

JOSEPHINE GARZIERI CALLOWAY

Oral History: *EDITED VERSION*

Interview #193 by Judith Hartman on June 17, 1986

Immigrated from Comiso, Province of Ragusa in Sicily, Italy, at the age of 15

Arrived in 1922 on the ship *Colombo*

Read the oral history. Jot down answers to the questions as you go along. Then discuss the answers in your group.

*Your dramatic skit will focus on Josephine's eleven months in the hospital at Ellis Island, where doctors successfully cured her of **trachoma**, an eye disease that usually resulted in deportation from the US.*

CALLOWAY (shown at right, from her *Certificate of Citizenship, 1944*): Life in Italy was beautiful, because I was surrounded with as much love as I needed, even though I had no parents nearby. And I went to school, in grammar and high school, in Italy. Now, we were with grandma, crowded in very small quarters. So, my mother and father was worried because she's left us at the mercy of my grandmother and my grandfather...



HARTMAN: Your brother and yourself?

CALLOWAY: My brother and myself and my cousin. And I was a leader of the three; I was the oldest. And I saw to it that everybody went to school at the right time, and went to high school and everything else. So, I went to high school, all in Italy. Comiso [a town in Sicily] is quite a nice little clean town.

HARTMAN: Your parents were already in America...

CALLOWAY: In America. I think my mother must have gotten to America in, I think, in 1917, or—just before the war. But then the war broke out, that was the end of transportation. So, my father came to get us in 1921. [My father] was a construction man. And my mother did tailoring.

HARTMAN: So were you anxious to be rejoined with your parents in this new place?

CALLOWAY: No. As a matter of fact, I wrote them a letter, when I was about fifteen years old, I asked them not to beg for me to come to America yet. I wanted to get my degree first. I had to go to school first, and finish my schooling before I came.

[But] my father got an emergency passport, and he came to Italy. He knocked at our door, it must have been around eleven-thirty at night. But, I guess the train was late. And he knocked at the door, and I was studying Latin and Greek in those days. I said, "Who's there?" He says, "A friend." I said, "Well, what's your name?" He said, "Never mind my name!" So with the two suitcases, he pushed the door open and I started screaming and I woke up the whole neighborhood. And, my grandma says, "Don't worry, that's your father, I recognized his voice." See, I don't remember him anymore.

HARTMAN: He left when you were quite young. Was it your letter that prompted him?

CALLOWAY: Yes. Because you see, had I been [older than] sixteen, [he] couldn't claim me. He wanted to have his family together.

Why would Josephine's father have to "claim her" before she was 16?

Do you think her father was right or wrong to take her to the US before she finished school? Why?

Why didn't he send for his children earlier?

HARTMAN: But, if you didn't really want to go, how did you feel about all this?

CALLOWAY: Well, once I saw my father, things changed. I was sorry that I had to give up school, but that was it. [But while getting a ship in Naples, others told her,] "You may not make it through." Because of trachoma.

HARTMAN: They recognized it before you left?

CALLOWAY: They recognized it on the boat. And they notified the boat. I was isolated. I had to be in a special cabin with no one else with me. They would bring food to me, but I could not come out. Only at night, when people [were no] longer on the deck. [They] had a joint cabin for my father and my brother. And I was alone.

HARTMAN: Why did they even let you get on the boat, then, I wonder?

CALLOWAY: I don't know, my father manipulated that situation, yeah.

So when I got into Ellis Island, I was on First Island, where the hospital wing was. We met my mother in Ellis Island. My brother was standing next to me, and he said, "Josephine, do you think that's mama?" See, he's two years younger than me, and I really... couldn't visualize her anymore. So, my brother said, "I think that's mama. I think that's mama." So, he went to her, and I had to run after him because I was afraid he would get lost, because there were hundreds of people in there. The Red Cross nurse said "Stay. I'll let you know." She approached my mother, and said, "What is your name?" Naturally the [nurses] had our names written [down], so that's how we met.



HARTMAN: Oh, so your brother did pick her out of a crowd. That must have been a happy reunion. [*shown right, years later, from his Certificate of Citizenship*]

CALLOWAY: Happy and emotional. Very emotional, it was very, very—so, that's life. But, my brother and I, we had to go to headquarters. The headquarters, Dr. [Hettrick] was the main person that took care of the hospital wing. And, Dr. [Kimmel].

HARTMAN: Did you even know there was something wrong with your eye?

CALLOWAY: I did know. But I didn't anticipate it to be the grave case of contagious—it was highly contagious. My brother was cleared. In a week, he was able to come home.

HARTMAN: He stayed with you for a week on Ellis Island?

CALLOWAY: Well, not with me, but in the men's wing, yeah. My brother, he was on the lower level, and we were on the second story of another building. In those days... people [sold] those great big apples for five cents, and he was calling me out from the yard, “Josephine, Josephine!” Finally I heard his voice, and I answered him. And he came with that big apple and he wanted to put it through the bars, but it wouldn't go through! That was really a pathetic sight. And he didn't have a knife so he couldn't cut it.

HARTMAN: It seems strange to me that they didn't send you back to Italy...

CALLOWAY: Oh, they did—they tried. And, my father was not informed that he had to have a thousand dollar bond for me to stay on Ellis Island to be treated.

All of a sudden I was on line, and I thought I was in the line was that I was going home to my parents. One man says to his wife, he says, "This is the first time I've seen a person going back to Europe and laughing about it. She's not even worried." I say then in my language, “I'm not going to Europe! I'm going to America.” The wife said, “No you're not, you're going right back to Italy.” So I was being deported.

So, the Red Cross nurse was nearby, and she came to me, and says, "Don't worry." She called my mother and my father. They had to be there before five o'clock with a thousand dollar bond. And they didn't have no way to do it. All the people on the street, in Paterson, contributed. On loan, to make the thousand dollar bond.

HARTMAN: They literally had to ask strangers for the money to help you—so that you could stay in the hospital.

CALLOWAY: Yes. It was a bond. And I stayed in the hospital.

Why was trachoma such a dreaded disease that it could get you deported?

What did Josephine's father have to do to keep her in the hospital at Ellis Island instead of being deported? How did he do it?

What does that tell you about the community in Paterson, New Jersey?

HARTMAN: Were there lots of Italians though, that you could speak...

CALLOWAY: Not one Italian. The Italian immigration was closed in that period. But we had them from Russia, from Poland, from everywhere, [but] my wing was just for the eye condition. We were eighteen beds in there.

They just take you there and take your clothes off and give you clothes that belong to the hospital. So you have identification, you can't run away. So, nobody tried to run away. We got nowhere to go. We had a guard with a gun, in the front of the building and in the back of the building. So we made no attempts of running away.

HARTMAN: Did you have to have daily treatments? Hourly treatments?

CALLOWAY: No, daily, daily treatments. Daily treatments. And the important part, in glaucoma [trachoma], it was not to walk, stay stable, because [walking] creates too much heat on the lids, and it delays the cure, if any, you understand what I mean?

My mother was allowed to visit once a week. I didn't even recognize her when she did visit, But it was really—I felt bad, but in my own mind, I says, “Well, this must be God's will, because I'm going to get better, before time,” you understand? I had that feeling about it. I—it was hard for me to get used to the different foods and the different things.

HARTMAN: Well, tell me about the food. How different was it?

CALLOWAY: Well, it was a lot of the American creams and all of that. In Italy, they don't do that, they're vegetarians most of the time, and it's a different tone of life. I would say it's more rustic, but the people are very knowledgeable. And when you're young, you adapt. When you're older, it's much worse.

Oh, I got used to it very shortly, because people were very interested to know more about Europe, and even though I didn't speak the language, because of the other languages that I knew, the doctor would say, “Speak to me in Latin.” I made myself understood, let's put it that way.

HARTMAN: So were the other people in the hospital ward with you all young?

CALLOWAY: No, they were very old people. There was one poor old woman [who] had sick nails on the feet, [and] they took the nails off. She was eighty-nine years old. That was a little bit too cruel. They shouldn't have done that, but they did. Because they considered that contagious.

On the left of my bed, there was Adoni Zoska. She was around my age. We tried to communicate. She spoke only Polish. I spoke Italian. But youth has a way of finding the door open. Some were Armenian, German, I had no knowledge of those languages.

HARTMAN: Did you start learning English?

CALLOWAY: Very fast. But I attribute that to my knowledge of using a dictionary and knowing different languages and all that. The transition wasn't so difficult for me.

And the doctors, that were on the staff, they would come in and talk to me, and write to me in Latin, and then translate the word, they was trying to teach—in that day, we had no teachers. But, my background, academically in school, helped me to go forward and be friendly. I was never shy, because I was accustomed to meet people at all times.

How did Ellis Island make sure patients in the hospital stayed in isolation?

Why do you think Josephine learned English “very fast” at Ellis Island?

HARTMAN: What were the actual treatments like for children?

CALLOWAY: Well, they used to use silver nitrate and “blue-stone.” [NOTE: In this case, “blue stone” means copper sulfate, a chemical used to treat trachoma.] They used to rub the

lids—turn the lids inside out—and it burned. But, when they did that, your face, your mouth, your nose, distended [stuck out]—you looked like a little pig for a while, for a few hours, you know, the tears. You know, I had scars from the tears for at least five years.

HARTMAN: Down your cheeks?

CALLOWAY: Yeah, the tears of the stone—see, there was a chemical in there, [and] it would stain my face. Every day, the doctor came in the morning and the afternoon. We had the treatments. Dr. Grossman was our doctor there, and the doctor Hector was in charge of the wing and Dr. Kimmel was also another very good doctor. They all came to visit me over and over again when I came home. There were knowledgeable people, very nice people. I cried [in] those days, but I laughed later, because they were wonderful to us. Anybody says anything else, they're just rotten. I had my sixteenth birthday in Ellis Island. All the doctors came for the birthday. They celebrated my birthday.

HARTMAN: Were you there for Christmas?

CALLOWAY: Yes, yes. Fourth of July, everything. You know what I was very impressed by? I had never seen snow. I had never seen snow. And the head doctor, Dr. [Hettrick], that day, he said, he gave us clothes, coats from the soldiers and all that, and we went out in the yard, naturally we had four guards, and we made a snowman. You know? It had many, many beautiful memories, as well as there were sad. God was with me, I tell you.

HARTMAN: At this time, at being sixteen years old, it's not the same sixteen year olds that we have now. You were much older, I would imagine. More like a young adult.

CALLOWAY: Yeah, a young adult—and very naive. I was a bookworm. But I was amazed to see people with knowledge and all of that to take the time and take the young kids out to do this, to do that, to sort of break the monotony. We didn't dare to leave the platform of our steps, because a soldier would be on duty, at all times.

HARTMAN: Did you ever think you might not leave...

CALLOWAY: No, no. Well, I thought that sooner or later I would be deported, because they said [my eye condition was] incurable. I was there eleven and a half months. But, they found a cure for [it], and when they did discharge me, I had to go to—up, way up in the building, it was the biggest building in Ellis Island, and they were fifteen doctors [there] and [they] put the okay and sign that I was qualified to be discharged.

Describe the treatment for her disease.

What did the doctors do for the patients besides treat their illnesses? How did Josephine feel about it?

So, when he says to me, he said, “Well, you can go now,” I said, “All right.” He says, “Well, you're the first person being discharged and you don't say, ‘Thank you.’” I said, “I'm not discharged.” He said, “Yes you are.” This was on a Friday. I could not leave Ellis Island [until] Monday. So, they threw me a party. All the doctors got together, and threw a party in Ward 18.

HARTMAN: So are you glad [her father] came to [bring her to the US]...

CALLOWAY: I'm very glad now. I was sorry to leave my parents—[she corrects herself] my grandparents. They were wonderful people. But, I never saw them again.

HARTMAN: Upon leaving Ellis Island, did you have a little knowledge of English?

CALLOWAY: Yes, I spoke English well! But I attribute that to the background of languages I was studying before. The transition wasn't as difficult as somebody who didn't take up the different languages.

When I came home, because of... the bond that everybody donated [to]—my father was grateful to have it, but he repaid them all—the street was closed, because I was coming home. I asked, “What's going on? Is there a feast?” In Italy, when they have a feast for Saint Joseph, whatever, they get together. But I had no idea. “They're waiting for you.”

By that time, they had already came up to Paterson, New Jersey. My mother had a store on Market Street in New Jersey. They just had a little store, and in back of the store she had two beds for the family. Just plain people. But... very aggressive.

HARTMAN: So, they had a big celebration for you. You must have been overwhelmed. What kind of neighborhood was it? Was it largely Italian, or...

CALLOWAY: Mostly Italian. You see, you find it necessary [as a new immigrant] to be near people of your own language. All Italian.

HARTMAN: Sure. So was it wonderful to be reunited with our family.

CALLOWAY: It was, but I always had a certain kind of sadness. To me, my grandmother was my mother. She was a very, very, very, very special person.

HARTMAN: Did you go to school when you got out of Ellis Island? What did you do?

CALLOWAY: No, I didn't. The doctor said, “Forget reading! Promise me you won't read for a couple years. You can't afford to strain your eyes.” My mother was a dress designer. I did the selling...in front of the store; she was in back. She did the work; I wasn't allowed to do too much handwork. Because of my eyes.

I was home two, three years that I didn't have the feeling I was home on leave, that I [would have] to go back. That's the feeling I had for the longest time. So, my mother says, “You don't have to go back, you stay home with us.”

HARTMAN: Did you have to continue treatments with your eyes at all?

CALLOWAY: No, no. They said to me, the doctors [from Ellis Island] came to visit me here. In a social manner, but they came to visit me just the same.

HARTMAN: How was your brother's experience in school?

CALLOWAY: Oh, he liked it. He did special exams and he went to [La Mar] University in Canada. And that's where he got his medical degree from. But he was a bookworm as well. He said you get nothing out of the pot if you don't put it in. So you got to do something, let's get going. They gave us a start; let's do the rest.

So, my father had that kind of thinking too. So they were poor, knowledgeable people that didn't have two pennies to rub together, but they always made room for themselves because their knowledge gave them a living. That's all I could say about my parents.

HARTMAN: And, how did you become a Calloway?

CALLOWAY: I got married, believe it or not, in 1961. [NOTE: This was in her late 50s.] Because my mother wouldn't allow me to get married. "You don't need to get married. Stay single and enjoy life. Stay with me. I had you away from me a long time." And, that was wrong, that was a very poor thing to do.

HARTMAN: But they were able to live a good life here, it sounds like.

CALLOWAY: Oh, they did, yes. My father built all of these houses on this street.

HARTMAN: Did he build this one?

CALLOWAY: Yeah, sure. So they were hard-working people. That's all they were. They earned enough money, they came to have a few pennies in their pockets, and that was it. It was beautiful, and I'm grateful to have had the pleasure of being in America. What doctors would give a damn, you know, to show us snow, to show this, and play with us? There are things you don't forget. You don't forget.

One day there was a fleet of seals, there must have been a thousand seals on the [wall; water] and they all called us out to the window to see the seals. It was interesting. There were knowledgeable people, very nice people, and they were wonderful. I cried those days, but then I laughed later, because they were wonderful to us. Anybody says anything else, they're just rotten, that's all I could tell you.

Why would the people of Paterson celebrate when Josephine finally was released?

Josephine enjoyed school in Italy and knew multiple languages. Why couldn't she return to school in the US?

What was her family's attitude toward work? (Include her brother.)

Think about how Josephine's father tried to get her into the country. Then compare that to how her mother influenced her life after she entered the US. How were their actions alike? How were they different? How did Josephine feel about it?

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER for Ellis Island Oral History

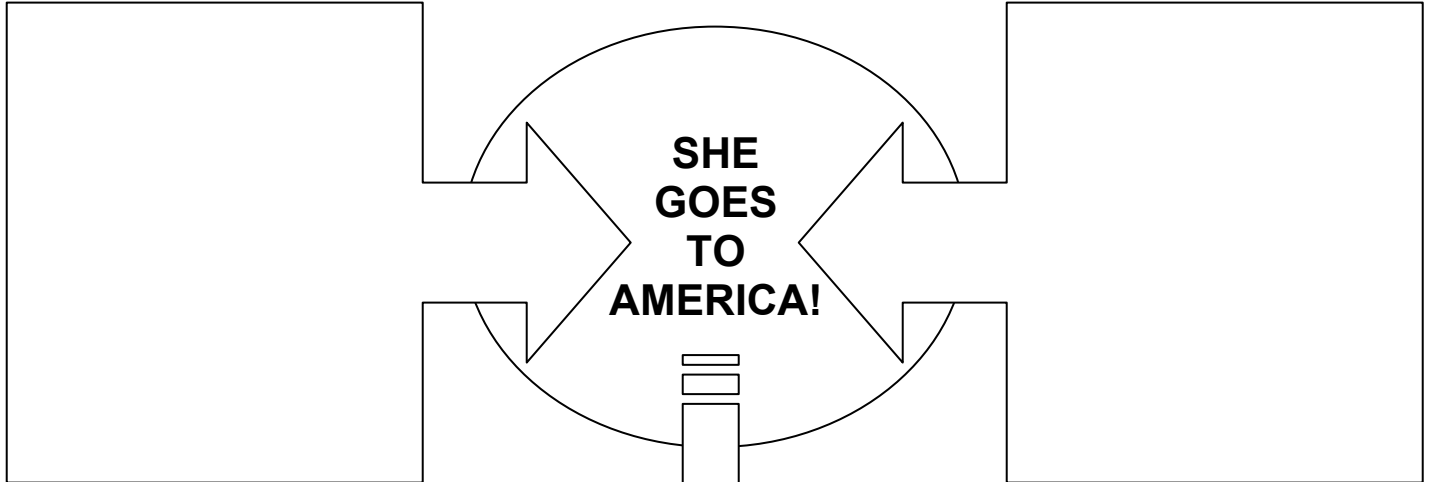
NAME of immigrant: **Josephine Garzieri Calloway** **FROM:** _____

YEAR she came to the US: _____ **AGE** upon arrival: _____

PUSH-PULL: Who wanted her to go to America? Why didn't she want to go?

Her side:

Her father's side:



But at Ellis Island:

**After she arrives
in the US:**

AND:

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An empty rectangular box intended for the student to write their response to the question "AND:".