

Faustina Peri interviewed by Madison Walsh

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Long Beach, NY

### **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

grandma, father, Italy, cousins, citizen, English, speak, parents, stones, telegram, asthma, mother, girls, teacher, thought, water, ship, nice, children, taught

00:00

Madison Walsh: All right. Go for it. So, this is 12:24 pm, and we're in Long Beach, New York. This is my great grandma, and I'm Madison Walsh. Yeah, Let's go.

00:14

Faustina Peri: My father, had to come here for five years before we could come to America. But somebody had to send for him that was a citizen also. My uncle Luciano was here.... He was in the army here, and he was a citizen. And he sent for him. So he had to provide food and shelter, and a job for my father and he did. And then my father lived with him. And after five years, he took the test and became a citizen. And through a mistake, they asked him "were his children with him?" And he said, "yes." And we weren't with him we were with my mother. I became a citizen, from a mistake. I had asked, I said, you know, that was a mistake. And they said you're on the paper, so you're a citizen. So, I was able to vote, when I was 18. My brother was asthmatic. He forgot all about that when we came to this country, because he no longer suffers with asthma. It was the change in the air.

02:03

MW: The change of air from Italy to here like gave him asthma or just like, what happened?

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FP: He never got asthma again, but that's what he died from.

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MW: So, Grandma, why did you leave Italy?

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FP: Because my father was here.

03:12

MW: Your father was here?

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FP: We had to take a ship.

03:21

MW: How long was the ship ride?

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FP: The ship was fine for about one hour. Then we got into the open waters and the waves were going over the ship. It was terrible. But we kids, we ran around anyway. But not the mothers. The adults were throwing up all the way over. Anyway, on the last day I think it was the 14<sup>th</sup> or the 15<sup>th</sup>, my mother said to me “go to the cabin and the top of the ship. That's where the telegraph office is and send a telegram to your father.” So, I said, okay, so as I'm walking up those steps, the water is running over me. And all of a sudden I felt somebody helped me and it was one of the mariners. He said, “where are you going?” and I told him. He says “that's terrible to send you up there because you can get washed away and we never knew would know.”

04:46

MW: Because the water was going into the boat basically, right?

04:49

FP: Oh, yeah. You can't even begin to imagine how rough it was. Anyway, I sent a telegram to my father. As I turned around to go away he said, “You're not going by yourself.” As he held me he took me down to my cabin and that's where we stayed. When we went to go to dinner, we went, we used to have nice, we couldn't eat. We were nauseous. They could eat.

05:41

MW: What did they give you guys to eat on the on the ship? Was it like crummy food?

05:48

FP: Yeah, imagine it was, but I don't really remember. The only thing I remember was I picked up a square of butter because I thought it was cheese because we never had butter at home we only used olive oil. I stuck my finger in my teeth as went “ehh”. They said, “no that's butter, keep it away from me.”

06:35

MW: Okay, why did your father want to migrate to the United States?

06:46

FP: Why do they want to come here because they want to make a better living? And years ago, he was profitable he got he got a very good job in a shoe factory in Italy he used to make the shoe to fit your foot. Here the head sizes.

07:10

MW: Oh, he would like individually like make it to the foot, mold it to the foot. Okay, got it. So we'd like more work in Italy essentially right.

07:25

FP: He played the clarinet and smoked. Which eventually killed him.

07:36

MW: That's why he got the asthma right. Partially.

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FP: He got the emphysema later on.

07:52

MW: Do remember anything about Italy? Like do you miss anything?

07:56

FP: I remember everything about Italy, there's not a thing I don't remember.

08:00

MW: How old were you when you migrated?

08:03

FP: I was 12. I came in 1927 and now I'm 104

08:16

MW: I know you're going strong it's because we're you cuz you're Italian they live long. They're healthy. Got the good blood you got the wine the blood?

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FP: No, I can't drink....never did.

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09:31

MW: Great. All right. So Grandma, yeah. So what did you miss about your country? Like what do you miss about Italy?

09:39

FP: Well, I don't miss anything at the moment. When I was a child, I missed my friends. I miss going to school after school, what I mean is after we were dismissed from regular school, we went to the nuns at the convent. Then nuns used to teach us how to crochet and how to embroider and different things. And then they used to read to us from the Bible. So I thought it was only a story. When I came from Italy and I went to the store with my cousin Faustina I said to her, "I heard English spoken, but never like this, they're so melodious with some expression." And she said, "Those are the Jewish people talking. They're talking in Yiddish." So I said to her, "You mean to tell me they're still alive." She said "Very much so." I said, "I thought it was only a story that nuns were saying."

11:09

MW: What about about like, what, what what story?

11:15

FP: They were reading the story of the Bible. And I couldn't believe that they were still alive. But it wasn't the story at all. That the Jewish people were alive. Of course, when I went to school, and I couldn't speak English the principle, said to me, "What grade would you like to be placed in?" I said, "Well in Italy I graduated, but here I like to be put in the first grade." So that...

12:07

MW: So you were 12 in the first grade?

12:12

FP: So, as I advance, you know, he would put me ahead. So the children used to say, "What's your name?" *Nome* it's similar. You know I would always try to imagine what they said. So, I would say, "Faustina Santa Bola" "Yes, but what's your name?" And these guys were stupid I used to think to myself. Anyway, I certainly knew what was what and World War II and the language I would just have to learn to speak it. So anyway, they sent me to another class and I thought, whatever was written on the paper told them that I couldn't speak English. So, they were having a reading session. And everyone was looking at the book reading. And the teacher told me where to sit. And then she went back to her book. But I wanted to tell her, "I didn't understand you. And I don't speak English." But she never looked. So after the third time she said, "What's the matter with you stupid? Don't you understand English?" I said, "No."

So she said, "You don't understand English?" I said "no." She hugged me, you know. And she said she was sorry she didn't know.

Anyway, at that time, I'm going back many years, this little boy that was in the classroom told his mother, "mommy, there was a little girl and she cried, and she was so pretty. And he said, "When I get to be a big boy, I'm gonna marry." And he took out many girls, you know, and he would say to them, "I'm taking you out for company and I hope we have a good time, but don't get any ideas because I'm not going to marry you or anything because I have somebody else in mind. So under those circumstances, if you want to go out with me fine, and if not, I'll ask somebody else." Anyway, he used to take the girls home and the father of one of the girls said, "I intend to retire soon. And I'll give you my business if you marry my daughter." He says, "I don't want your business and I don't want your daughter. I told her I wasn't doing that." So he went away.

15:46

MW: Wait, so but you were you were in the first grade and they let you skip grades, right? Yeah. So how old was great grandpa then? Was he younger than you?

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FP: He was about seven months younger.

16:03

MW: Oh, that's not that bad. Seven months younger. That's really not bad

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FP: Anyway, eventually, I got to you know they [the educators] wanted me to write conversations. Before writing, you know, "what are you going to write?" They had parents go...

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17:33

MW: All right, Grandma, I have a few more questions. Let me see. All right. So you already answered that you came with? So you came with your cousins? I'm sorry to interrupt you. Um, so you came with your cousins. Right. And your father and your mother to the United States? Right?

17:54

FP: Yeah, we went to live upstairs from my cousins. But what am I up to?

18:06

MW: You're doing really well. Let me see. Well, okay, well, how did you adjust the language, the language and, and the culture in New York City?

18:20

FP: They said to write a conversation including parents, And I said, "I have lots of parents," and they, "no, there's only two." I was very confused, but how could not have more than two parents. But see *parénte* means relatives and parents is *genetore*. So lots of times I was confused about the language. Then the was a principal asked these two young teachers in the lunchroom if they would teach me how to speak English. So, the first day they were really nice and they taught me little different things and then they started to talk English like my father, broken English you know, "come-a-here, come-a-there." And I looked at them, and I couldn't say anything to them, but I left and I never went back to them.

19:52

MW: She only got taught by the lunch ladies like once. The lunch ladies only taught you English like once. You said the lunch ladies only taught you English like one time.

20:08

FP: No, I went there a couple of times and they were pretty nice, but they were teachers. It was there lunch room and the lunch period actually, They didn't have to do that...

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MWL What they were required to do?

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FP: But when they started to teach me English with the Italian accent I didn't go back anymore because I was attuned, I could tell. But the kids were very nasty to me. They threw stones at me and they...

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MW: Why, because you were Italian?

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FP: Because I didn't speak English I guess, I don't know why. They couldn't tell from my clothes, but I looked like, I looked better than them. I didn't know how to express myself with these kids. They threw stones at me. So I said to the teacher, "This, this this." And she said, "you mean they threw stones at you?" and I said, "yes." They were punished very severely and they never did it again.

21:38

MW: Good. So you like wore different clothes and you had different hairstyles and they didn't understand basically, right?

21:44

FP: No, my my styles were better than theres. When my father brought me to the children dress shop to buy different clothes the woman said, "I like the one she's wearing better." So he said "my sister made it for her."

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MW: That's always the best stuff anyway.

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