

KECK-78

HELEN (ANGELA ELENTINA) DI NINI NITTI

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INTERVIEWER: DEBBY DANE

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ITALY, 1920

AGE 11

PASSAGE ON "THE RE D'ITALIA"

DANE: This is Debby Dane, and I'm speaking with Helen Nitti on Tuesday, November 19, 1985. We're beginning the interview at 2:50. We're about to interview Helen Nitti about her immigration experience from Italy in 1920. She was eleven years old. Helen Nitti, would you tell me where you were born and what town it was.

NITTI: It was the town of Palmoli, province of Chieti, Italy. There's, um, between, the town is between Naples and Rome.

DANE: Could you spell Chieti?

NITTI: Capital C-H-I-E-T-I.

DANE: And what day were you born?

NITTI: November 17, 1908.

DANE: Will you describe the town you grew up in, what it was like, and how people made a living?

NITTI: Well, it is a farm town. They lived off the ground, the land. Everybody had a little piece. And those that were too poor to have a piece of land worked for somebody else. And there was, um, the, uh, in those days, there were these people from the royalty, the Marchese, you know, I don't know what we call here. Anyway, and they had lots of land. And those people who were too poor went to work for them. They went, raised the food, and then lived there. And that's the way they made their living, yeah. But you have to grow everything. For instance, on our farms we had grapevines and all fruit trees and, uh, they planted corn and wheat and flax. You had to grow everything there. I mean, you just couldn't go to the store. You couldn't even buy material. There was no store for material. You had to go out of town, you know.

But that changed right after the war and they brought, opened up a co-op, that's what they called it, and, uh, you could buy material. But, uh, if you wanted a suit of clothes you had to have the tailor come to your house and he would measure you. And it was funny because the son of the tailor came one time and he said to me, uh, I was a little kid and he was a grown young man and he said, "Come on over here," he said, "in the other room, because I have to measure you for your underwear." ( they laugh ) Of course, he was kidding, you know, but I ran over to my mother, I just . . . Yeah. So, and that's, you know. And then we hired the tailor before we came to have clothes for us.

DANE: And he would come to your home?

NITTI: Yes. He brought his sewing machine and you fed him and he worked and measured, you know, all the people in the house that needed the clothes. That's the way it was done. Because there were no clothing stores. Everything had to be made. And the same way with the shoes, only the shoes you go to the shoemaker and he had all paraphernalia that you needed and everybody

had homemade, handmade shoes. See, so everything you had to produce yourself. But, for instance, you know, when it was olive picking time and all these people in the different trees they'd sing to each other.

Harvest time was a lot of fun, too, when they brought in the wheat and the corn and that . . . Now it's all machinery, but in those days they would put three sheets, hang them up, and all the corn on the ground, and they would beat it with long sticks to get it loose from the cobs, you know, see. Everything was all done by hand.

DANE: And did you help in the harvest, or were you . . .

NITTI: Well, I was too little. As a matter of fact, my mother didn't want me to go on the farm too much. I used to go. See, over there we have no school on Thursdays and Sundays. That was so you wouldn't forget, two straight days in a row, you know. You, uh, one day separate from the other. So, anyway, and, and then, also, my brother was younger than me and I had to babysit him all the time. So I used to take him to school with me. He was sitting on the same bench with me at school, you know.

DANE: Did you own a farm?

NITTI: OH, yes. My mother owned everything. Of course, she inherited. She had a lot, a lot of land. As I said, we had a big house in town. I didn't show you the picture yet. And, uh, a farmhouse, too.

DANE: So you were fairly . . .

NITTI: We were well off. That's why she didn't want to come here. She didn't want to leave, my mother didn't want to leave there. That's why my father came back here alone because, um, she had everything, and she said, "I don't know what I'll find on the other side."

DANE: You mentioned that you grew flax on the farm, also. For the linen?

NITTI: Oh, yes. Every, for the linen.

DANE: And did you make the linen?

NITTI: Oh, yes. I knew how to spin it and everything.

DANE: Did you have a loom in your home?

NITTI: Yes, a huge loom to make the clothe, the cloth, you

know. But you first have to have the sheep, what is the word they use, to take the wool off the sheep. And then there's a man that card it, you know, smoothes it out. And then we had a special thing we wrapped this wool, and then another thing that we spun the thing, all by hand. You see, here you have that spinning wheel. We didn't. Uh, we had to do everything by hand. And the same way with the flax, and the flax was a complicated, uh, thing, too, you know, you first, it grows tall, about four feet, and it has blue flowers. And in the summertime, when the wind blows, it's just like a blue sea, it's so beautiful. It's waves, you know, all this blue. And then you cut it and you put it in bundles and, of course, it has seeds. This is what they make, uh, this oil from, what is the name of it?

DANE: Linseed oil?

NITTI: Linseed oil, they make out of that seed. And, um, I'll show you. I have some upstairs. And, um, so you have, you make bundles and, and then it's put in a, in a big vat, um, to soak. I don't know how, how many weeks, you know, how long. And then it's beaten.

It's a lot of work. And it all was done by hand. And then comes that beautiful linen, you know, that you see.

DANE: And your mom would sit at home and work on the loom?

NITTI: Yeah. That's, see, summertime you'd, these things are done all in the season. In the summertime, in the wintertime when you can go out and then you work the loom or, of course, the spinning and thing is done. Even while you're working you're doing this thing. Crochet, and then socks. I wouldn't have had socks if I didn't knit them, you know. So, everything had to be done by hand when I was there.

DANE: It was you and your brother and your mother.

NITTI: Yeah.

DANE: And tell me about your father's heritage.

NITTI: Oh, well, my father's people died while he was young, he was very young. I don't know exactly, but he couldn't have been any more than about twelve years old and a cousin of his brought him to this country, being that he was alone. And he grew up here, see.

And then . . .

DANE: Did he have family here?

NITTI: Oh, no, no. He didn't have anybody here. Just this cousin that brought him here. Yeah. Uh, he didn't have much family, only one sister and, um, so he was here and she stayed there. I think she's older than he is, so, uh, and she married there and she stayed there. But, uh, you know, he was here. So, uh, I don't know how old he was when he went back to get married. He went back to the town to get married, where he was grown up. But he stayed all the time in Buffalo.

DANE: Now, why would he go back to get married?

NITTI: I don't know. He said the girls here were too wild. Even in those days, he thought they were too, that's why he wanted somebody from the home town, you know, yeah. So he used to tell us about this bit that he started from one end of the town courting the girls and then he used to brag that he married the prettiest girl in town, you know.

DANE: Your mother.

NITTI: Yeah.

DANE: And then, he got married, did he stay in Italy for very long?

NITTI: Well, he stayed, he stayed a while, and we were born, and, uh, and then he wanted us, my mother to come here to America as soon as they were married, but she wouldn't, as I said. See, she, she didn't want to come here. So we stayed there a while and tried farming. And over there you can't do it by machine, 'cos it's a mountain, as you saw, the town is all mountain. So everything was done by hand, the digging the planting, and everything. And he didn't like that so, so he bought a horse and he bought a, what do you call the thing that digs . . .

DANE: A plow.

NITTI: He bought a plow. When we came it was still up in, nice, shiny, up in the attic. 'Cause you couldn't use it. The thing used to fall over, you know. So he said, "The heck with this." He said, "I'm going back to America. You want to stay here, you stay," he said to my mother, "I'm going back." So he left us. I

was, uh, two years old and my brother was two months. And so we grew up there. And all that time my mother didn't want to come here. But then the people started telling her, you know, you keep your kids from their father and they're not going to like it, even though you have a big house and farmland and everything, you ought to give them a chance, you know, the whole family talked her into it. And so then, of course, it was pretty rough during the war, see, the First World War came. And during the war, of course, nobody could come to this country.

DANE: Before that did you hear from your father? Would your mother get mail?

NITTI: Yeah, he'd write once in a while, you know. So, um, but he didn't send much money because he knew she had everything because she raised so much stuff that she sold, you know. And, um, she used to sell the oil and, um, and the wine and all of this stuff, you know. A lot of stuff. And, um, so, as I said, the war was pretty bad and we couldn't come, even though at that time she was changing her mind because they weren't letting people come. So as soon as passage was open

then we came. Of course, she had, he said to her before he went, "Here are the papers. You got the money. All you have to do is go to Naples and get on the boat." And so, you know, everything was all fixed all those years, so then we decided, then she decided to come.

DANE: You told me a funny story about you and your brother. Um, how did you imagine America to be? Your father was here. What would you think about?

NITTI: Well, we used to hear stories about people who had been here, you know, that the streets were paved with gold and everybody was rich and they didn't have to do all this hard, this hard work that everybody had to do in the old country. And so we wondered, but we had no idea. We didn't even get newspapers. Once in a while I used to read, a neighbor that used to get newspaper, he had been to America, and he used to get the newspaper. But, uh, it was very little, except what other people that had been here and told us, you know. And they used to say how good it was. So sometimes I used to say, "Well, if it was so good why did you come back?" You know, I used to think that in my own head,

you know. But anyhow, so my brother and I would go to the topmost of the mountain and we'd say, "I wish we could fly over here and see how it is." And then if we like it we stay and then if we don't like it we could fly back. So, anyway, we were anxious to come and see what it was like, yeah.

DANE: Uh-huh. Did you imagine you'd put these wings on and flap across the Atlantic Ocean?

NITTI: Well, of course, I had no idea of the vast expanse of the, we were just kids and had never left the town, you know, had never been anyplace else. So I didn't know. I didn't realize how far and how much water there was. And then, of course, we got on this ship that was terrible. Thirty days in the water, it took us exactly thirty days. And then it broke down in the middle of the ocean. Of course, we were, one week we stayed just standing still in the middle of the ocean, waiting for somebody to bring parts. They had wired parts, for the parts.

DANE: Had the engine broken down?

NITTI: Something. I don't now.

DANE: You sat in the ocean.

NITTI: We just stood there, yeah, just stood there.

DANE: Before you go on with that, I want to get you from your village. So then your mother decided to go. The war was over, she said, okay, we've got to get these kids to their dad.

NITTI: So she went to the agent. There was an agent that . . .

DANE: In your town?

NITTI: Yeah. There was an agent. He used to go to Rome. So she had to go to Rome to register before leaving. And that's all. She just went one day to Rome to register the papers that she had and, right away, we left, as soon as there was a ship ready there that would take us.

DANE: Do you remember, before you left your house, the last day and . . .

NITTI: Oh, we left everything, all the beds made, food in the house, everything we owned, just close it. Because people used to say that, uh, they used to be sent

back. And so we left everything, just the way, you know, furniture and everything. We didn't sell anything. The only thing my mother sold was the animals. We had two donkeys, you know, to work on the farm and, uh, she, and a goat. We had to sell those because there was nobody there to, you know, to take care of it. And my cousin got my little billy goat. I had a little billy goat, and I gave it to him. But I wanted to take the donkey. Well, my brother wanted to take one of the donkeys and I wanted my billy goat, see. Of course, the donkey was out of the question because he was too big, but my mother asked if I could bring my little goat, you know. But they said no, because they couldn't guarantee him that he would last through this. And it's a good thing we didn't. We had a horrible time ourselves, yeah.

DANE: So when you, you left everything, just practically . . .

NITTI: Everything. Just locked the door, and we left everything in place.

DANE: Huh. Huh. So what did you take with you?

NITTI: Well, just, uh, clothing and some food. You know, couldn't take too much, but dry sausage and ham, you know, cheese.

DANE: Bread, cheese?

NITTI: Cheese, yeah. Well, bread, of course, you could get on the boat, you know, and also in Naples we stayed at a hotel, so there was food there, you know, we got food there. But, um, yeah. But, then they supplied food on board ship. Most of the time we'd throw it overboard, I mean, it was terrible. Yeah. My brother made friends with the cooks, you know, at the kitchen, and so we used to get there and get a little pizza once in a while, yeah, yeah . . .

DANE: When you left your town did you and your brother, was it sad, I mean, did you think that you'd come back, except maybe it wasn't . . .

NITTI: No, well, of course, we were, my brother was younger. He doesn't, remembers very little. You know, boys don't remember things like, I'm sorry, did I do something? ( break in tape )

DANE: You were so young that your brother doesn't remember

much.

NITTI: No, he doesn't.

DANE: But were you sad when you left your home?

NITTI: No, because for me it was an adventure. As I said, I wanted to come and see what it was like anyways, you know, and, uh, so, going on the train, going on the bus, and, uh, going on the ship, you know, we wanted to see what it was all about.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Then you got to Naples. Is that where you left from?

NITTI: Yeah, well, we, from our home town we took a bus to, uh, Bari, I think it was. That's a port town. Yeah. And then, let me see, from there we took the train and went to Naples, and we stayed at the hotel. We weren't there too long. I think we were just there three days. And, of course, the boat was, uh, ready for us to go in, you know. And, uh, so we didn't stay there very long. So we just walked around a little bit, but we didn't go see the sights because we were waiting any minute for them to call. We had to stay on standby, you know.

DANE: Uh-huh. Did you have to take any medical exams there in Naples?

NITTI: No. We didn't do anything.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Then it was time to leave . . .

NITTI: It was time to leave, and we boarded the ship.

DANE: Was it daytime, or nighttime?

NITTI: It was daytime. Yeah. It was daytime. And, we were . . .

DANE: Do you remember the name of the boat?

NITTI: Yeah. Re d'Italia.

DANE: Could you spell it?

NITTI: The king of Italy. Capital R-E, no, I'm going to spell it, D-I [sic], this is two words, two separate words I-T-A-L-I-A. And that was the last trip that boat made. They junked it when they got on this side, they had had so much trouble coming over. They just wouldn't . . .

DANE: Was it a passenger ship, or was it a . . .

NITTI: Well, I don't know if it was a passenger ship before, but it was equipped as a troop ship, we came. And this was, in the hole, hold, or whatever they call, in the bottom of the ship, this great big vast expanse there. And there were these bunks, one on top of the other. All over. All over. No privacy or anything.

DANE: That's where you stayed.

NITTI: That was sleeping quarters. But you couldn't stay down there. It was so dark and dreary and everything. And the bathrooms were way upstairs. You had to run all the way upstairs.

DANE: What did it smell like?

NITTI: Well, they kept it pretty clean. Yeah. But, um, I didn't like it, I'll tell you that much. I didn't like being in that hole. Having been in the open up there in the mountains in the open air, I didn't enjoy that. We just slept down there. We didn't stay there at all. Yeah. So we were, mostly by brother and I were running around the ship.

DANE: Did you go up to second class, or first class?

NITTI: No, no, we didn't. No.

DANE: Do you remember meeting any other boys and girls that were your age?

NITTI: No. There didn't seem to be any. Just little babies. One woman died on board ship. They threw her over.

DANE: Do you remember that?

NITTI: Yep. Well, as a matter of fact, I think there were three people that died. I think this lady died of childbirth, because they were saying, you know, the older people, they didn't let the little children know, but I had big ears, and I heard more than I should have, I suppose. And they said that she had died childbirthing. And they put her overboard.

DANE: Was there a ceremony, or . . .

NITTI: No, we weren't allowed. I wasn't allowed. But I just heard people say, say about these thing.

DANE: Uh-huh. And the food was not so good.

NITTI: No, the food wasn't very good. No. But you couldn't expect too much because that was right after the war,

you know. Everything was scarce. So I guess they did the best they could.

DANE: When you were stuck in the middle of the ocean for seven days, did it get scary? Did you think you'd ever be rescued? Did they keep you informed?

NITTI: Well, as I says, now, my brother and I were kids and we, you know, we didn't think about it. As long as, one day after another, you know. But, uh, I knew a lot of the older people were scared and, uh, I happened to, when we were running around the ship, uh, we saw these sailors kneeling down and praying, you know. But otherwise we didn't, we didn't know there was any danger. We were still out. ( she laughs ) Above water. Yeah.

DANE: And you finally got started again, the parts came, and you pulled into New York Harbor some thirty days later, had you heard about the Statue of Liberty? Had anyone told you about the Statue of Liberty?

NITTI: Well, yeah. We heard about the Statue in the old country, yeah. But then, when the ship got, just before we could see the Statue, it slowed down to just

a crawl, you know. And then we got right up in front of it and it seemed like it was standing still. And then we all looked. Of course, it looked beautiful, and I heard these women saying, "We are free." You know, (Italian). Of course, I didn't know what that meant. As far as I was concerned we were all free. Nobody held us at gunpoint or anything, you know. So, uh, yeah. And, uh, so we gazed, and then we went straight to Ellis Island.

DANE: As an eleven-year-old, there was this woman, this tall woman. Can you remember what it looked like in your mind?

NITTI: Well, just as we see it now I saw it then, you know. It's huge, it's really huge. You know, I never, we lived in New York so long and the children were all born in New York State, in Westchester County, but, uh, we never come to see, as I said, my husband wasn't a good provider and he never took us anyplace. So we never went to see, and I've been wanting to so. Helen said to me, you know, when she came yesterday, she said, "When it's all, when they built the, um, library, or whatever, we'll go up and see it."

DANE: Oh, that'll be nice.

NITTI: Yeah. So I, uh, hope to live that long so I can go and see it.

DANE: Oh, that'll be wonderful.

NITTI: 'Cause at this point in my life I'm afraid to travel alone, especially since I've had this injury.

DANE: Do you have a picture of what it looks like in your mind, the Statue?

NITTI: Well, no, of course, I see it in the newspapers and on television and everything so it's just fresh in my mind all the time. But I would like to go inside and see the inside, yeah.

DANE: Then the next stop, after they went by the Statue of Liberty, did they take you right to Ellis Island?

NITTI: Uh-huh. We went straight to Ellis Island. We got off of the boat and went there and, uh . . .

DANE: They put you in line?

NITTI: There wasn't, there wasn't, well, first everybody

walked in, but like I say I don't remember a lot of crowds. There weren't a lot of crowds at that time. And, uh, so then they started lines and when we went through there was just this one line and, as I said, there were no, those metal structures, it was all a big open space. Big rooms, all white, you know. Beautiful. And, um, so we just hang, hung around, and they served our meals, long tables, you know, long benches. And we just sat around for a while. We weren't there very long. As I said, we were there only, I don't think we were even there three days, days our papers were processed. We didn't have to wait, because those people, they call it, place of sighs, or whatever . . .

DANE: Island of tears.

NITTI: Tears, yeah. But in our case it wasn't that way because we were processed already and we were ready to get out. My father was waiting on the other side. And, matter of fact, we saw him, we were on board ship and he was on the wharf and we saw him. But, uh, a lot of people just took a chance and came. And so they were either sick or they had some kind of

problems or they weren't the people that this country wanted in this country, so they were sent back. And that's why they call it the Island of Tears. But in my case, as I said before, we weren't coerced in any way.

DANE: But you did, you did have to go through a medical exam.

NITTI: Yes, but no extreme physical. All he did was talk to us, the doctor. I'll tell you a funny thing. When my mother got up there and he said, "How much is five and five?" And my mother looked at me and, you know, she didn't know whether he was insulting her or what. A man asking a grown woman how much is five and five. ( she laughs ) Yeah. So, anyhow, he just looked, he just looked at us.

DANE: Do you remember any other questions?

NITTI: No, nothing. He didn't say anything. He just looked at us and he turned my eyelids inside out. They showed that on the T.V. Did you see it? Did you see when they turned, and that's all. That's all he did. Turned my lids inside out, and the same with my other

people, and that's all.

DANE: Did they scare you or anything?

NITTI: No, no. I was healthy.

DANE: Uh-huh. And he did check for lice?

NITTI: No, he didn't look. Well, if you got lice, you know, if you have lice I can tell by looking at you. There would be all those nits in there. But we didn't have any. And, uh, so we didn't have any problem.

DANE: Did you ever worry about being sent back. Were you ever afraid that you . . .

NITTI: No, but my mother, that's why she left the house intact, just in case. You never know. We knew we were healthy and, uh, we knew, our papers were straight, and we didn't have any criminal records or anything. So, but, she said, you know, just in case something happens and, of course, she probably was thinking that she would come and visit and then go back, that she didn't have to stay here too long. But she died. She was not even five years, and she died.

DANE: In this country. You were saying that you saw, when

you were in line you went one way and stayed in the Big Hall, but you remember seeing another little girl?

NITTI: Yes. Some other, other people that had gone before us, and they were going up this long stairwell, up, way up there, and I had met this little girl, that we talked and played there during the daytime. And she, they had sent her up there. So I said to my mother, "I want to go up there." And she said, "No, you can't go there. Those are the people that are going back."

DANE: This is the end of side one with Helen Nitti. It's 3:20.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DANE: This is the beginning of side two with Helen Nitti. IT's 3:25. She's number 078. You were just telling me about the little girl who was taken away.

NITTI: Hmm. And I never saw her again after that.

DANE: But you had wanted to follow her?

NITTI: They were put, see, I guess they had different

sections where they keep these, the people that they were separating one way or another. I never did see her again, no. Of course, they were kept there longer to be processed or whatever, and they had to wait for their ship to get back to wherever they were going. But we went out right away, so we didn't have, I never did see her again.

DANE: Were there any things on Ellis Island that you started to see for the first time or taste for the first time?

NITTI: Yeah. Well, butter is the one thing. I, in my home town we didn't make butter because we had no way of keeping it. We had no refrigeration and, uh, so nobody, we'd just make cheeses and, soft cheese and hard cheese and, you know, dry cheese. But we never did make butter. So I, I really went, went for the butter. I used to spread it real thick on my bread and put black pepper on it. I must have gained a couple of pounds in those two days, because I really enjoyed that butter. That was different. Then I also asked my father if our house in America was going to be like Ellis Island. "No," he said, "it's . . ." I said, "We're going to have marble floor just like the

doctor used to have in the old country." And he said, "No, it's all wood. The house is wood." "Oh," I said, I want to go home. I don't want to go. That's going to be a fire. That's going to get on fire. All wood, you're telling me. I want to go home." So he said, "Now, this, we have fire engines in case a fire starts." ( they laugh ) "Fire engines with a horse driving them."

DANE: Because you weren't used to seeing wooden houses.

NITTI: No. Over there we don't have any wood at all. No wood. It's all stone or brick, in my home town.

DANE: It sounds like you were impressed with Ellis Island.

NITTI: Yes, I liked it very much. Yes. And I wished I could stay there. ( they laugh ) I wasn't too anxious to go to this wooden house, you know. Yeah. But, uh, we went, and it was all right. I adjusted.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Do you remember, on Ellis Island, where you slept?

NITTI: We had bunks and, uh, no, I don't remember how many were in a room but, uh, each one had a bunk, one of

those folding cots.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. But you don't remember, even, where you were sleeping, if they were in metal cages. Some people . . .

NITTI: No. No metal cages. Everything was open. You know, I was surprised to see that picture with all that, uh, metal work standing up there in the middle of the floor.

DANE: And what year was this?

NITTI: 1920. In March. We left, uh, Naples March the 15th and got into New York April the 15th. Yeah. It was one whole month. Yeah.

DANE: Before we go up to Buffalo, there was something you had mentioned to me before about the Spanish flu.

NITTI: OH, well, that broke out. The Spanish flu broke out during the war and, uh, we went through it like everybody. And many people died, and my father used to write that here they couldn't keep up burying. They had to have steam shovels making the, uh, uh . . .

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DANE: The graves?

NITTI: The graves, yeah. Digging the graves, because there were so many people dying.

DANE: In Italy.

NITTI: And in Italy, too, they, of course, we didn't have any steam shovels but, uh, quite a lot of people died. Yeah. Yeah. But we were lucky. We had it. We went through it. You know, we were sick. But, um, um, nothing, you know. We came out of it well.

DANE: And who, who was the, the most knowledgeable doctor/

NITTI: There was only one doctor in the town, there's, of course, all Europe is, um, this, um, socialized medicine, as you know. And that was, the government paid this doctor. But in those days what could he do? I mean, in case somebody cut himself he could sew him up, but most people did that themselves. So, uh, he, there wasn't much that he could do. No medicines, no nothing. But anyway, my brother was real sick. He was the worst off. And he was always the healthiest one. You know, he's big, tall, almost six feet and everything. And I was the puny one. But he got a

bed. He must have had bad pneumonia because he couldn't breathe. He was making funny noises when he breathed. And so she, um, my took him to the doctor and I'd trudge along behind, you know. I went and, when, uh, he heard us downstairs and from the top of the stairs he says, "First you let him die and then you bring him to me." You know, what could my mother, she didn't see him, she took him up there. So he looked at hi and he said, "Okay, you go and get some leeches and you put it." This is where they put them, on your neck. So that's the only medicine there was for anything. Whatever you had you got leeches. Yes. So, uh, that's what she did. She got the leeches. And, of course, he would have gotten better anyhow without those things, but she had to do it, you know.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

NITTI: Yeah, so, and we got better. And it was all over.

DANE: That's interesting.

NITTI: But during that stay, the government used to send around doctors from, these were officers in the service, Army doctors. And they sent them to the town

to see how many were going to make it and how many would die. And he came to our house and he said, he patted my little brother and he said, "Ah, you're all going to make it, you're all okay, you're all fine, you're not going to die." Just like that. What a relief. ( they laugh )

DANE: I didn't mean to digress there, but I wanted you to tell that story. Any other first impressions? Did you see, a lot of people told me that they saw their first black person when they came to America.

NITTI: No. But I'll tell you a funny story. During the war, you know, these soldiers had gone overseas, you know, Africa, whatever. And these two men got the bright idea to get this black man and they built, on a cart and they sat him there and they dragged him all over town, you know, on this cart with this cow or bull or whatever it was that was dragging this cart, with this black man. And they, you used to pay two cents, we had never, in my home town, we had never seen a black person or Chinese or anything, you know. Just, we were isolated up on top of that mountain and we had never seen anybody. So they used to charge two cents

to go and see this man, this black man. And, of course, he had some clothes on, and I heard these women, you know, speculating, "I wonder if he's that color all over." ( they laugh ) They doubted that anybody could be that way, and they figured maybe somebody just painted parts of him, you know. So they were wondering if he was black all over. And that's the first time, but then when I had my first daughter she was in the carriage and I was pushing her, and we were going to the store and she, for the first time, saw this black man, and she was just beginning to talk and she said, "Mom, look at that man with the dirty face." So, of course, that man turned, he saw the little baby, you know, and he laughed. It was all right. But, you know, the first time you see somebody that's different it makes an impression.

DANE: Sure, it does. So then, when you saw your father, did you recognize him? Were you excited to see him?

NITTI: I had never seen him. I was two years old when he left, and my brother was two months, see. So, uh, I didn't recognize him. But when we were on board ship and he was on the wharf my mother pointed him out to

us. And I didn't think much of him, I'm sorry to say. ( she laughs ) I turned right around and I nearly got slapped int eh face because I said, "I don't like him." ( she laughs ) So, anyhow, that was the first seeing from far away. But it was wintertime, and he had this cap pulled over his eyes. You could hardly see him. But he was, uh, he was a nice person. He was, uh, blondish. He was blonde and gray-eyed. Light person, very light.

DANE: What did he do in Buffalo?

NITTI: He, he, uh, was a yardman for, um, American Brass. He did all kinds of jobs. He was very handy. Then, when he bought the house, after we came, he sold the property in the old country and, uh, bought a two-family house there in Buffalo, and he used to do all the painting and, if the windows were broken, he was very handy at doing everything, you know. You know. So he, um . . .

DANE: Were you glad, when you got up to Buffalo and you took the train, I imagine, to Buffalo . . .

NITTI: Yeah, yeah.

DANE: And then, you got there in the Spring, you didn't speak English.

NITTI: No. No, and I would see these people yakkin', yakkin', and I got angry because I couldn't tell what they were talking about. And we'd go to the market, and this was the Polish market, and these people, and I would get close, you know, hoping that I could understand a little of what they were saying. And I couldn't, and that made me angry. So, as we, Sundays my father used to take use for walks to the park on the trolley car. He used to take us around. And all the signs I used to see I used to try to read and ask him what it was, you know. And there were a lot of Jewish long names, and German long names, and he would say, "That's just a name, you know. That's just a name. It doesn't mean anything. Just somebody's name." Yeah. That I remember. But then I'd pick it up real fast.

DANE: In the street, or . . .

NITTI: No, no, not in the street. I wasn't allowed, I wasn't allowed to go to birthday parties or anything when I was, even when I was in school, I was kept very

strict. That's the kind of people they were. In, uh, so, um, that was funny. I'd be invited to birthday parties and they'd say, "No, you can't go." I couldn't go. So, uh, I just, just in the school. Of course, I knew the, see, I knew Italian, and that is just like, when you know one language, kind of carries you over and I picked it up. Even my kids, they're surprised at the way I picked it up. Yeah. And, so I, it didn't take long. I didn't start, we came in March and I didn't start school till September, and, uh, so we started at the public school, my brother and I. And, uh, and then we realized there was a school across the street from where we lived. It was St. Lucy's School. And, so, my mother said, "Well, it's easier walking all the way up there in the wintertime than in the summertime when school was over. In September you, when you start again, you'll go across the street. So I wasn't allowed to leave the house until we heard the bell ring across the street.

DANE: Why do you think they were so strict?

NITTI: Just their custom. And my brother, you see, that's why I was angry at my brother all the time. Because

he could go out rollerskating and everything and go running around with the kids.

DANE: Tell me what your names were. They're different than they were, now.

NITTI: De Nini is my father's name.

DANE: And what was your first name?

NITTI: My first name was Angela Elentina. See, my father put his name on both of us, my brother and me. He is Angelo Americo. He named my brother for America. Like I told you, he just loved this country, hmm. So he named his son after America. And, uh . . .

DANE: And you were Angela . . .

NITTI: Yeah, Angela. That's his first name, his name. His name was Angelo De Nini. See, and he gave us both his name, and he made up Elentina. He said we have a patron saint, St. Valentine, so out of that he made out Elentina.

DANE: When you went to school did you ask the teacher to call you Elentina?

NITTI: Well, I wrote my name as I was baptized, you know, as my papers show. And, uh, but all the people, nowadays, you know, you see, the world is altogether different than from when I came here. Nobody could say the Italian words or anything else. And they just couldn't say Elentina. My first name was Angela, but nobody ever called me, in the old country nobody called me, they all called me Elentina, see. So, uh, when I came here nobody could say that. And, uh, so, they used to say Elly, Ella, Tina. I didn't know what to answer to. So I said, "Okay." From now on it's going to be Helen, see.

DANE: And that's when you first got here.

NITTI: Yeah. So it's been Helen ever since.

DANE: Were you sad to lose Elentina? Did you feel like a new person?

NITTI: No, no, no. I was glad because I never really liked it because it was so different from everybody else. And even a couple of families tried to name their girls after me. And one of them was called Rudolandina. That sounds awful. And the other one

was Elan, see, a lot of these people didn't know how to read and write and so they just said it and whoever wrote it it didn't come out right, you know. So, uh, I just like Helen better. Easier. Didn't matter. I was me.

DANE: Uh-huh. When you started going to school and you were still learning English, did you ever feel like you were treated different because you were from Italy?

NITTI: Well, no. What made me really angry was that some of these kids were from Italian parentage and they used to make fun of me. I couldn't pronounce the words right, and they used to make fun of me and they used to call me Little Italy and, all, wops, or whatever, you know, as if they were better or something, you know, just because they could speak a little better, you know. But, uh, they soon found out that, uh, I was, I could hold my own.

DANE: Did you like school?

NITTI: Ah, yes. I loved school. I always did. Even in my home town I loved school. Yeah.

DANE: Did you stay all the way through till high school,

or . . .

NITTI: No, I graduated in four years, the eighth grades and, uh, I was given a scholarship that I could have gone to high school, but would buy my books and pay for transportation and everything, but my father took me out. He said, "You see, you're too smart for your own good. You stay home and help your mother." So he took me out of school. And nobody could stop him, see. I graduated eighth grade. In those days not many people graduated from eighth grade, you know. So, uh, yeah, so I was denied, and that's the reason that I had this yearning to give for school and that's what I pressed on my kids.

DANE: How many children do you have?

NITTI: Six.

DANE: And did they all go to college?

NITTI: They all went to college, and they're all Phi Beta Kappa, I'm proud to say. Yeah.

DANE: So your dream came true.

NITTI: They all, yeah. When my son sent me this letter

telling me he was a full professor I wrote back and I said, I raised some very good children for the United States of America. I'm very proud. I don't have much. Just, I get along every day. But I am proud that I did something good.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Do you remember when you first felt like an American? You were awfully young when you came.

NITTI: Yeah, well, I, I felt right at home after I came, after I lost the longing for the things familiar of the old country, you know. But, um, no, I, I liked it right away.

DANE: The citizenship. Your dad was a citizen.

NITTI: Yeah, he was, so we all have derivative citizenship. In those days, when your father was an American citizen, you all have. But I have a copy of my citizenship.

DANE: Did you have to go get special papers, or did they . . .

NITTI: No, I just went to the immigration office and said

that I wanted my copy. I hadn't asked for it. I knew I was a citizen. I hadn't asked for it before. But, uh, when you, I wanted to go overseas, and I wanted to go to Mexico, too. And in those days, um, you had to have a passport. So I went down and they said, "You have to have, you have to show something that you're a citizen." I knew I was, and it was on record, but I didn't have the paper to show. So I went and I got it and I got my passport.

DANE: And you got an American passport.

NITTI: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

DANE: That's nice. That's wonderful. Did your mom, when she was here, sounds like she really was attached to her farm. Did she miss the old country?

NITTI: Yeah, she wasn't happy here at all. Because she didn't learn any words at all. She just, she was too much attracted to what she had. Because she worked hard. She was a hard working woman. You know, she used to leave us in bed in the morning, go out early. It takes a lot of work. And then she had to oversee, and feed the animals, and sometimes had to hire some

people, although she had relatives that would come help in the harvest and planting and everything. But she worked very hard, you know. And then to leave it all made her feel bad. But, as I said, we were pretty well off. We really didn't have to come to this country except that they wanted the family together, see.

DANE: Did she bring customs over? Food, or holidays and things?

NITTI: No, we . . . Everything was the same here as over there, because the church was the same and, uh, food was the same. Of course, over here you didn't have to raise the food. You just went. Over there she had to bake bread twice a week, I mean, every two weeks she baked a whole bunch of bread, and it lasted two weeks, where here you just went to the store but she, she still, everything was a little different for her. It was hard for her to grasp.

DANE: Let me take a look at my notes here. You got married, had six children, gave them an education.

NITTI: Yep.

DANE: Looking back over, would you say that it was a good thing that you came to this country?

NITTI: Of course. I know I could have gotten an education there. But if I had stayed there, I don't know, if I had had children, if they would have been able to get an education. But, uh . . .

DANE: And why was it so important for you that they get an education?

NITTI: I don't know. I had this thing that, uh, I wanted to learn. I, I never had had enough. I always, you know, with my teachers and everything. And, uh, and, of course, they were good to me. I don't know, they all liked me and they all helped me when I asked questions, you know, even in a classroom and everything. And, uh, of course, all, I never liked to play with the little dumb kids, you know. She would say, "You teach, you teach." They had one boy that was kind of hardhearted. She used to scold him, say, "Now, you do what Elentina tells you." So I used to be a teacher even before, when I was a little kid myself. And that's the way it was. I liked better the educated people that I could ask questions and,

and the others, there was a lot of superstition, you know, in that town. Of course, that's the way it was all over Europe, in those days. It wasn't just my home town. A lot of superstition. And I couldn't believe, I didn't believe in ghosts and I didn't believe in a lot of things that, you know, those people believed in. And I felt sorry. And I used to say I'm gonna be a doctor or a lawyer so I could teach there things, these people not to believe in, you know, I, before I knew we were coming here I used to think these things to myself, that I wanted to be somebody so I could teach these people, you know, something. I guess I was just born with this kind of thing, because I had nobody to teach me or push me or anything. But I just kept thinking these things.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And, so, the importance of an education for your children, it was for mental betterment, or for a better life, or both?

NITTI: Well, for everything, and so that they could do some good. I could see that all those ignorant people couldn't do anything. They just plodded along. And it seems like nobody had any ambition. And that, and

I did, and I just wanted things to be better all the time. I wanted knowledge. That was the whole thing. And I wanted it for them. And I'm lucky that they listened to me and they wanted it too, you know. When they first, before they were old enough to go to school and the older ones would go to school, they would cry. They wanted to go too because I, you know, I would say, all of this, they learned these different things and they would come home from school. I checked everything, all their work, and I asked them what they did in school all the time. And so the younger ones were interested to learn, too. That's how it started.

DANE: A lot of, um, Italians, when they came over, would stay within the community.

NITTI: That's right.

DANE: Would you opt for that?

NITTI: That's what I don't like. That's what I didn't like, and I didn't. When it was up to me to make decisions I lived outside the Italian community because I could see they just never wanted, felt like they wanted to

improve themselves. And I couldn't see that, you know. I just wanted things to be better and I could see that they could be if people applied. But they were just lax. I mean, they just didn't care.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

NITTI: And I couldn't see that. And I didn't want my children to be with those people. I wanted them to look, open their eyes and see the world, you know. That's why I didn't send them to Catholic school. I went to Catholic school, but I didn't send them. Too strict, and they keep you down too much, I thought. They're very strict. They, you know, make you walk the line but, uh, I wanted them to open their eyes and see everything around them, the good and the bad and all.

DANE: And your children, you were born Italian, became American, and then had American children.

NITTI: Uh-huh.

DANE: Did that mean anything special to you?

NITTI: Well, you know, I didn't think about it. They were

just my children and I was proud that they were here and they were doing all the things that were right, you know.

DANE: Did they think of themselves as Italians, or both? Do they have any mutual identity as . . .

NITTI: No, well, of course, they're proud that they have Italian parentage. But, uh, they're glad. Lot of times they say see, if you hadn't come to this country then you wouldn't have us. ( she laughs ) You would have us Americans, you know. So, but, uh, you know, just, as I say, they're proud to have the Italian parentage.

DANE: And then when you got here you had to make a living for yourself at some point.

NITTI: Well, after, uh, no, when, see, I got married very young. When my mother died, as I said, and she was here only five years, we didn't get, my Dr. and I didn't get along with my father. He was very strict and everything. So a friend of a friend got me a job. When I was sixteen years old, I think. In a men's manufacturing place in Buffalo. There's a great big

factory there, four blocks square. And that's where I started sewing men's clothes. And I went to night school a little after my mother died, because before that she wouldn't let me out, and my father wouldn't let me out. So I went to night school and took shorthand and typing for a while. But not having the full range of the language it was very hard, you know. So I, I knew I couldn't make it as a secretary, so I stuck to sewing and when I married I was sewing, and sewing ever since.

DANE: And you worked for Sears?

NITTI: Yes. I worked for Sears for many years and I retired from Sears. Since I was injured, I retired on disability. But Sears built the first ladies alteration shop for me. And I retired from there. And after I left they tried others, but they had to cut it out. They abandoned it because they couldn't make it. And I worked on all of the bridals and formals and all the women's line, all of the whole store. If anything came damaged then I would fix it, and altered for the people to fit. ( break in tape )

DANE: It's four o'clock, it's the end of side two, Helen

KECK-78/NITTI

Nitti, number 078.