

AKRF-71

JOSEPHINE (GIUSEPPA MARIA CONCETTA) REALE

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INTERVIEWER: NANCY DALLETT

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SICILY, 1920

AGE 5

SHIP NAME NOT RECALLED

DALLETT: My name is Nancy Dallett, and I'm speaking with Josephine Reale on Friday, October 25, 1985. We are beginning this interview at 10:30 AM and we are about to interview Mrs. Reale about her immigration experience from Italy in 1920. This is interview number 071 and it's the beginning of side one. Let's start back in the beginning and could you tell me where and when you were born.

REALE: I was born, uh, December 7th, 1914 in Palermo, Sicily.

DALLETT: Can you tell me a bit about, uh, your family, your mother and your father?

REALE: Yes. My mother and father lived with my mother's parents. I remember it was a, quite a large, uh, first floor place there. And my grandfather who was, um, uh, he couldn't do his regular work because he lost his leg. He was a guard in a prison there. And he was shot at by one of the prisoners. He wouldn't allow this prisoners to go, uh, this prisoner to go out on leave as it were and, uh, he had, he held this revenge for him. And he shot at him one, once he was finished with his prison term. And so my poor grandfather, lost his leg. He was a willow and reed worker. And he did very fine work with reed. He made reed furniture. And he couldn't do that work too much there, so, uh, he did a little of that. He learned to do that after, not being able to be a guard any more. And so he sort of took care of this building. They had offices and the secretaries, uh, of the state, of Palermo, Secretary of Palermo, lived on the upper floors and we lived on the bottom floor. And all I remember was a big door. And I used to go out and play on this cobble street. And, uh, my grandfather and grandmother were such dear,

lovely people to me. I adored them because my father served in the war. He was in the First War. And so I was, I, they sort of, uh, uh, raised me. My mother was left there while my father spent five years in the World War. And my grandfather just adored me. And my uncles and my aunt too. I had two delightful uncles, Uncle Toto and Uncle Papa. And, uh, my grandfather used to take me out to the villa which was just about a block away. At the corner of our street was the cathedral. A beautiful, beautiful building. I remember just palm trees, and delightful, uh, weather. And, uh, my grandfather was such a loving man. He, uh, I was like his own child there. I was the very first grandchild born to that family. Their name was, um, Piazza. And he was a singer. He had a beautiful voice, my grandfather, John. He sang in the church choir.

DALLETT: Uh-huh.

REALE: Well, he used to play the lotteries there. They had lotteries there. And, uh, in Palermo, if you had three numbers, they called it terno, interno. And he would win and come home. He had to buy something for me. Every time he came home he would tell me to look in this pocket or that pocket. And that was something I adored doing, going through his pockets. And he always had something for me. There was always a little gift for Josephina. Penutza they called me. Peanuts. (she laughs) They called me Peanuts. And, uh, so these are the wonderful memories I have there. And then as I got older, my mother had me go to, uh, uh, kindergarten. I remember playing along the streets. And, you know, in those days, the cows used to come around, too. And you bought your milk right from the cows. And it was strict orders to my mother that she had to wait in line there for the last squeezing. Because the last squeezing was the creamiest of the cream. And I always got that. And I would say to her, "Did you wait for the last?" And she would say, "Yes, I did." And I would drink this creamy milk. I have beautiful memories of Italy. And, also, uh, of course, in those days, everybody nursed. And my mother nursed me for quite a few years, like up until I was three years old I was nursing. And she remembers always taking such good care of me. And she used to tell me that I ate a chicken liver every day. She made sure that she prepared a chicken liver for me every day. (she laughs) She'd say, "That's why you were so healthy." I had beautiful rosy cheeks when we came to this country, and I lost them. And my mother used to say, "What happened to your beautiful rosy cheeks?" "This American air doesn't seem to be as good as the Italian air." And she used to think, well, that was

it, the change. And she, uh, well, that's it. I could go on and on, but it's, I have beautiful memories.

DALLETT: Tell me, uh, how is it that your parents decided to come to this country?

REALE: Well, although my father, when my father met my mother, he was a guard, uh, guardo de la finanza, finanza, uh, uh, the finance. They have different areas of guards. They have the trotta benieri, and that's the royal police. He was a guard, of finance. And he met my mother there. They, they, oh, they fell in love, he fell in love with my mother and, uh, he immediately wanted to go out with her. And it was at this, uh, fiesta, there was a fiesta in the, in a, a certain part of Sicily. And, uh, uh, he knew people who knew my mother. And, he, he caught her eye and, uh, oh, he fell madly in love with her. But, of course, in those days you had to talk to the father. So he spoke to her father and told him that he was interested in my mother. That, that, could he possibly, you know, get to know her better. And he went over to her with a bottle of soda. Green, it was green. And he offered it to her. And he said, "Senorita, verde de esperanza, meaning the green is for hope, stands for hop and I hope to, to know you better. Well, they certainly did. (she laughs) And he married her. And so, uh, but things were not too easy after he came home from World War One. And though, uh, after finishing with the guard, uh, the time, the years that he had, uh, spent there, he really didn't have a trade. So my grandfather taught him his job, his work. He became a willow and reed worker. And that is what he did. But, of course, they all had hopes of coming to the country where the streets are paved with gold, he would make so much more money here. And so his mother and brother had already left for this country. And they sent money and they sort of, you know, uh, what do they do? They, uh, i don't know what, what they call it . . .

DALLETT: Some, like an affidavit?

REALE: Uh, and, and, well, yes, that they would be responsible. And so we came hoping that he would be able to make, you know, a better living. Because, uh, it was very difficult there. And he did. He found work immediately that we came to this country. In the willow and reed. He used to make willow and reed furniture. Beautiful furniture. They use it now in, mostly in sun parlors, you know, that fancy work.

DALLETT: How old were you when, uh, you left for this country?

REALE: When we left Italy, I was five-and-a-half. In fact, I

started, uh, our schools here and it was so difficult to start going to school with other children and not knowing one word of English. It was so difficult. I remember I used to . . .

DALLETT: Did you have to say goodbye to your grandfather then?

REALE: Oh, it was such a tearful, it was so sad. We cried so. In fact, my mother and I cried for a year, over a year. We, uh, we would write. My mother would write letters and we would just cry. And I would say to my mother, "Why did you take me away, it was so beautiful there. Why did we come to this country, it's like prison." And, uh, that was it. It was, uh, the thing people were doing then, coming over. After a while, we got used to it and, of course, we love this country now. But it was very difficult in the beginning.

DALLETT: Was there any chance that your grandfather would, would come to this country?

REALE: No. When my mother left them, she kind of knew she was never going to see them again. And she didn't. They went back, but my mother and father went for a trip there. They spent three months in Italy. But they were already, they had passed on. She never saw them alive again. It was sad. That's poverty, you know. If they had money, they would have been able to go visit. But who could afford that? Then my mother had six children. And it was tough.

DALLETT: Tell me how you began that voyage, how you, how you left from Palermo? What were you taking with you, do you remember?

REALE: Well, I remember we had one, it was called, they called it baulo in Italian, trunk. And my father was very good with his hands. On the lid of this baulo he had drawings of bicycles and men. And I was so sorry, I don't know what happened to it. But he, he had all these drawings, he was very funny. He was an artist. My mother used to say, "His hands were gold and everything he touched turned to gold." (she laughs) Because he was so, uh, it was really great how, uh, he seemed to do so many things well. And, uh, I remember the, uh, trip, uh, getting on the boat was a horrible, horrible boat! It was, we were like cows. I mean, it was like, uh, we were all bunched up together. It was really very horrible, very sad. My poor mother had me, five-and-a-half, an eleven month old child and pregnant. She was three months pregnant. And, of course, we, seasick. And we hated the food. Fortunately my father had a little money on him that, he would get us beefsteak sandwiches. And I remember

eating the steak sandwiches on board ship. And all I remember are the sleeping. It was like, uh, one over the other! Sleeping, it was, no one had quarters. It was like, opened. Very, very terrible.

DALLETT: What was the name of that boat, do you remember?

REALE: I think it was called Santutso or something, I don't, I don't remember. I'm not too sure of the name. And then hopefully, my uncle was going to meet us in New York. But that didn't happen. The reasons they gave us, was that there were too many ships waiting to land. There were, the immigration was so unbelievable. We had to wait. And so they kept us there on Ellis Island. And I'll never forget the terrible memories I had of Ellis Island. Very frightening, too. And, uh . . .

DALLETT: How long did the voyage take?

REALE: The voyage took about, oh, about two weeks, I think. Yeah.

DALLETT: And do you remember when you came into the harbor at all?

REALE: No.

DALLETT: Any landing memories?

REALE: I don't remember the harbor, no.

DALLETT: Okay.

REALE: I just remember holding my mother's hand and we were led to these cells.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. At Ellis Island?

REALE: Actually, at Ellis Island, they, after, uh, doing all the paperwork of, uh, getting us, our names and, then they tell me how . . .

DALLETT: Excuse me. Tell me about that before you went into the cell. What happened before? Did you go through a medical examination?

REALE: Well, as, as, we, uh, we all were examined. And we went through these, uh, of course, everything was so strange and so foreign to us. And then after being examined and questioned and, uh, my mother and father, and, uh, myself and my mother carrying the eleven-month-old baby in her arms, then we were separated. And we couldn't understand why my father couldn't stay with us. They led him to one area of the prison, and

we were led into this prison building. Of course, the cells weren't closed. The, the cells, and I remember the bars, the cells and the little narrow cots in the cells. And this is . . .

DALLETT: They led your father away?

REALE: They led my father away. The men were all in another building, another part of the prison. And we were led into this part and I remember my mother would have her washing to do. And we would go down into this laundry room and she would do her wash there with a little infant. And my clothing and that's were we, uh, had, uh, the shower rooms, I suppose. And what I remember vividly is the putting us together in the shower room, telling us to get completely naked and hosing us down. And we couldn't understand. And I cried so and I would yell that they were burning me. And it was bitter tears I shed. And it was very sad. And as for the food, we ate, we were hungry enough to eat the other food. But we couldn't eat the bread. Our Italian bread was so delicious. We couldn't understand this kind of soft, mushy bread. And it had a horrible taste to us. I like it now, but in those days, we hated it. My mother and I couldn't swallow this bread no matter how hungry we were. We just couldn't swallow this horrible bread. And we thought, "Oh, dear God, is this the kind of bread we're going to have to eat in America?" Little did we know that we, there'd be delicious Italian bread that we could buy, too. But anyway, my father loved it. So we would meet certain times of the day in the courtyard. It was so strange. We would all go out there and we never understood why really we were held there for so long.

DALLETT: Uh, was there an interpreter, was it a communication problem, that, because the Italian and English?

REALE: No, they, they told us that it was, the problem was too many ships were in the harbors there and we just had to take our turn. There were so many ships ahead of us.

DALLETT: So you weren't detained for any medical reason, it was just . . .

REALE: No, not too many.

DALLETT: Too many people in the process.

REALE: And, in order to keep the, uh, everything cleaned. They had to be sure that there were no, uh, uh, lice or things like that. And, uh, they're the memories I had of Ellis Island. Taking the bread out to my father (she laughs) who, who devoured it. He didn't, they

didn't give him enough. He could have eaten more.
(she laughs) He couldn't get enough of that. Well,
he was pretty young man there. And then we came to our
house, the marble house.

DALLETT: Did your uncles finally meet you at Ellis Island?

REALE: My uncles, yes, finally came. Yes. They met us there
and, uh, we came to Philadelphia.

DALLETT: Tell me about that. Do you remember when you actually
made that voyage and landed in Philadelphia?

REALE: I remember riding on the train. And that was all very
exciting. And, uh, meeting my grandmother at the
station there and then going to the house. Everything
from then on was very disappointing. It seemed, going
through this narrow street, I seem to remember Palermo
being very open. And it wasn't really that the street
that I lived on wasn't that open. In fact, I was very
disappointed after visiting there this summer, seeing
that it wasn't as wide as I remembered it.
(they laugh) It was quite narrow. And all cobbles
as I remembered. But this house that we lived in on
Camac Street in Philadelphia was very, the streets were
close, the houses were small. All these row homes.
And, uh, it was very disappointing and I didn't like
it. In fact, I hated it. I wanted to go back. "Let's
go back to Italy." And, of course, we couldn't. This
was our life and the beginning of our life in a, which
was quite hard. It was difficult. My mother wound up
with six children. My father had to work very, very
hard.

DALLETT: What did he do in this country? How did he support his
family?

REALE: Just becoming a willow and reed worker.

DALLETT: He did that here.

REALE: Yes, he did the willow and reed. He made this
furniture and baskets, woven, uh, baskets.

DALLETT: And how about you? You must have gone into public
school and learned English.

REALE: Yes. I went to public school and it was a very, very
tearful time for me. I had a most miserable time. I
would come home and cry and cry and say, "I don't
understand them and they don't understand me." And I
would just weep bitter tears till gradually little at a
time I learned very fast through. Before I knew it I
could speak as well as the other kids. (she laughs)

And we got along fine. I went to public schools in the city and, uh, it was fine. I began to like this country. (she laughs) I began to forget that we had left palm trees and the Mediterranean. And we became accustomed to living in America. Only things, the streets were not paved with gold. My father didn't earn enough to support us. Things were very, very difficult. We were very poor. My mother, after a year of living with her mother-in-law, my father's mother, decided she had to save money so that we could go into our own home. But before we could do that we lived in a two-room apartment on 11th and Mifflin [ph] Street. And, uh, we lived in these two rooms, without water, that we, she had the privilege of the kitchen of the people that owned the house. But it was so hard. Well, my mother saved enough money that first year to put down on a home. Also on Camac Street but a block away from where I was, where we went to live after Italy, a nicer home. And my mother lived there fifty-five years in that home. She never moved. She never learned to speak English too well, although she became a citizen in 1926. And we were naturalized through him. But then my husband and I went and got our own citizenship papers. And, uh, within a year, as I said, they bought this house. And we were all married. We were five girls and we all married from this house on Camac Street. And we all went our way and made our own lives.

DALLETT: So your mother, um, basically had a little bit of Italy that surrounded her in Philadelphia.

REALE: Yes. She was always, that's why she never learned to speak English too well, because all her friends were all Italians. She didn't have to speak English. And I remember as we were growing up and we would speak English to her. She would tell us we have to speak in Italian, which I'm very thankful, today, that she insisted that we speak Italian because I would have never known the language. It was this that made me remember the Italian language, which is a beautiful language. I, and my daughters now blame me for not doing the same with them. They don't understand Italian at all. And that's sad, too. I should have done what my mother did. I should have spoken Italian at home. Because they learned, outside the home they learned the English language. And that was it.x

DALLETT: Tell me about, you met your husband, you mentioned he also had a similar story.

REALE: Yes, well, we met, it was strange because we lived not too far away from each other but we never saw each other. He used to go shopping. Used to buy Italian bread at the corner of our street and yet we never met

until we went to a dance. In those days, you know, people went to dances and you sort of met. It was a way to meet a girl or a fellow. And we met at this dance and we sort of were attracted to each other. He more to me. And I was with my sister. And since I wasn't dating anyone at the time she thought, "Well, it won't hurt you to go out with him." And I did. And that date led to a marriage within three years. And that was it. And then as we're talking and he tells me that he was born in g and I said, "How strange." We were born, born in Italy. And that he came, his parents came to this country in 1920. And he had his experiences. Now, he didn't have to stay at Ellis Island too long. I don't know how long he stayed there. But they were detained because he slipped and fell and they had to put a couple of stitches on his forehead. And that was the reason that they were detained. But as we were talking about this, I mean, that we should both have come to this country in 1920. And that we should have met. It was very, very strange to us.

DALLETT: I really just have one other question and that is, um, do you have any of the original papers from when you came to this country? Passports? Visas?

REALE: Have the passports, yes.

DALLETT: Passport for you?

REALE: I have my father's. Well, my name is on the passport.

DALLETT: Uh-huh, so it's your father's and your mother's.

REALE: It's my father's and my mother's passport. I have two passports.

DALLETT: And also, when you got your citizenship papers, was there any kind of name change at that point?

REALE: No, no. My original name was, and my sister's, which is Giuseppa Maria Concetta. Those are my names. Josephine Maria Concetta.

DALLETT: So there was no name change for your father or your mother either?

REALE: No, no name change.

DALLETT: Okay. Unless there is anything else you want to add, I don't think I have any other questions.

REALE: No, I think I told it all.

DALLETT: Good. Thank you very much.

REALE: You're quite welcome.

DALLETT: That is the end of side one and the end of the interview, number 071, with Josephine Reale.