many years ago. Then his wife, she got pneumonia, then he take care of her, and she died from it, and he was left alone.

[UNIDENTIFIED VOICE]: This was like two years ago.

MR. MONZONI: More than two years ago.

[UNIDENTIFIED VOICE]: Three years.

MR. MONZONI: Well, yes, within four or five years. His wife died, and he has no children, he would been all alone, but he lived in

that house, that my mother--my father bought.

MR. GOWAN: Was there anyone on Ellis Island that could have helped you, I mean, like a--

MR. MONZONI: I cannot. Everybody seemed to--you know, in those days. But--oh. When this thing happened, then my mother was taken to the Italian Consul, just when my brother was taken to Europe. And after we were introduced to a consul, the consul says in a very discouraging way, he says, "You should have come here!" My mother says, innocently, "I did not know this." He said, "That's why we're here, to help out people!" You understand? So, ignorance is not--that's why we pay a price, my mother, especially, pay a very big price, and my brother's paying yet, because my brother's living. My brother is paying a price yet, a price, for making a holy mistake, or not knowing to say the right thing at the right time. And it has been, it has been a thorn in the family, my brother. Now, my brother, he's pensioned, he has a home there, and he has his own friends, they grew up with, through hardships, and he had his own food, because the food the people eat in that restricted area is not the food that you would eat here. Now, I'm not trying to insult you, or insult myself, or insult my brother. There is, he eat, a certain food, and here, every time that we used to introduce him to a certain food, he said, "No, not for me, not for me, not for me." Because the food is restricted, the bread, the hard cheese, and the glass of wine, and he was satisfied. Not only he, but the average farmer there, bread and wine and cheese is essential. But here we are brought up a little different.

MR. GOWAN: Restricted food in Sicily, or--

MR. MONZONI: They eat a certain diet, just like you would go down in the deep South here, and you'd, they'd give you, or you hear about certain foods that you'd say, "I never saw this before." Now, the same thing happened in those restricted towns, especially Maro, because it's the highest town in the island. Well they claim that this tribe of people, many years ago, there were living on the outskirts of the island, and because they didn't want to be disturbed by passengers, by world travelers, they went in the inland, and they built a town there that, right now, they have the Castle of [Mondigaro]--[Castelo di Mondigaro]-- in that--that was built by those people so they could watch that people don't come in to disturb them. And they were restricted, at that--after so many years, after so many years, things begin to be the way you see it today.

MR. GOWAN: Why didn't your brother ever try to come back?

MR. MONZONI: I just finished telling you.

MR. GOWAN: Oh, I see.

MR. MONZONI: We were--my brother got married after so many staying with this relative of ours, and we felt that as long as he was married, he was happier with a husband and wife, as a team.

MR. GOWAN: So that was shortly after he returned.

MR. MONZONI: No, no, no. After--at least, after two, three years.

MR. GOWAN: I was wondering within those two or three years, why he didn't try to make another--

MR. MONZONI: We were green. We were--I don't know nothing. My mother, she was dumfounded with my brother and she kept on going to this church here that never did accomplish anything. And because of the language barrier, and my father habit of playing cards, and my--the habit of my father that he was living alone here for eight years, he was not close together with my brother problem. My mother was the one. But she could not talk, she could not do anything about it. She sobbed and she

cried, and eventually he went back there. And my mother died. And we kids grew up here, separated. Because I have a girl in California, married--

[UNIDENTIFIED VOICE]: But they were all married when your mother was alive--

MR. MONZONI: Yes, yes, they were all--my sister got married, my big sister got married. And, things were not easy in this country, you know, in those days.

MR. GOWAN: On Ellis Island, was there any offer made of having a family member go back with your brother, like your mother go back--

MR. MONZONI: No, no, no. I cannot say, but the only thing I know, that in those days, they had the regulations that the shipping company that brought people here, they had the responsibility of bringing back passengers where they come from because they brought them here. 'Cause they should have found out if those people were able to read or not. And they neglected or whatever it was, I have no idea, but I know that the same French line took back my brother when the same boat returned here. This, that's all I can tell--all the finer points of the regulation that they have, or they had, I don't know. But the only thing was that my brother was taken away from the group of us, and detained, and that's it. That's all I can tell you.

MR. GOWAN: Did the inspectors ask you to read something? Did the inspectors ask you to read--

MR. MONZONI: No. I was underage, so I didn't qualify. I was less than fourteen years of age, and I was going--and I was able to read anyhow, because I had six years of school in there. Even so that I didn't care to go, I went, and I passed in the schools there. They had one class there every twelve months. And I used to pass one class every two years. Once I didn't go to school for over a month and boy, when my mother find out, she beat me up. Because I used to go to a farm with the other boys, and have a good time and play, and I used to go home three o'clock, that's as if I went to school. My mother, she could not read or write, and she took for granted that the homework that I was doing, that I used to write on a hillside, sometimes the other kids would do the same thing, hooky-playing, we should do our homework. My mother, she used to look at it, and she took for granted that it was okay. But [one Thursday is] went up, and this girl came from a class, she says that Leonardo-- (that's my name, is Leonardo; that's what I was born, Leonardo; that's what the judge said to me I should never change to Leo, my name was Leonardo, but I thought that Leonardo Monzoni, it was too Italian; I want to be Americanized)--and they, this thing happened--

MR. GOWAN: Do you remember if the inspectors asked your mother to read something?

MR. MONZONI: No. My mother, she--because she was a woman, a mother, she didn't--they never asked her. They never ask her. They never ask my sister either, because my sister was past twenty years--and my sister marry, she went to school two years in Italy, and then she didn't want to go to school no more, because she had to take care of the house while my mother went to work, and earning some money to support us. My sister married, she used to take care of the house, cook, you know, and everything. It's a girl, and she--after she was in school for two years, then my sister didn't go to school no more. But my sister, married, she was smart. She could read a little. But they didn't ask her or my father or my mother anything about this. But my sister and I, my young sister, Louise, she went to school. She was very clever; she was--she went to second year high. She was very smart. She wanted to be a teacher. And I got along. But my brother, who was the boy that didn't

go to school, and he paid the price that he's paying yet.

MR. GOWAN: Did you remember anything about the medical exams on Ellis Island? Doctors looking at you, or--

MR. MONZONI: They, they--now, I don't want to say it--they looked, they're checking just like animals. They open your mouth, check, the fingers, [pass by]. The people were coming in in droves. At that time, America was young, and the boats, when they come in, they were coming in and just sit down there and you was, you was just--you was in a daze. I don't know about you, [or your dad] but because maybe you was first class or second class, but we came, we came third class. And there was a difference between first class and second class and third class on boat. The first class got better food, better treatment, and everything. But the way they--the way we were sleep down there like animals, in the third deck below.

MR. GOWAN: You said during the medical exams you were treated like animals. Well, how do you mean?

MR. MONZONI: Not polite, nothing like this, because maybe we did not know any better. I don't know. Because I was only a kid; I was just eight years old, nine years old. I don't know. But to me, to me, it was it was a [. . .] dream, just what I'm experiencing right now. I cannot tell you. But I know that the most important work, I know that the food was no good. My mother, she brought the bag full of home-baked bread. When the bread finished, we didn't want to eat what they gave us. The boat, the boat used to go, the table, the big board table, and every once in a while the boat used to go like this, and the bread used to slide all the way [. . .] The way it was set; this I remember.

[UNIDENTIFIED VOICE]: Why don't you tell them when your brother was here with his wife, in the sixties.

MR. GOWAN: Well, getting back to Ellis Island. And you were treated like animals during medical exams.

MR. MONZONI: I need to say it's not polite and so forth, because we did not know any better. In the group that I saw, as a boy, because they were pushing here, pushing there. My mother used to take us, say, "Leonardo," half a name is "Nardo," and my mother called me "Nardo, Leonardo," she used to call me "Nardo." Says, "Nardo, [in Italian]!" And she used to pull, because she always protect me, more than my brother, because my brother, he did not stay home all the time because he was work in the farm, and he came home every month, once in a month, a day, a day in a month, or so forth. But I stay with my mother all the time, and she--and I know my mother, my mother, to me, she was Madonna. My mother to me, she was everything. Because she gave me a lot of time. And she just, she just loved me more than anybody.

MR. GOWAN: When you arrived in your new home, in New York, on Eighteenth Street?

MR. MONZONI: Eighteenth, First Avenue.

MR. GOWAN: What were your impressions of the new place?

MR. MONZONI: We were staying in my aunt's house. I do not know nothing. People used to come over and say, my mother, and see my mother and all, and I stay in the fire escape outside. I stay--I sit down on the fire escape, and I was very fascinated to see automobiles go by, people go by, see these big buildings--two, three stories high--that I did not see in the little town that I was born in. We used to see one-family house and two-family house, mostly. There was a [princitessa]. You know [princitessa]?

MRS. LEWIS: She was a member of the royal family, lived there. And when they used to come and walk, Main Street down, because they have some kind of a fad, that they used to go on strolls, on walks, on the

main street, at the edge of the town, and then you see the whole countryside of Sicily. And they used to go, and they used to have seats there, and they used to sit down, and blah blah blah, and talk. And relax. And we used to see all the time the princess, that she was in the royal family, the second cousin. The royal family, years ago, if you was a second cousin, third cousin from the king, you was the upper bracket, you know? And they had one of these houses in Maro, and we used to see-- we could just play, and used to see the [princitesss] looking out of the window. And sometimes, they used to go and throw us an orange, an apple, because they know that they had, and we did not. Because we were poor.

MR. GOWAN: So, did you go to school, start out going to school in America?

MR. MONZONI: Oh yes, sure, sure. I loved school. I skipped here. I skipped, I skipped from 1A--oh, first they put me here C class, to teach me the a-b-c, and being that I had Italian schooling, I found it a little easier in learning the a-b-c. And then I began to read a little bit, and then after a year, they put me in the third grade. All of a sudden, third grade, because my age was [not qualified]. I did qualify, and when they put me in the third grade, I skipped 3A, 4A, 5A, 6A, 7A, until I reached 7A-1, when my mother says, you gotta quit school. But I like art so much that P.S. 19 on Fourteenth Street and First Avenue, I used to do all the art work for the whole school. The class used to change from one room into another, [. . .] I never broke. I stood there and I did all the art work for the school. For all the floors of the school. All the work, my teacher, Miss [Borg], she bought me a painting set. I used to do everything. I was it. And I want to be an artist, and my mother pulled me out of school, because I had to go to work. Because then my mother got ill. Then I got married, see?

MR. GOWAN: So you really didn't have a lot of problems assimilating, getting into--was there a period that you felt like a "greenhorn," you felt awkward?

MR. MONZONI: No, I did not. They--I was choosing my--and because of my liking for the art, I was left alone. And I used to have a lot of girls that used to sit next to me that want to be mushed up [. . .] I never had that experience, and I was always wondering, "Don't bother me, don't bother me." And certain girls used to always come near, because a lot of girls, I'm not--a lot of girls fall for certain people for what they do. And they used to enjoy it that I used to do a lot of things, pictures and so forth, I used to do with my hand. I liked art, I like art. And until I was thirty-two years of age, I was still full of hopes that I was going to be an artist and go to art school. And, in fact, I did go to art school. When I went to art school, to qualify to enter the Sixty-seventh Street, Eighth Avenue, he says, "You're too old now, you cannot enter no more to this school." And I took all the work I had done and I gave it to my sister. I said, "Here, that's it." Then my father opened me a grocery store. I was fourteen years old, in those days. My father opened me a grocery store, he stuck me in the grocery store. Five o'clock he used to put on his jacket, he used to go play cards. And I used to close the store at nine o'clock, ten o'clock, eleven o'clock at night. And I never played with kids. Until I met her. My sister, that was born here, one day she says--I'm skipping a lot of things--my sister says to me, she says, "This is my friend, Jenny." And she was not tall. And I said, "Come on, leave me alone, huh?" And she was [in the choir] and so was my sister. And I says, "Leave me alone." She says, "Do you know how old she is?" I says, "She's about fifteen years old." She says, "No, she's over twenty. She's twenty-two years old." I was twenty-eight, see? When she said that she was twenty-two, I got kinda

little more interested in her. And we had been together all through the world. We've been together, thank God. And when, that first time I met --was introduced to her, her mother, she says to me, she says, "My daughter," she says, "I got three daughters. My daughters have not been allowed to go out by themselves. They had to have a chaperon. You'd be the only boy, the first boy, that I allowed to go out with my daughter alone. Her mother says to me.

[UNIDENTIFIED VOICE]: That was a tradition, then.

MR. GOWAN: So, when did you become a citizen?

MR. MONZONI: When I was able to become--when I had the store, when I had the store, the grocery store, I was fifteen years old, sixteen years old, my father was not a citizen, and you had to have a license to display some things outside the city store. So, I had to get a license. And I had my first papers. They did not give you the second papers until you were twenty-one. But at eighteen, they give you your intentions. So, I got the license to go and get a license to display the fruit there, and on the third time they didn't want to give me the license, because they want the papers. So I went to Congressman La Guardia--that time, he was a congressman. And I told him about my problem. And he say, "I cannot do nothing." So I went to the Tammany Hall leader, the--I shouldn't say that--the [Demogray]--Tammany Hall was it, those days, but that was fighting word. [Demogray] I went to a Tammany Hall club, and they send me to Union Square and Sixteenth Street to go and see a certain person, this guy own a hotel, he was a politician. And I went there to him, and I says, "I come here for support." I says, "Look, I'm waiting for a stupid call to get citizenship. Meanwhile," I says, "I had to be called, because I had to get a license, to renew my license, because I cannot get my license," and so forth. So, he says, he quotes you the price of a cup of coffee, and I never heard that before, what it meant. And, I took a dollar, at that time a coffee was nothing. I took a dollar, and he said to me, he said, "It's a ten dollar bill." I says, "Ten dollars for what! I'm asking for nothing; I'm just asking to rush up my papers!" So I went back, and I wrote to Congressman La Guardia, and I told him my problem. So Congressman La Guardia wrote to me back, and said, "You will be called shortly." And within ten days I was called. I did not pass the test. And I went for my license. This is my experience I've been having. That's the way things are. And my brother now is having this problem. Now he is about seventy years old.

[UNIDENTIFIED VOICE]: Eighty-one years old.

MR. MONZONI: He's eighty-one years old. And I feel now, that he's eighty-one years old, he got his friends there, he got his food there, he got his home there, he gets his pension there. He come over to say hello to us. My brother, all those years, suffering. Now he's all alone, and I feel, I feel deep down in my heart that he's better off now where he is, at his age, his food, his pension, his friends--the only thing he could find here is me, and I am not well anymore. If I was well, if I could, if I could be--I would do everything to have him here, but I'm not up to par, and this is a history--

[UNIDENTIFIED VOICE]: He has cancerous lungs, he has half a nose, he has to take care of it, keep it covered--

MR. MONZONI: Oh, he has something in his nose, he has something in his nose, by scratching or whatever it happened, that cut a piece off and a piece off, and when he come here, I says, "Look, Charlie, every time you--the nose--that you--people asking me, 'What happen, what happen, what happen?'" He says, "Can there be a shield to put on there?" And I did tell him that, and I heard, now, that they did make a shield, so that nobody couldn't ask questions about his nose, because, you know,

when you walk around with part of the nose missing, people have to ask you a question. You have--people--when he came here, a lot of people [go and look], because they see a nose like that. And I took a lot of courage in myself, and I did tell him that, and I felt mortified to tell him that, because I know that my brother, he's very sensitive. My brother, this brother, there's a saying in Sicily, that my brother didn't let a fly touch his nose. You know what that means? It's a phrase used by some people in Sicily that my brother is a little cocky. That everything like that--he only want to hear what he likes to hear. The other parts are just--[. . .] we all are [those terms]. But now, I hear that he has a shield around his nose, and he is--but, now that he heard that I am in this condition, he wants to come over and be near me to console me, and in my condition today, my consolation is her. Her. And because my brother was not raised near me, as boys, I remember once, that when he came to see us, and we slept together, we wrestled, we played, we enjoyed. But I never did now, that he is at that age, and I am in this conditions, we all have to pay a price, and I'm sorry for my brother, I like to have him so much to have him here with me, but I don't want to give my wife anymore work, because my girl needs a lot of help. Because my wife, she is a nut about cleaning this. And my brother needs a lot of help, and I need a lot of help, and I don't wanna give my wife the help of two people. I love her so much because of that. And then the two, I don't have the way--I like to have a dining room here, that bedroom there, now sometimes I cannot, like last night, I had to sleep here, because she has to have air, she cannot--and I, I been having a runny nose because I slept with a window open there, and because I don't eat everything, I'm restricted in eating a lot of things now and I don't have enough of the [systems] in me and I just getting out of a clogged-up nose because I cannot--that's why I'm [. . .] sun, to get a little more, that's what the doctor says, I need some sun.

MR. GOWAN: This is the end of side two of the interview with Mr. Monzoni, interview number 189.