

Ellis Island Interviews

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IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Peter Morton Coan



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Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words

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back, I remember going into this big room where they had not bunks but hammocks, because I remember wondering if Ellis Island was a place for soldiers.

Our clothes were all wrinkled. My father said, "We'll change when we get back on the boat," because we had to go to Boston from there. I became a citizen because at the time

children under twelve automatically became citizens.

So we got off the boat, my aunt was waiting for us. And the first thing my aunt did when we got there, she took me to a store, and bought me a new pair of sneakers and a dress which I still have somewhere.

Peter Mossini

BORN JULY 8, 1898
EMIGRATED 1921, AGE 22
PASSAGE ON THE PESARO

He came from a large family, dirt poor, in the seaside village of Santa Teresa di Riva. Uneducated, he was forced to labor at a young age. Unskilled, he followed his eldest sister to western Pennsylvania and worked the coal mines for eighteen dollars a week. He worked the Pennsylvania Railroad, scraped through the Depression, and bought a sanitation business on the cheap in 1934. He sold it and opened a bar and restaurant that he ran until he retired.

*I*n them days, there was two classes of people in Sicily: the rich and the very poor. My family was very poor. I never went to school. I started working from before I was ten years old. My father and mother, they send me to work to make maybe ten cents a day. I was working in a lemon factory. I work from one o'clock in the morning to about two in the afternoon the next day. Eleven, twelve hours. Them days, if you make ten cents a day, that was a lot of money. There was no time for play. For fun, I play boccie or soccer maybe. But we no have a ball. So we used a lemon.

My father was also working in the factory and my younger brothers did, too, later on. My mother no work because we had a

big family, you know. Eight children. And there was no work for the women. Even if they wanted to work, there was no work. So my sisters stay home. We had only two bedrooms. Today, if you got four children, you got four bedrooms. Them days, if you had four boys, they all had to sleep in the same room or if you had four girls, same thing.

To feed the family in winter, my father would buy a hundred kilogram of dried beans. My mother would soak them the night before and the following day get some macaroni and that's how we fill the family. And naturally, she baked her own bread. The flour came in fifty, seventy-five pound bags, and she bake maybe sixteen, eighteen

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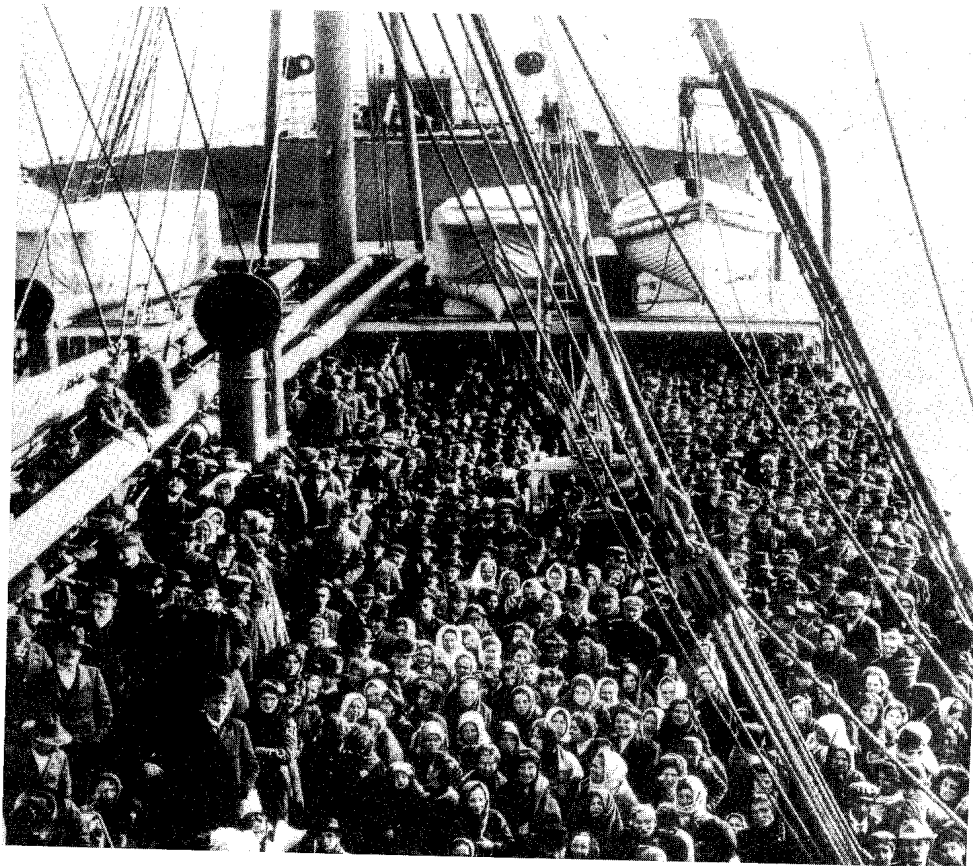
loaves of bread each week. The oven was outside the house, a communal oven.

The first few days the bread was pretty good because it was soft, but after a week the bread was like a rock and many times I remember we had to soak the bread with a little water and rub it with garlic and that's what we were eating. That and fish. Fish was cheap.

The day before Christmas we always had fish and on Christmas day, maybe my father go to the butcher shop and buy a

couple pounds of pork, you know, and we mixed sauce and we have a dish of spaghetti. Over here, even my own children or my grandchildren, you buy steak, cost you five dollars a pound and they say, "Who wants that garbage?" Over there, if you had a piece of fat you was lucky and boy, it tasted good, too. There was no gift. There was no money. What gift? You was lucky if you can buy a loaf of bread.

We never miss church. We was all baptized, confirmed. Madonna Mount Carmel.



Immigrants in steerage upon arriving in New York Harbor, November 1920

(NATIONAL PARK SERVICE: STATUE OF LIBERTY NATIONAL MONUMENT)

A big church. The church, I would say, was three miles from where we was living. So we walk to church because there was no transportation. I'll be honest with you, my first pair of new shoes I had on my feet, I was sixteen years old. Every time I got a couple penny, I had a place in the wall where I put the money. And there was a shoemaker. He was making a pair of shoes for himself. And when I see that pair of shoes I ask him how much they cost. He says, "Sixteen lira," and I try them on my feet. Now I says, "I'm going to go get the money." I went home, and got the money from the wall. My piggy bank. I went back and I says, "Now you're going to make another pair for me." He says, "A lot of work!" I says, "I'll stay all night with you." We stayed there all night and he work all night to make the shoes.

I wanted to come to the United States because my father did. The first time my father come was in 1901. He went to Pennsylvania and he was working in the coal mines. Every once in a while, he send a few dollars. He was there about five or six years. Then he come back to Sicily. The last trip he made to the United States was in 1912. He stay one year. But there was no work, and he just had enough money to pay his fare and come back to Sicily. By that time, the family started to get a little big. So we no starve, my brothers were working. So we all pulled together.

During the First World War, I was in the army, and I held to my idea about coming to America. Then, in 1919, my sister Josephine came. I was very close to her. She was the oldest one in the family and I respected her like a mother, because she was like a mother to me. She came by herself and she got married. She was doing very well over here. And I wanted to build myself a new life, better myself. Eventually, all my brothers and sisters came to United States.

So I saved my money because my father, he couldn't afford to pay for my trip. I don't

remember exactly what I pay. As soon I got out of the army, I apply for the passport. That took about four, five months, because they started closing the immigration.

I took a little suitcase and I had just a few pairs of socks, couple of handkerchief and couple of underwear and a couple of shirts. There was me, my cousin—he was only sixteen years old, I guaranteed for him—and this friend of mine. He was about nineteen. They're both dead now. And we left from Naples the nineteenth of March 1921.

The boat was *Pesaro*. A German boat. Italy got it after the First World War and there was no cabin, no first, second, or third. There was just one class in them days. Steerage. One floor. One room. There was bunk beds. And in the morning, you had to get up because the crew had a firehose and they washed the floor.

I remember as soon as we left Naples they gave you a pillowcase. Inside that pillowcase you had your aluminum dish, your fork, knife, spoon, and a metal cup. When it was time to eat, we lined up and got our stuff. We ate twice a day. They gave you a cup of soup, piece of meat, piece of bread, and cup of coffee. Then we had to find a place to sit down because there was no dining room. This was a troop transport boat.

When we reach New York, I thank the good Lord. It was early morning, the Fourth of July. We was on the deck like a bunch of sheep. Everybody had a suitcase, dragging their suitcase, and I remember the first meal they gave to us at Ellis Island. They give a sandwich, white bread with a piece of cheese and a piece of ham and it tasted so good. It tasted like a nice piece of cake. That was something new for me. I never seen sandwiches in Sicily. They examined if you had lice in your head. If you did, they shaved your hair. I remember that. There was a lot of bald people. And if you had some kind of disease in your eye, they send you back.

We left that night by train from Pennsylvania Station in New York. We went to Portage, Pennsylvania. It's between Altoona and Johnstown. Western Pennsylvania. My sister Josephine lived there with her husband.

Them days, the train stopped every station for the people who worked in the coal mine and the railroad and the factory, every station. By the time we got to Portage, no one was on the train. Just us—me, my cousin, and my friend. We didn't know where to go. None of us spoke English, and it was April, kind of cold. We had the Italian

clothes on, very light, because Sicily's warm like Florida. And we see an old man inside the stationhouse. He was making a fire with coal to keep the station warm. He sees us with our suitcases.

"Hey, where you going?" he asks us. We don't know what the hell he says. "*Italiani?*" Oh God, my heart went. He spoke Italian! We say, "*Si, si!*" Then he asked us where we supposed to go and we give the name of my sister and my brother-in-law. He says, "Oh, yeah. I know them." He got in touch, and then my brother-in-law come, thanks to God.

This was the trip.

Angelina Palmiero

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BORN SEPTEMBER 8, 1913

EMIGRATED 1923, AGE 10

PASSAGE ON THE *GIUSEPPE VERDI*

She came from San Cataldo in central Sicily. During the Depression, she became a seamstress in a dressmaking factory in Brooklyn where she met her husband, an American-born Italian. She married at nineteen. In 1959, she bought a dressmaking factory, had twenty-eight employees, and eventually sold it in 1969. "The Jewish people owned the factories, the Italian people worked," she said. "We tried to make ourselves Americanized as much as we could at the time.

Now, thank God, we're all one. I hope so."

*M*y grandfather was a ranch foreman. He would take care of all these men that worked. They picked olives and almonds, and then they would have to crack them. I remember going to a place where they would crack them with a little hammer, the almonds, all by hand. I had three sisters. I was the baby of the three. They got us kids to take the almonds out of the shells and put them in a

burlap bag. We wanted to get into the burlap bag because they said the bag was going to America.

I used to visit my grandparents at their farm, but we lived in the town. I remember I was in school when Mussolini came into power, and they took us out of school, and they made us march all around the town with flags. Our school was upstairs from a prison. There was an open yard with an iron