

**GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION**  
**WEST VILLAGE**  
**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview

VINCENT LIVELLI

By Liza Zapol

New York, NY

April 19, 2016 & May 4, 2016

## Oral History Interview with Vincent Livelli, April 19 & May 4, 2016

Narrator(s)	Vincent Livelli
Birthdate	4/10/1919
Birthplace	Brooklyn, NY
Narrator Age	96
Interviewer	Liza Zapol
Place of Interview	44 Perry Street, NY
Date of Interviews	4/19/2016 ; 5/4/16
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Vincent Livelli at his home at 44 Perry Street on April 19, 2016. Photograph by Liza Zapol.

## Quotes from Oral History Interview with Vincent Livelli

“We did not say ‘Village,’ we said ‘Villaggio,’ the Italian pronunciation, until they learned English. Greenwich Villaggio! It sounds European or Sicilian, which is what my background happens to be, on my mother’s side. However, my mother said, “Never say you’re Sicilian.” When I was fourteen months old, Sicilians were *mafiosi*, perhaps even today. So we were reluctant to bear our background to the public. “Say you’re Genovese!” What is Genovese? The people of Genoa are very refined, educated, cultured, speak German, Spanish, Italian, French. “And that’s what you have to say,” my mother said, so she’s shedding her identity in my favor, to see that I succeed as a Genoese individual rather than a Sicilian.”

(Livelli p. 1)

“I learned a little about the Italian language. The Portuguese language. Even though I was deaf, I ended up speaking five languages, working four hours a day in Italian, French and Spanish on a tour bus, traveling to Niagara Falls when there were Indians at the base of the falls living in teepees, in [19]39, my first escorted tour of Italians. And they all took photos with Indians, went back to Italy, and showed these photos, which grew into a wave of Italian visitors interested in wearing cowboy hats and talking about Indians and cowboys. In those days, movies were cowboys and Indians. And in Italy, everyone saw a cowboy named Buffalo Bill. “Oh, wow, America! Indians!” So that gave rise to the need for an Italian interpreter to escort and explain America, from Canada to Florida, stopping in Washington, Virginia, Richmond. And I built up what is known as the billion-dollar New York travel industry...

I said to the Gray Line Company, “Instead of using three separate buses for each, one for each different language, give me one bus and I’ll take the three and repeat Italian, Spanish, Portuguese.” And actually, on one trip I did French. Four languages, and the company paid me three times what they would pay one. The Gray Line Bus Company was just a minor, sort of neglected part of the scene of economy in the city. Now it’s a big, big enterprise.”

(Livelli p. 7)

“Here we are, living in what year, 1937, [19]38. My father came home after looking for a job all day. He decided to celebrate a birthday, either it was my mother’s or his or myself. We, all the three of us, we were living three in the apartment with my grandfather on the next floor below. He pulled out something from his pocket, put it on the table, and we all three of us stood around looking at it. What was it? A five-cent O’Henry bar, that he cut in three pieces. ‘Here’s a piece for you, and a piece for me.’ Now, you figure that out. What is that sort of thing going on? What is that? That’s the height of the Great Depression, to celebrate an occasion in that manner. I got a tiny little piece.”

(Livelli pp. 12-13)

“Waikiki Hotel used to send shortwave programs of Hawaiian music to New York. But you could only hear it coming in and out. It would fade. Shortwave was not constant sound. And I said, ‘Well, I don’t like to hear Hawaiian music, I want to hear Cuban music, which is more audible to my particular condition.’ Why? Because I heard not instrumental music so much, but drumming. Drumming vibrated, hit me in the right spot to where I responded. This brings us to Santeria, by the way.

So anyway, my father used to say, ‘Shut off that damn radio, I’m trying to go to sleep!’ He wouldn’t let me, and I would put it under the pillow with me—the radio, married to the radio. So I was able to absorb that Cuban music lying down in bed as though it had a property beyond normal music, what I call divine music: music from outer space. Sound waves never die. Light waves diminish. Sound waves have been known by scientists to exist forever, to the end of time. The last thing that will disappear will not be the sun and the planets. It will be the sound waves that end, if we’re going to end the cosmos.”  
(Livelli pp. 17-18)

“In fact, on one occasion I met Charlie Parker at the San Remo, and I walked him home to his hotel on Broadway, and we sat down, he and I, and he said, ‘Here.’ And I said, ‘Wait, I don’t smoke that stuff.’ He said, ‘Well, that’s all right, try it.’ I said, ‘No, I’m not—’ I tried a little. I didn’t like it. I said, ‘No, I’m not gonna smoke that.’ That’s the start of my marijuana days. Charlie Parker and I. [laughs] Here’s a little guy. I was against jazz. Charlie was into jazz. I said, ‘No, it’s not for me. I’m into Afro-Cuban. Sorry, buddy.’ He said, ‘You should listen to jazz.’ I said, ‘No, you should listen to Afro-Cuban.’ He went to Cuba, and he heard it, and he came back with Dizzy Gillespie. They tried to copy a little bit of Afro-Cuban and jazz. You can’t dance jazz! The Jewish community of South Beach, the grandfathers, my age, who were my pupils at that time, carried into their children the love of Afro-Cuban rumba. And from that, they brought it into the young kids of today, who are doing salsa. Goes to the grandfather! Who taught the grandfather? Me! They had exposure in my dance studio, in the number-one hotel. They had no dance studios in those hotels. They had to put dance studios in after I started them.”  
(Livelli p. 27)

## Summary of Oral History Interview with Vincent Livelli

Vincent Livelli is ninety-six years old. He was born in Brooklyn but spent his childhood living in the Village from the time he was three months old. He is the child of Sicilian and Genovese immigrants. As a child, Vincent's parents forbade him from playing with the Sicilian children, who they considered the tough street kids of the neighborhood. As a result, he developed a several friendships with Portuguese playmates that also lived in the Village, who his family considered to be more gentle and refined. Vincent was often the target of bullying by other kids in the neighborhood because of his relatively wealthy family. That wealth dissipated, however, during the Great Depression.

Like many children who grew up in Village tenements during the 1920s, Vincent suffered lead poisoning as a very early age, which greatly affected his development. He recalls being "very mischievous, very rebellious" as a child, much like the kids that bullied him on the street (Vincent suspects they too were victims of lead poisoning). The lead poisoning also left Vincent severely hearing impaired, which neither his family nor his teachers were well equipped to handle. In school, Vincent had trouble paying attention because of his hearing loss. One day he was caught staring out the classroom window, looking for airplanes. Consequently, his teacher struck him across the head with a ruler and declared him—much to the delight of his bullies—"Dead from the neck up."

Despite this early crushing blow to his self-esteem, Vincent went on to cultivate a rich and noteworthy life for himself, by immersing himself both in music and in travel. In this interview, he reflects several times on his deliberate effort to become a truly unique individual. He aimed to be able to impress a wide variety of people from all over the world, through his musical and linguistic abilities. Vincent explains that it is "part of the Italian quality" to "fight harder" when "your adversity is overwhelming." He notes that his own story echoes that of his grandfather, who migrated across Europe as a traveling musician before arriving in the Village—back when it was called Little Africa—and becoming a prosperous entrepreneur. Vincent remarks that his family history made him very patriotic about both his Italian and American identities, which stand in his mind for moral integrity and social progress.

Music has played a tremendous role in Vincent's development. Despite his difficulty hearing, he felt touched by the sounds of drums over the radio, which helped him develop into a successful dancer. Vincent used to frequent dance clubs in Harlem as a young man. In 1938 he became a member of a professional dance troupe in Beacon, New York. The troupe made a tour through Detroit, which Vincent explains was like the Las Vegas of that era. The applause and adulation that he received from audiences during this time changed his life. Vincent's dance partner in the troupe was the mistress of Al Jolson. She told Vincent about the cultural discoveries that she and Jolson had recently made in Cuba, which led Vincent to make his own seminal journey to Havana in 1940. There he achieved some local fame for being the person to introduce Cubans to the New York-style rumba. Upon returning to America, he recounts that he then introduced the Havana-style, Afro-Cuban rumba to the Harlem nightclubs.

Vincent has thrived by taking what he calls "a global approach" to his life. After World War II, Vincent fell into a job as cruise director of a steamship company (he initially wanted to

teach dance on the ships). “I put entertainment on cruise ships,” he explains during this interview. “Made it a 30,000,000,000 dollar industry. Nobody did that except yours truly.” Through the force of his own will, Vincent overcame his hearing impediment to become proficient in five languages, which helped him to pioneer the growth of New York City’s international tourism industry.

Vincent’s memories of Greenwich Village are inextricable from his memories of the dear friendship he had with one of the Village’s most famous mid-20<sup>th</sup> century residents: the writer Anatole Broyard. Vincent recalls opening a bookstore in the Village with Anatole in the late 1940s. He laments the eventual takeover of the Village’s literary scene by the Beats, who introduced drugs, sloppy dress, and Communist politics into the neighborhood. Vincent refers to this time in the history of Greenwich Village as the era of “the Jack Kerouac bullshit” and “the William Burroughs sickness.” This cultural shift is part of the reason why Vincent spent the majority of the 1950s and 1960s aboard the cruise ships that employed him. The ships provided Vincent the “privilege” of “build[ing] a world to my own specifications.” He traveled around the world for twenty years, picking up all kinds of knowledge about different cultures and histories, which he would then disseminate to his passengers in the form of lectures.

Towards the end of the interview, in the second session, Vincent recalls the culinary dimensions of his early childhood immigrant experience. He also recalls the friendships that he developed with other famous residents of the Village: Beauford Delaney, Anaïs Nin, Sheri Martinelli, Maya Deren, Stella Sampas, and Valeska Grit.

In reflecting on the great degree and unlikelihood of his success in life, Vincent gives the credit to a higher supernatural power. He explains, “I am a believer of Santeria. I believe that I was controlled remotely, remote controlled, because that’s the only explanation for the life that I have led.”

#### General Interview Notes:

This is a transcription of an Oral history that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

The GVSHP West Village Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing South Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

## Oral History Interview Transcript

**Zapol:** So this is the –

**Livelli:** Give me a signal like this to start.

**Zapol:** Ok. So we're starting. I'm going to start just introducing it.

This is the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral History Project. It is April 19, 2016. This is Liza Zapol. We're at 44 Perry Street, and if I can ask you to introduce yourself, please.

**Livelli:** Please, I want to thank the Historical Society for interviewing me. I feel that it's going to be important to me, and to everyone listening, who is interested in Greenwich Village.

**Zapol:** We're so pleased to have you today. Can I ask you to say your name, and where and when you were born?

**Livelli:** Well, I was born in Brooklyn. [laughs] I used to never admit that. However, I moved to the Village when I was three months old, and my name is Vincent Livelli. Vincenzo Antonio Livelli, nel Villaggio. We did not say 'Village,' we said 'Villaggio,' the Italian pronunciation, until they learned English. [ITALIAN WORD UNCLEAR—00:01:21] Greenwich Villaggio! It sounds European or Sicilian, which is what my background happens to be, on my mother's side. However, my mother said, "Never say you're Sicilian." When I was fourteen months old, Sicilians were *mafiosi*, perhaps even today. So we were reluctant to bear our background to the public. "Say you're Genovese!" What is Genovese? The people of Genoa are very refined, educated, cultured, speak German, Spanish, Italian, French. "And that's what you have to say," my mother said, so she's shedding her identity in my favor, to see that I succeed as a Genoese individual rather than a Sicilian.

So I, on the other hand, rebelled against that, naturally. I wanted to be a Sicilian. Tough guy. I didn't want to be an intellectual, or cultured. I wanted to play with the rough kids in the street. "No, you cannot!" So I grew up biforked. In public, I was a Genoese but among the family, and of course, they knew the truth, we are Sicilians, and Sicilians were cut-throats in those days. Now, I think our Governor has some Sicilian blood, so I'm not too ashamed of it. We've really come out of it.

Now, if you want to know a little more about my background, it's sort of a mixture of Portuguese, in terms of the neighborhood having been semi-Portuguese when I moved here, when I was three months old. My playmates, who my mother and grandmother allowed me to play with, were Portuguese, who were considered to be refined in comparison to the Sicilians. "Ok, you can play with those boys and girls, but not the kids downstairs in the building," because they were Sicilian tough kids. Spit. [mock spits] Bad words, bad manners. Ruffians. In Italian, *guaglione*. If you have an Italian listener, he'll know what that is. It's a bad person. So, my background was Sicilian, Palermo, Napolitano, Genovese, Irish family members, and the Portuguese kids were sort of the best playmates for me because they taught me manners and sort of leveled out my behavior.

And I learned Portuguese growing up, with poor little children like that. Which came to my rescue later in life. "You speak Portuguese? You speak Brazilian? We need you badly." Nobody spoke Portuguese in New York City, or in America.

So, here's what happened to me, however. At the age of about three years, I still couldn't walk. I still couldn't hear. I still couldn't respond properly. I was disqualified for life, due to lead poisoning in the water, which today is a big American problem, in 450 communities throughout the country. Lead poisoning, metallosis. So I had this problem without anyone knowing anything about lead poisoning in 1920, [19]23. It wasn't only until 1972 that landlords were required to examine the painting, the chips coming off the walls in Harlem, poisoning little black kids. Why are they dumb, mischievous criminals? They had all this poison in them! I almost grew up to be a criminal. I was very mischievous, very rebellious. I put tacks on my grandmother's chair so she would be hurt when she sat on it. That sort of mischief. And nobody in the family knew anything about lead poisoning, and the doctors didn't know that I was deaf. Zero, flunked, I couldn't get anything out of the teachers' attempts to educate me as a young little child. [00:06:24]

I'll tell you about this as I introduce myself a little better. Getting back to my grandfather, who came from Russia. That doesn't surprise you.

**Zapol:** It does surprise me! [laughs]

**Livelli:** Do you know the reason why?

**Zapol:** Tell me, tell me!

**Livelli:** Nobody told you why.

**Zapol:** Tell me!

**Livelli:** Well, believe it or not, he sailed from St. Petersburg, Russia, having walked in those days, eighteen, his old passport, which I fortunately have, showed him traveling from Genoa across Germany on foot, carrying a hurdy-gurdy organ. He was kidnapped by gypsies, who put him to work with a trained bear and a—not a monkey, you’ve seen them where the monkey goes, takes his hat, and gives, and you give him a dime? He had to walk with a bear through the Black Forest of Germany in the winter. This is a family story. God bless my grandfather! He was attacked by a pack of wolves who were hungry in the winter, and they ate the bear. That’s the only way he was able to escape. He survived by playing his organ, continuing through Poland and up into Russia. I have the passport. Each city he went through in Germany was still independent. It was not yet unified. Like Italy, un-unified. So he was able to reach St. Petersburg, and upon arrival, they put him immediately in jail, as a strange character coming into St. Petersburg. However, when the royal family heard that there was an Italian musician—because his old passport, which I’ll show you, shows Anton—he didn’t use the Italian, Antonio, he preferred the German version of Antonio, which is Anton—going through Germany, he showed respect and a clever diplomatic sort of approach. So when they found out that on his passport it said *Musiker*, musician, they invited him to the palace. And he was able to enjoy a brief stay, until he wanted to join his family in Argentina. Because the Italians in that period went to South America, not to New York, which was in the throes of the civil riots, the draft riots, race riots, fires, killing little orphans in orphanages if they were black. So he got on a ship going to America. They said, “We’re not going to South America, we’re going to North America.” So that strange trick, whimsical—fate interfered. I was born in New York.

We have family in Argentina. So that’s an interesting story. He came from Russia.  
[00:10:00]

**Zapol:** So your grandfather came to New York. Where did your grandfather go when he arrived in New York?

**Livelli:** Are you speaking about my grandmother? You're interested in the woman's angle.

**Zapol:** Well, no, and also where did your grandfather go when he came to New York? Where did he live?

**Livelli:** All right, but I'll also mention my grandmother, which is sort of a tragic aspect. When he arrived, fortunately, he had like, what, twenty cents, you know, like everybody else. He was able to join the Generale Giuseppe Garibaldi, who was the liberator of Italy, the unifier of Italy, and was able to take him in. Garibaldi was on his way to South America to liberate Peru from the Spaniards. He was a volunteer. He lost thirty-two Italians at the Battle of Gettysburg. Thirty-two volunteers, Italian-Americans who went to fight against the South in Gettysburg. If you go there you'll see the monument. So he was, for a while, supported by General Garibaldi.

My family grew up with great love of patriotism for America and Italy. We wanted to see the progress of people in general in the world, so we were able to carry on during the great division between races and nationalities in New York City as it was coming up. The Irish fought the Italians, the Italians fought the Chinese, and it was terrible. Imagine my poor grandmother, who because she loved this gentleman, abandoned—followed him to America, at a time when it was uproar, horrible, the blizzard of [18]88, cold water family. If you go to Italy to a city called Chiavari [phonetic] [00:12:06], and you mention the family name, my grandmother's, they will say, "You are a Rivari [phonetic] [00:12:13]?" Yes, my grandmother. Well, the Rivari was one of the number-one families. She left a wonderful life to come to America to be in love with a man she must have admired to such an extent, that she followed him to the depth of—where the hell would you go other than New York in that period, the Civil War starting, and live in a cold water flat, climb up, and not speak the language. Left your family. You're surrounded in beautiful Italy with flowers and Cinque Terre, which is a tourist spot now. So what happens in my life, I say to myself, "You know, you don't always have that right idea about your life," because she sacrificed her life. She died in New York, probably influenza! Everybody—thirty million were dying. So, that was a tragedy that my grandfather probably had to support on his shoulders as well. Those people had such a terrible life. Today, we're well off, believe me.

Now, getting back to my grandfather living in what at that time was Little Africa. You've heard the expression. This part of the Village was elegant. It still is, even though there were

several Italian families, in fact an Italian friend of mine paid five and a half million for a house across the street. And another one, Dick, pays about 3,000 a month for a garden apartment on 285 West 4<sup>th</sup>. Then the gentleman upstairs is a three-time Emmy Award winner, Vice President [of] MTV. He's Italian. So when Italian visitors come to visit me, or come as tourists, I say, "At one time there were several Italian families living in these nice streets, Perry Street. Mayor LaGuardia lived on Perry Street." So there was an Italian grocery store right on St. Ambrose. And an Italian pharmacist on Bank Street. So these little snippets of Village lore are precious to me. They are Italian-feeling. The Village that I tried to portray a little bit, that I'm proud of, is that the better-class Italians moved up to this area. The lower-class lived in Little Africa, Little Italy, which composed a great deal of the part that is now called South Village. Sullivan Street must have belonged to a rich black family that sold it, or an insurance company or something. [00:15:43]

But here's what happened to my grandfather. He managed to get a good position with a German family who owned a piano string factory on Sixth Avenue and Barrow Street, off Houston. It's gone. They made a parking lot or a building there. So, he worked for them for forty-seven years. Now, the piano string, if you are familiar with the construction, contributed to the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge. Did you know that little historical? The winding of the wires, it reinforced the structure, to where the Brooklyn Bridge was made possible. So he had a hand in that. They probably influenced and were consulted about some of the aspects of strength. He spoke fluent German. How come, with—I should talk more about my grandfather, because he invested everything, walked from Sullivan all the way, East Houston to Barrow, early in the morning to go to work, late at night, came home and raised a family of four sons and one daughter. Now, these people had nothing. They lived in one room with a kitchen, bedroom, cot. It was like Mahatma Gandhi's cottage in Bombay. His kitchen had a cot in it, and a spinning wheel. Spinning wheel, I think you call it, to manufacture wool.

**Zapol:** Oh, a loom or something. Yeah.

**Livelli:** Right. A loom.

So, the fact is, I was too young to realize the situation that everyone was in. However, the people in the neighborhood were Sicilians. And my family were Genoese. What does that mean? Conflict.

Here's what started the revolution on Sullivan Street. Bad times, bad feeling, spitting, and the kids used to knock my hat off. What do you call it today? Rowdyism in school?

**Zapol:** Bullying.

**Livelli:** Bullying. Yes! "You're Genoa" [mock spits], bite, they bit me, terrible. One kid gave me a terrible scar. But here's what happened: My family was so wealthy by the time we were able to have good clothes, I had a hat with a brim, that other kid had a peak hat. They didn't like the brimmed hat, which signified a little higher status. It may have had a ribbon. Now, that's like little lord Fauntleroy. I was dressed nicely, and I was able to escape these kids by knowing how to avoid them, what time to show up and not show up.

Would you like to interrupt me? No, ok—

**Zapol:** No, it was just about the cord.

**Livelli:** Ok, if you have to interrupt me—

**Zapol:** No, no, I'm interested! So tell me, yeah, tell me, if you have a specific story about an encounter with the neighborhood children.

**Livelli:** Alrighty. I was able to go over to the Portuguese community, and that was located on Cherry Lane and Concord Street there. That was a little nucleus. What did the Portuguese community in the [18]80s provide? How come they happened to settle here? They were all in the wine business. Even today, if you go to buy a bottle of wine, you say, "Where'd it come from?" All, "O Porto! Portugal!" So they were very industrious and they were able to succeed, and my grandmother used to take me to get away from the kids in the street. She would walk me up Sullivan to Washington Square Park with my bicycle, stopping at St. Anthony's Church on Sullivan Street, which is a shrine church, St. Anthony of Padua. And she would also take me on the same day to St. Pompeii, Pompeii's church. So I was brought up with a religious feeling that

I resented. I was bored. I sat there as a little kid, not hearing, not interested, just bored with my grandmother. I wanted to play a natural, normal life with children. [00:20:56]

But on the other hand I did learn a lot of other things that those kids—who, many went to jail, because they were not privileged to learn—I learned a little about the Italian language. The Portuguese language. Even though I was deaf, I ended up speaking five languages, working four hours a day in Italian, French and Spanish on a tour bus, traveling to Niagara Falls when there were Indians at the base of the falls living in teepees, in [19]39, my first escorted tour of Italians. And they all took photos with Indians, went back to Italy, and showed these photos, which grew into a wave of Italian visitors interested in wearing cowboy hats and talking about Indians and cowboys. In those days, movies were cowboys and Indians. And in Italy, everyone saw a cowboy named Buffalo Bill. “Oh, wow, America! Indians!” So that gave rise to the need for an Italian interpreter to escort and explain America, from Canada to Florida, stopping in Washington, Virginia, Richmond. And I built up what is known as the billion-dollar New York travel industry.

**Zapol:** Wow!

**Livelli:** Nobody knew anything, how to handle a foreign visitor to New York City in 1970. I trained people. I trained guides, who spoke a little French. Nobody hardly spoke Italian. The Italians were interested in something else. They were not interested in learning Italian. The people who came from Portugal, Brazil, found somebody that finally spoke Portuguese. In New York, nobody spoke Portuguese. So I said to the Gray Line Company, “Instead of using three separate buses for each, one for each different language, give me one bus and I’ll take the three and repeat Italian, Spanish, Portuguese.” And actually, on one trip I did French. Four languages, and the company paid me three times what they would pay one. The Gray Line Bus Company was just a minor, sort of neglected part of the scene of economy in the city. Now it’s a big, big enterprise, with—I’m glad to say they have chosen, very wisely, black guides. Which sort of represents—if you come to New York, you only see white, that’s not New York. These black kids are doing a good job. They’re dressed well.

When I left Gray Line—now, this was a sort of intermediary phase of my life, where I got the thing started and took off. I got Greenwich Village started in [19]38 and took off in the

San Remo, and I left it. I took the cruise industry from zero, where nobody knew anything about cruising, except traveling from A to B, transportation. I put entertainment on cruise ships. Made it a 30,000,000,000 dollar industry. Nobody did that except yours truly.

**Zapol:** So I'm interested—I'm excited to talk about those—

**Livelli:** It's not Greenwich Village, but it's related to it.

**Zapol:** I'm excited to talk about the cruise industry and the tourist industry, but I'm interested also in, you said you learned all of these languages. And you were deaf. [00:25:02]

**Livelli:** Yes, how did that happen? Well, it's a mystery to me, I have only some simple explanations, if you're interested in helping people. Just the other day, I read that a mother was suing the city for having allowed lead poisoning in the tenements in Harlem, especially. In 1923, I was eating lead chip paints on the floor, crawling around, because they have a salty taste, and I was just curious, as a child. You want me to talk about the hearing problem?

**Zapol:** If you want to. Also—

**Livelli:** Sure, it might help somebody. All the children in Greenwich Village, in the neighborhood here, at that time, were in tenements with lead-poisoned apartments. Not only me. So, that explained the behavior of the kids. These were normal when they were conceived, but they turned bad due to the environment full of lead poisoning. Now, the city ignored it. The country ignored water poisoned by lead pipes. The Roman Empire fell because lead-poisoned emperors went crazy. If you ask me how I survived and learned all these languages, and not only learned them, but earned a living through them, teaching them, and appreciating languages, as similar to music—well, here's what happens with me. You see, I'll jump ninety years ahead. What I'm telling you today is not me talking. I'll just give a little hint and let you hope, in the future, you get the answer. I am a believer of Santeria. I believe that I was controlled remotely, remote controlled, because that's the only explanation for the life that I have led. It was not—I could not have done it.

Well—

**Zapol:** Tell me about—

**Livelli:** How I got out of the situation?

**Zapol:** Last time we spoke, you told me about looking out of your window as a child, and seeing the street scene, and I'm interested, before we talk about your time in Cuba and learning about Santeria—if you can tell me a little bit about what you watched out the window, and why.

**Livelli:** Stay, I'll be more chronological.

**Zapol:** You don't have to. I'm just curious.

**Livelli:** That's a hard seat to sit on, but—

**Zapol:** It's ok.

**Livelli:** If I get back to my grandfather, it helps a lot, because he lost the building during the Depression because of the neighborhood that became so antagonistic to this family, with wealth. The other women had no baby carriages. You did not see a baby carriage in Sullivan Street in 1923 or [19]22. We had a beautiful white covered, wicker carriage that we wheeled to Washington Square Park. I had a bicycle. No kids had a bicycle. I had roller skates. “Wow, look at those roller-skates!” I had a penny for candy every day. They used to come and watch me, what candy would I buy from the candy store in the building that we owned. And I would buy jellybeans. So I'd give a kid one jelly bean to keep friendly. And, you know, I had to make diplomacy work in terms of paying off for my survival, in terms of being able to walk down the street.

When I went to school, which was just close by here on Avenue of the—it's not Avenue of the Americas, it's the technical manual school. In those days it was separate, girls and boys, so I grew up in a boys' school section of the education system. One day, probably in first grade, the class was full. The teacher came from behind her desk over to me, with a heavy ruler which had a lead—a metal strip down the old rulers were very thick. I was daydreaming. I was looking at the clouds. Because I was not listening, I couldn't hear. I was not in the class, I was up in the sky somewhere. I was looking for an airplane, cause in those days airplanes were fabulous. We would run out in the street and say, “Look, look, look! An airplane!” And I would look at the clouds, and that's where my mind was, up in those clouds. The teacher came, whacked me heavily on the head with a resounding blow of a heavy ruler, and said—which was worse, I don't

care if she just hit me—she said, “Dead from the neck up.” And left me. And all the kids, [mock laughs]. What happened to me? Self-esteem, wiped out. “I’m stupid, I’m dead from the—” Word is “self,” and put “dead” with that, and you get a dead kid. I went for years, zero, F, flunking, teachers, back of the room, you know, I didn’t give up. [00:31:20]

That’s part of the Italian quality. When your adversity is overwhelming, you fight harder. I went to five universities. Did you know that?

**Zapol:** No.

**Livelli:** This is a story that is in keeping with what I said about remote control. How the hell could I go to five universities, all tuition-free? This is the astounding fact of my life, I think, because it was me trying to get a life together, put it together. This is my grandfather’s gumption—walking barefoot, maybe there was holes in his shoes, from Italy to Russia, in those days, especially. He was probably beaten, robbed, kicked, kidnapped. He ran away from the gypsies. He had to make perhaps his own organ by hand. He ended up making strings. That was the source of his success. He became a wealthy man, and bought the property. However, a revolution started against him: people would not pay the rent. They went on a rent strike. Why? Because he expelled, from the building, a person of prominence who was a policeman. If you were a policeman, you had power that policemen today do not have. You were corrupt, a hundred percent corrupt, you were in league with mafia, so you could get killed. You don’t go against a Mafioso in the building, a cop. It was the equivalent—it was corrupt through and through. Tammany Hall, period.

So, my grandfather managed to get him expelled. Well, when that happened, his Sicilian friends all went on strike to support the policeman, who was a bad guy, in order for my family, my father and mother, who were in Brooklyn at that time, could come to live on Sullivan Street with the family in the building. That was probably the basic reason for my grandfather becoming antagonistic about it, in addition to the fact he didn’t pay the rent. He got away with it! “Oh, I’m protecting your property, the mafia has protection.” So they lost the property. Everybody went on strike. And the mortgage company also, Prudential or Providential mortgage property, I have it on the document. The other reason he had no money to pay off the mortgage, not only was the rent not coming in, but he had to pay 300 dollars to the government to escape the draft. Are you

familiar with the situation where, if you paid—? Abraham Lincoln had to finance the Civil War, he had to raise money. He put a 300 dollar fee on families who could support the war effort, and have excused the head of the family, who contributed to the war effort, war tax. [00:35:11]

So, instead of going to fight in Gettysburg, he was a member of the Garibaldi brigade. He paid off to support the family, and maintained the building, the property. He not only lost the property that he bought in Sullivan Street. He owned property in Forest Hills, when it was a farm. He owned property in Rego Park when it was a farm. Acres! So he was on the rise, but through something happening, in his life, what a poor guy, ugh. You know, the suffering with the family, suffering, raising a family, he had it really bad, bad—and when you get to be my age, you get to appreciate that love, that you never had previously, how these poor people on Sullivan Street, when it was full of horse manure, stunk from the stable in front of the building. There were no screens. When they brought a screen in the family, “Oh, a screen, wow look a screen, we can keep flies out!” When they put flits in cans, I had the job of killing the flies in the apartment every day. Which inhaled poisonous pesticide, and it was bad for me, together with the poisoning from the lead poisoning. I was not a healthy kid. I was very sick. My father had influenza, and he almost died from that.

Now, those stories are sad because there’s nothing that—but they may have been happy, even, who knows. They may have been proud, anyway, of their success. They were landlords in Greenwich, which became Greenwich Village. The people who lived in the Village were all working class people on Sullivan Street. Primarily, people who were working on the docks, which later went up to Chelsea. Or people who were in the box industry on Broadway, where they had box manufacturing, and also people who were in the post office, or other civic—my mother kept saying, “Get a civic job, you’ll get a pension,” because she knew I was not going to succeed in the marketplace in business. “Don’t ever go in business.” People told me that throughout my life: “Don’t ever go in business.” Guess what? I ended up in big business! I had forty ways of making money on cruise ships, and I’ll tell you that later.

So, ask me a question about the Village, I want to get back to the Village more.

**Zapol:** I’m not sure we have it on the record, but the address on Sullivan Street, what was the address on Sullivan Street?

**Livelli:** It's still there. It's 117 Sullivan, which is directly in front of what used to be the stable with the horse manure smell at night, with open windows in the summer. Flies. And the shouting of the Teamsters, who would beat the horses so they would go up the ramp to the second floor. They pushed the pushcarts into the ground level floor. The horses would come back in the summer exhausted, and they would keep beating them and beating them. That's the situation when I was a kid. I would look out the window, and I'd see the horse getting beaten. One day a cop shot the horse, and dragged him, a bloodline, out to Broadway. I was exposed to death when I was like four years old, five years old. And I said to myself, "Wow, look at that, a horse getting killed." That was sort of shocking to a little kid.

But that was the condition of the street. Horse manure was a thing you took in stride. Snow removal didn't exist. Garbage removal was problematic. We had gas lights. I used to go on my father's shoulders; he would turn it on, I would put the match there, to teach me how to handle certain things in the building. Then they were compelled—another thing that destroyed my grandfather was the city, after the Triangle tragedy where the women had to escape the fire, the city required metal stairways, no wooden. We had wooden stairways. Toilets in the house, not in the halls. We had to share a toilet with a string that you pulled. The toilet was the coolest spot in the building in those days, because it had a little open window to the courtyard. And there was some cool air. We used to sit in the toilet to cool off. The houses had no air conditioning. [00:40:32]

Now, in Jersey, the marshes had not been cleaned. The flies in the summer—not only mosquitoes, but horse flies were black, big ones [mock buzzing], and they would come in the apartment, and you couldn't really control it. There were no nets. And it was not a pleasant environment to grow up in, but you became accustomed to harder life knocks. We called it hard knocks.

At one point—I don't think I'll mention it, it's a family thing, but they were desperate. During the Great Depression, people had no food on the table. I'll tell you one fact. Here we are, living in what year, 1937, [19]38. My father came home after looking for a job all day. He decided to celebrate a birthday, either it was my mother's or his or myself. We, all the three of us, we were living three in the apartment with my grandfather on the next floor below. He pulled out something from his pocket, put it on the table, and we all three of us stood around looking at

it. What was it? A five-cent O’Henry bar, that he cut in three pieces. “Here’s a piece for you, and a piece for me.” Now, you figure that out. What is that sort of thing going on? What is that? That’s the height of the Great Depression, to celebrate an occasion in that manner. I got a tiny little piece. And I had been used to—this is interesting, because it involves the politics at the time.

William Randolph Hearst was running for President. Did you know that? You did, good for you! Very few people know that. My father was an investigative reporter. You see investigative reporters all over television. Goes back to the early 1917 when my father worked for the Hearst newspapers, as an investigative reporter, which should be of interest to you, as an investigative interviewer. He was in the Air Force in World War I, until he developed influenza. Now, my grandfather was probably very wealthy at a certain point to buy me toys of great value, which today would be on *Antiques Roadshow*. They get thousands for an old toy fire engine. We’re going to have to take an interlude.

**Zapol:** Sure, we can take a pause for a drink.

**Livelli:** Give me some – [TAPE CUTS OFF AND RESUMES].

My father was able to become friendly with the Hearst family, taught the young boys how to play baseball, stayed up at the Hudson River where Hearst had all his treasures in the warehouse, before he built St. Simeon. My father had a good position in the journalist field. I think some of that rubbed off on me. Because he was very patriotic. Hearst was all pro-American, to the extreme. So, I grew up hearing politics talked. And I became patriotic to where I wanted America to expand throughout the world. We were very provincial. I went into foreign languages, and went into a global approach to life, which served me very well with the tourist industry. Americans looked at tourists as foreigners. I was able to look at the world in terms of, first of all, Italy. I used to hear the word “love” when I was hearing family talk. They used the word “love.” Italians said, “love, love, love, love, amore, amore, amore!” What are they talking about? They’re talking about Italy! The old country. So I said, well, “Love is Italy.” I’m going to be in love with Italy. Then, you know, growing up. So I was able to orient that global aspect to my learning, so I outshone the other kids, who were concentrating on baseball, football,

American sport. I don't want to get dirty in the sand and breathe the dust and get hit on the head!  
I was to play with lead. [00:45:50]

**Zapol:** So—

**Livelli:** This point is important. This point is very decisive. Why would I separate myself from the children and stow off alone in an alley, dig a hole in the sand, take lead bits that were from the buildings going on in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, around a pipe fitting? They would leave little pieces of lead, collect the lead, sell it by the pound to people that came around in 1934 to buy lead, and they give you like ten cents for two pounds of lead, and I would take some of that lead, put a hole in the ground, put a fire, with a can, melt the lead, and make—guess what?—a gun. Kids liked guns. Made the gun imprint in the mud, poured the lead in the mud, cooled it, picked it up, I had a gun made of lead. So that shows creativity. However, I was inhaling fumes of lead. I lived near lead pipes, lead water, lead paint, lead pesticide, I played with lead, and I chewed lead pencils—which is graphite, I don't think that's lead—but what else was lead? There was lead in a lot of stuff, in prescriptions, and so my lead poisoned infancy separated me from humanity. The world closed, the door was locked, the world belonged to other people. I had been hit and told I was dumb from the neck up. And the kids all laughed, and I was just—the teachers that hit kids today are reprimanded, they can almost lose their job, they can be put in prison. Because they realize what it does to the child.

Now, how did I overcome that feeling to become the cruise director in charge of thousands of people on a ship, performing, emcee, show business, inventing? It wasn't me! I had a role in life prescribed. When you are deaf, and you start life with a blank page—in other words, I started life with zero! And I didn't get into life until I went from land to the sea. You change the world. The world on land is one world, and the land, for twenty years on ships, is another world. Now, this has something to do with Santeria, which will be in the second volume of the book that's coming out. By the way, today I'm getting a copy of it!

**Zapol:** I heard!

**Livelli:** It's printed.

**Zapol:** That's exciting.

**Livelli:** So, it's an occasion.

Well, the fact is, the education to the Italian family of the upper-class—not upper-class, there was no real upper-class Italian family in the [19]20s. There was probably a hero of some sort, Marconi, great, when he was twenty years old, he invented shortwave transmission. So we had some heroes. Garibaldi. I was given, in trust, the flag that was flown at the Battle of Gettysburg, full of bullet holes, to keep in trust for my family, but I lost it in my travels. Couldn't find it anymore. They hit behind the stove in the apartment. I remember my uncle saying, "This will belong to you someday," and I was just a little kid. But I would have donated it to the Historical Society. [00:50:05]

The fact that the baby carriage that they wheeled me in up and down Sullivan Street started a revolution. All the women hated my mother. My mother was, believe it or not, Sicilian. Why did my father, who was Genoese, marry a Sicilian woman? To try to make peace between the Sicilians and the Genoese, just as the ancient Romans would marry one family to stop the war between two families. They would offer the daughter. It goes back to Egypt! So my mother, god bless her, she's up there [blows kiss], she's beautiful, she was a model, millinery, feathers. She used to bring home feathers to work at home at night. They worked that night and day. Then she'd go to work in the daytime. But my mother had a streak in her that I have, and I have a streak from my father. He was very conservative, very proper, never used bad language. He had a respect for everybody. He was a journalist on the way up. Knew the right people: Brisbane, Arthur Brisbane, who has a statue in Central Park. He started as Brisbane's office boy, and went up to investigative reporter, until he uncovered a big scandal in New Jersey, put it into the Hearst newspapers, Hearst was sued, threatened with life. My father had to be relieved of the job to save the situation. "Get rid of that guy, he revealed the investigation," when, probably somebody went to jail. He discovered some documents, which were published in the Hearst newspapers. Scandal, Tammany Hall! My father received a big bonus. However, he lost the job. And he couldn't get another job on a paper. It ruined his career. He had to go and look for some other type of work, which was terrible. Because the Depression started, and there was no work. He came home frustrated every day, and took it out on me, a little kid, cause I was rebellious, and I was terrible, a kid. I could only get attention if I did something stupid. So he would beat me with a leather strap. Frustrated for not getting a job, take it out on a kid. I would scream as loud as I could to

get help from the neighbors, who would hear in the windows—they would hear these kids getting hit. So I had a brutal beginning. I began with a gold—not a gold medal, but I will show you the medal that I received from the Hearst baby milk stations, throughout the poor communities. Hearst was running for President. To get the immigrant vote, like Obama, opened health stations for a prize baby. Who will be the prized baby of Manhattan? And get the little medal that said “New York, American, New York City,” and the seal of the City of New York. And on the back it says “Vincent Livelli, prize baby, 1921.”

So I started off as a very wealthy little kid. We had money, until he lost it. And so I was exposed to the wealthy part, I got nice toys, nice clothes, bicycle, wow! And I had to eat the smallest piece. And for a present for Christmas I got a pencil. It’s like a bar mitzvah. [laughs] So, imagine giving a kid a pencil for Christmas. Wrapped up! And I said, “I don’t want it,” you know, I rebelled. But I was not a bad kid, because I was afraid to be bad. I didn’t want to get hit. So I lost my self-esteem. That’s the biggest thing you can hold on to. If you’ve got confidence, you can face life. If you lose confidence, you’re nothing.

Now, I’m talking about the Village now. I’m talking a little too much about the situation of the family, but I was not the only family to go through hell. Children were hit daily, if you were a bad kid. I had a friend that my mother allowed me—she said, “There’s only one good kid on the street that you can play with. He lives in the building in front, next to the stable.” There was a very nice little house there. We used to fill the bathtub. His mother allowed me to play in the bathroom, not in the house, and we would fill the bathtub and sail out little sailboats. [00:55:38]

Talking of sailboats, if you were a wealthy child, you lived on Fifth Avenue and you had a sailboat for the lake in Central Park. All the kids on Sunday had their little sailboats. What did I have? My family saw to it that I had a sailboat and was brought to Central Park Sundays, to mingle with the upper-class Fifth Avenue wealthy family kids. That’s how much they thought of educating me. Well, that stuff didn’t always work.

It’s exactly twelve o’clock, we’re going to take an interlude.

**Zapol:** Ok, sounds perfect!

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE 'Livelli\_VincentGVSHPOralHistory1.mp3'; BEGINNING OF SECOND AUDIO FILE 'Livelli\_VincentGVSHPOralHistory2.mp3']

**Zapol:** And—

**Livelli:** Here we go.

**Zapol:** —we're returning, yeah.

**Livelli:** Well, my dad tried to help the family, and it fell apart. In fact, the family went to New Jersey, where my father's brother ran for city clerk in Hoboken. And now they live in Morristown, having become very wealthy. My father and mother remained in New York City all through the Depression when we used to have what was called Moving Day: when they put your furniture out on the street because you didn't pay the rent, that was Moving Day. I used to have to stand guard over the furniture on the street so that nobody stole it until my father was able to relieve me. I'm talking about when I was ten and eleven. We lived all over Brooklyn. Finally settling in Greenwich Village, because I wanted to come back to the Village, which I did, after World War II. My mother was heartbroken. She said, "You're leaving the family. Stay with us, stay with us." I said, "Well, Mom, I'm going to take off on my own." I had been helping the family with—I worked in a grocery store for a dollar a day, you heard those stories. I gave the salary to my mom.

However, this starts a whole new chapter in my life, because my father used to have to go and look for work early in the morning, and go to bed early at night. At least by ten. However, at eleven o'clock, coming from Havana, Cuba [claps]: shortwave, Casino de la Playa, Hotel Nacional; coming from Waikiki, Hawaii, the Malibu Hotel—Waikiki Hotel used to send shortwave programs of Hawaiian music to New York. But you could only hear it coming in and out. It would fade. Shortwave was not constant sound. And I said, "Well, I don't like to hear Hawaiian music, I want to hear Cuban music, which is more audible to my particular condition." Why? Because I heard not instrumental music so much, but drumming. Drumming vibrated, hit me in the right spot to where I responded. This brings us to Santeria, by the way.

So anyway, my father used to say, "Shut off that damn radio, I'm trying to go to sleep!" He wouldn't let me, and I would put it under the pillow with me—the radio, married to the radio.

So I was able to absorb that Cuban music lying down in bed as though it had a property beyond normal music, what I call divine music: music from outer space. Sound waves never die. Light waves diminish. Sound waves have been known by scientists to exist forever, to the end of time. The last thing that will disappear will not be the sun and the planets. It will be the sound waves that end, if we're going to end the cosmos.

But through that exposure to this influence, each cell seemed to respond to the vibration. It's not only sound, it's [rolls tongue] it's something hitting. Now, what is a drum? A drum is an empty appliance, if you want to call it a product. It has an empty interior, until someone animates it. This animation is carried out into the space as sound waves. The original—I'm getting into Santeria, wait a minute, no, come on, let's not talk about religion. We're talking about politics. [laughs]

**Zapol:** Well, I'm interested—

**Livelli:** Which is worse.

**Zapol:** These experiences of listening to music, those happened when you were ten or twelve? Or they happened when you returned, after you returned from the—[00:05:01]

**Livelli:** Ok, all right, of course, here's what happened. It gets a little mixed up in the sense that I entered Brooklyn College knowing I was going to fail, and I did fail. In Brooklyn College in 1938 there was still the smell of paint on the walls and the hall because they had just built Brooklyn College. It was free. If it was a charge, it was a minimal charge of some sort. I didn't know anything about how much to pay for college. I just did what my father told me to do, and I signed up and started learning English literature. I said, "No, I'm not going to learn English literature. Everybody's learning English literature, it's the easiest subject in the whole college."

Here's my mentality: either I'm going to be a complete disaster in life, or I'm going to find a way to be superior. That's my thinking. How do you become superior in New York City, full of talented people? You become unique. And how do you become unique? You learn four languages. And the most intelligent guy in my class, the most brilliant kid, flunked Spanish. I taught him Spanish, and he was going to teach me mathematics. Cause I never learned mathematics. But I said to myself, "If I can teach somebody something, I have a talent, I have

something to offer, and I have something they want.” He needed me to teach him Spanish. After-school class. I went through Brooklyn College, until the War intervened, and I had to go into service. But when I came back, most of the college kids came back, they said, “To hell with college, Brooklyn College, we’re not going to follow, we’re going to get a job!” Everyone was going after jobs, cause you had to start a family. Get an apartment. Start a new world.

What I did was I graduated Brooklyn College. Now how the hell did I do that? If you look at the register card, my resume, college, it says “trigonometry.” Do you know what trigonometry is? It’s on a level with Einstein. So what was I doing studying trigonometry? I wasn’t studying anything. I was flunking everything.

When it became a question of “is he going to graduate or not,” the teacher took pity on me and illegally gave me a passing grade, so that I could graduate. He felt so, so—wow, that hits home. My education was such a hell! It was hell. “Failed?” my father said, “What the hell’s the matter with you, you stupid kid.” My family gave up on me. “Put him in the military academy, he’s rebellious. Do something with him. He’s not going to be anything.” The whole family wanted a boy. They were all girls. Cousins. I was supposed to be something. Carried that on my back. Failure only made me more determined.

What did I do? After I graduated Brooklyn, I went to night school. Night school, what are you, trying to get out at night, huh? Going out? No, I’m going to study at night. I went to Bay Ridge, all girls’ high school. And it was all girls, but I studied something. I said, “I’m not going to be able to do anything in the business world. I may have a chance if I learn stenography.” Which is really not taking part as an entrepreneur, or a businessman; you’re an adjunct. Well, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia was a stenographer, and become Mayor of the City of New York. A little guy, a little warrior. He had what the Italians had. I had some of that. I didn’t let my hearing or his stature or his background as an Italian interfere with what you were, had to do with your life. It was not an option. I had to prove to these, my family, that I was not dumb. I knew that I was not dumb. I knew that I was not able to understand and express it, but I could be creative. That made my creativity talent upgrade. To be ingenious, to be unique. [00:10:37]

Now, I got a job, thanks to the music that I heard, with a dance troupe, in Beacon, New York. Not Beacon Theater; that’s part of it. They opened in New York in 1938, on the stage.

Dancing in front of the public, hearing applause for the first time directed at me. It's a total reversal. Instead of hostility, applause. So there was a breakthrough. Show business! I had no talent. I didn't study dancing. I used to go to Harlem and dance. Where I learned to dance Afro-Cuban. Not cha-cha-cha, not Latin jazz. African jazz. Now, that's a little different. That's where Santeria comes in. Because the Afro-Cuban influence involves slavery. The lyrics talk about, "I cannot live a slave."

Wow. I was a slave. I identified with the blacks, the slavery condition, where the lyrics were telling me, "I want to die." And that whole feeling, that got me involved, led to my career as a professional dancer. Opened the first Latin dance studio in Miami Beach, 1940. They had no idea of rumba. They heard it coming from Cuba. The Jewish community in South Beach were people from Flatbush, Bensonhurst. I used to go to the synagogue. More of my friends were Jewish. I fell in love. Jewish girls. My first girl was Jewish. That's important. Influence. I have a tree planted in Israel, in Haifa, four times.

Anyway, we'll talk about that in travels, but I sent my salary home to my family from—the first job was in Red Bank, New Jersey, West End, next to Diehl. You know the area? It's the shore, in Jersey. Your family probably knew it if they moved to Jersey. Well, that's where the mafia owned a mansion that was supposed to be turned into a gambling casino, illegal. A front was the nightclub, but downstairs was the gambling area that they were not able to install. They had to move from Red Bank, New Jersey, West End, to Asbury Park where they finally put in the gambling industry.

Well, I worked there in 1939 in the troupe of dancers, and I had my own partner, who was Al Jolson's mistress. Al Jolson had gone to Cuba, fell in love with the music, like Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. They went to Cuba. I had to go to Cuba, because of the music. I dropped out of—no, Anatole and I were at Brooklyn College together, we—that's a whole nice story, how we got together and moved in together in the Village. In fact, I'll take it from there.  
[00:15:00]

My mother was desperate to have me leave the family, but I was twenty-six, in 1946, and I said, "I'm going back to live in the Village. That's where my heart—I grew up, as a little kid, riding my bicycle in Washington Square Park." So she said, "Well, ok, go ahead." So Anatole

and I took up a little apartment, for very little. It was something like twenty dollars a month. We split it, and I was able to enjoy the beginning of something that just was like a garden that grew, a beautiful environment of intellectuals from NYU who came to Anatole and I to hear stories about the Depression, or about European authors that they were not being exposed to at NYU. They were studying Hemingway, or American, Henry James, James Joyce, that sort of literature. Okay, classical literature. Dickens, great. But there's some other literature that is not known among the intelligentsia, the literati, the people who are going to have a say in the culture of New York City and of the country, who should be reading people like Nathanael West, or Anaïs Nin or Henri Michaux, the painter and poet. We had Céline, Camus, what's his name, the existentialist guy?

**Zapol:** Sartre. Sartre.

**Livelli:** Yeah, and the woman who was his mistress? We—

**Zapol:** Yeah, that's also—

**Livelli:** Sartre!

**Zapol:** Sartre, yeah.

**Livelli:** We should be reading those people. Psychiatrists, Freud. Not American English, *Beowulf* and all that. Shakespeare, okay, we'll read him sometimes. The Italians said Shakespeare borrowed from Italy. Boccaccio, Petracca. I was taking Italian courses in Brooklyn College, and I had to study Italian literature, and Spanish literature, which I can quote. I used to quote Cervantes. I can still do it. I impressed people on these tour buses.

Now here's how you become unique: you don't think of yourself, you think of how you impress other people. Not how you impress yourself, "Oh, I'm smart." No, it's how other people think you're smart that you succeed. Because you have to have help.

Now, when I tell Spanish tourists that have come to New York to see the skyscrapers that I know how to recite "*En un lugar de la Mancha de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme, no hay mucho tiempo que vivía un hidalgo de lanza en asteliero* [REST OF PHRASE UNCLEAR, in Spanish—00:18:36]. Cervantes, *Don Quixote*. If you tell the Spanish people, and fifty people in

the bus, you recite their poetry to them, “Bravo! [claps] Here’s an American! He knows Spain! He’s one of us!” I did that in Italian. [PHASE UNCLEAR, in Italian—00:18:58] You know, I knew all – in German [PHRASE UNCLEAR, in German—00:19:09]. Portuguese! If you have Brazilians, they say [claps] “Brava, brava!”

You see, the unique quality that languages offer you; when you have something that people want to know, and here’s a guy that’s not supposed to know our culture. Because I’m reciting poetry. If I’m talking about, “They shot some people in Greece” or something, they don’t want to hear that. They want to know the childhood poetry that they were brought up on and here’s a guy in New York City, an American, who are so stupid about European culture, talking to us in our language and telling us stuff. [00:20:36]

When I had Brazilians on the bus, I knew all the high Brazilian society. The king of coffee, Hans Stern, the king of jewelers, he’s on Fifth Avenue, the fourth largest jeweler in the world. I helped him and the business to grow. His mother used to bring a paper lunch for him to eat while he’s working in the little office. He became one of the wealthiest men in Brazil. Aquamarines. I have a whole list of those people. I made everybody wealthy that I touched. It was having a touch of gold. I went through all the West Indies when it was sleeping. It was sandy, dirt, dusty, people didn’t speak English, they didn’t know a tourist from a hole in the ground. I said, “Look, clean up this little store, I’m going bring you some business. I’m bringing you tourists on the ships.” The West Indies came to life! Unfortunately, the mafia saw a good thing. They went into the cruise business. I was there when they said, “We’ll get a piece of the action.” That’s the way they talk. I said, “Uh-oh.”

I used to charge four dollars for an excursion tour in Nassau to see the flamingoes, which was a big deal for tourists, to see birds. Today, if you want to see the flamingo show it’s like twenty-five dollars. The business and the cruise industry just grew over my sight. I just have to look, and I can see it happening. One ship, two ships, thirty ships, forty ships. 6,000 passengers. I had like—if I had 200 passengers when I started on my ship, the little ship in the kitchen, I have a sentimental favorite of it called the *Nuevo Dominicano*. It was a ship that—well, the shipping part of my life has something to do with the Village, also, because this neighborhood had some, what you call stevedores. Stevedores lived here, and one of the people in the building was a stevedore. He became the janitor. And since I had some knowledge of ships and arrivals, my first

land job was with American Express company. No, actually, my first job after World War II, having moved to the Village with Anatole, on West 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, to a building that had an entrance called, it was, I think, 3A. What does the A mean? That there's an adjunct in the back, a little cottage. You go down the iron steps to the basement, walk through the basement, come out into the courtyard, where there's a little house. And that little house is still there. You're probably paying 3,000 a month or 4,000. It's a little cottage, which was formerly perhaps a public toilet, which was converted into a building.

Now, when I was just two and three years old, my mother used to take me to the window and point down there: "You see the snow?" Did you read the article about my mom doing that? You might have read it, where to teach me how to look at life, and understand that the snow was cold, she would put it on my hand, and it was cold. And she would put a candle, let it drip on my hand, to show, "Fire, don't touch it." I was sort of brought up by—not through education, because we sort of gave up on me, but my mother had a way of getting to me. Which must have broken her heart when she had a child who was deficient. Inferior. Kids would not play with me! So, we went through that sort of situation. [00:24:59]

Now, when my first job—I got it through the fact that I should never have been in the Army. They said, "How the hell did you get in the Army? You only have one kidney." You can't hear, how can you get in the Army? When I was interviewed by the doctor for my physical exam, he said, "We're not taking you. You're 1B." I said, "Wait a minute, I'm not 1B! I don't want to go in the army as a 1B. I've been through 1B all my life. I want to be 1A, for crying out loud!" He said, "Well, you have hypertension, you're not eligible for—" He didn't know I was deaf. Nobody knew I was deaf, really, nobody realized what it was. But you have hypertension, essential hypertension, caused by a kidney problem that incapacitated me. I was weak. That's why I couldn't play sports. I had two concussions from falling playing sports. I couldn't climb trees. I thought I could. I was a kid, you know, kids climb trees. Couldn't climb. Other kids climbed. Couldn't swim, they outswam me. I couldn't run. I was going to run. We were lined up on a public school day for competition, running, who could run the fastest. Who was the last? I thought, "Well, I'm gonna run as fast as I can." When they said, "On your mark, go," I ran like the dickens. That was way out there. And then I started to give up, and I fell down. Everybody passed by me, I couldn't keep up. But I thought, "If I go fast enough, maybe I can reach the

end.” You see, that’s the approach: if you try hard enough, maybe somehow or other you’ll succeed. Well, I failed. They all laughed at me, [laughs] they all took a pace and ran the normal pace. So I was taught a lesson, to try hard but continue to try hard.

When I got on the stage, guess where it was. Not in New York City. Somebody said, “We need a guy that dances, come join, three couples.” We worked in Beacon, New York, and we worked in New Jersey, and another troupe was formed. I’m talking about [19]38, [19]39. Latin troupes didn’t exist. I worked in Detroit, Michigan, which was unheard of, to go out of town, way the hell to Detroit in 1939, to work in a nightclub that was all lit up like Las Vegas! Detroit was the most prosperous city in America. Thanks to the automobile industry, during the Great Depression. New York, the lights were out. Garbage. Broadway was sad. It wasn’t Broadway. Nothing shining. Maybe the Rialto Theater or the Capital Theater.

Well, I’ll tell you, the sight of Las Vegas, of Detroit, all these lights! It was like Coney Island. At one time, Thomas Edison invented the electric light and it was displayed in a Philadelphia exhibit, and also in Coney Island. It was all bright lights, and I used to have trouble with my eyes. I used to look like this [models, Zapol laughs], was hurting my eyes, that’s how bright it was. It was part of my brain and my ears and my sight. The brain is affected by that.

Now, when I went to Detroit, I sent money home, until the guy said, “Well, I had to pay your hotel bill, I’m not paying you your salary,” so I had to leave without any money. He didn’t pay me my last salary. But that’s okay. What happened to me in Detroit turned my life around. Here I am, on the stage, hearing applause directed toward my effort, along with the other partners, and I said, “I’m not completely out of the picture. Here I am pleasing a multitude of people clapping in the nightclubs, on the stage.” I performed all over. I performed in the nightclubs in Miami. When I went to Cuba—I was going to the University of Miami, I got an exchange. They didn’t charge me tuition at the University of Miami. So I had Brooklyn free, University of Miami free, and exchange scholar to the University of Havana free. We changed students. They went to Miami, I went to Havana for one semester. [00:30:26]

Now, I wanted to tell you about Cuba. I arrived in Cuba in 1940, having dropped out of college. Not dropped out, withdrawn. We didn’t say “dropped out,” that’s common. Anatole used to say, “We withdrew. He withdrew. It didn’t suit his,” as he said, “Frame of mind,” being a

black guy in the Jewish community, which sort of at that time considered him to be different. Not part of our crowd. So, poor Anatole, me, an Italian Sicilian in Brooklyn College, stupid. The Italian fraternity in Brooklyn College was a few guys that rejected me. Because of my politics. I was, believe it or not, pro-Mussolini, because that's before he became involved with Hitler. He was admired by—we'll take a break.

**Zapol:** I'm curious also—you were talking about Anatole, Anatole Broyard and you both dropped out of college at the same time.

**Livelli:** Yes.

**Zapol:** Or, you said, not “dropped out,” but you took leave. You left. But did you also know—you said he was a black guy in a Jewish school. At that time, did he tell you that? Did you know that he was black?

**Livelli:** No, I didn't know it, because he was coming from Bedford Stuyvesant dressed like a black with a sweater and sneakers or something. He was not well dressed. However, when he progressed and started to look like somebody of prominence, working on Madison Avenue, dressing up with flannel grey, watching his composure, his manner, his politeness. He had a South, New Orleans approach, which was very polite. Not New York, garish, and he was outstanding, not as a black, but as a person who was interesting. From his features, very beautiful face. The kind that's irresistible, to women and to men. They envy his looks. I had—somebody said, “How would you describe Anatole?” One word: irresistible. Intellectually, his comportment, his composure, his New Orleans breeding. His father and mother were average, but he must have inherited some love for literature, and he learned how to imitate people of consequence, raise himself up. But he wasn't doing it correctly, or was not able to, because if you're not dressed for the task, people don't take you seriously. You have to give an impression, first impression. First impression at the San Remo.

Here's what makes the whole story come together. The way he entered my life in Brooklyn College in 1938, it was only because he was a misfit, like me. No hearing. He didn't fit in, he said it didn't coincide with the environment. Well, we are closer together than we are farther apart. I described it this way, and you'll understand it perhaps better. There are people who are together day and night, husbands and wife. We were apart for eighty percent of our

relationship. When I went on ships for so many years, we used to write, but that was the only contact. So we were apart. So I said to him, in a letter, “Closer together”—no, it has to be worded correctly: “Closer apart than many who are together.” In French: “*Plus proche que beaucoup sont ensemble.*” Well, here’s what happened, Anatole and I became current fixtures in the Village. I call it nobility. There were certain people who influenced the society growing up in the Village, with—[00:35:33]

**Zapol:** Sorry. To continue, you were talking about Anatole Broyard and yourself as nobility.

**Livelli:** Sure. Well, Anatole and I had to do something about the Village, the direction it was going in. Here’s what happened, and this is of interest to people who know nothing about it. We—when I say we, I mean New Yorkers in general—are not up on certain things purposely, because certain things have been held from us. What I’m telling you is a revelation, involving Communists’ infiltration into our culture. The McCarthy congressional investigation was belittled, besmirched and stepped upon through the Communist infiltration in our young student colleges. The American Student Union, which you never heard anything about, was a Communist front installed in New York University, installed in the New School for Social Research. Brooklyn College was all—that’s why I ran for student council, because I was unique. They needed somebody. “Oh, go ahead.” I had no reason to run for student council. I was the dumbest kid in the whole college, but something intervened, anyway, I don’t know how it happened. They picked me, I didn’t win, and Anatole and I got out of Brooklyn College.

But I went back and graduated. “Okay, he didn’t—he never graduated, but look where he went!” All the way up to the top. He’s not up there yet, he’s yet to be known. And I’m one of the ones who are fighting for his popularity to be known. He had a big contribution to Greenwich Village, which is Communist-dominated culture, counter-culture, counter-progressive culture, that clownish culture that we suffer from today. Damn it!

Anatole and I were walking down MacDougall Street from San Remo. We passed Sheri Martinelli: a fabulous, brilliant woman, who was Ezra Pound’s secretary, mistress, whatever. She was in love with Anatole, and he was in love with her. It was a Greenwich Village romantic story. Everybody was following it. Along comes William Gaddis. Falls in love with Sheri. Who had been in love with Anatole to where she was entirely his and he was entirely hers until Willy

came and complicated it, because he was brilliant, and Sheri went for brilliance rather than anything else. However, Sheri fell in love, I guess, with a musician, which was a bad thing to happen in a way, because he was on drugs. Not soft drugs, but hard drugs, which made her a drug addict. Anatole and Willy and I didn't know anything about drug addicts. We knew about marijuana because the musicians at the Village Vanguard and the Barn and Louie's were smoking.

In fact, on one occasion I met Charlie Parker at the San Remo, and I walked him home to his hotel on Broadway, and we sat down, he and I, and he said, "Here." And I said, "Wait, I don't smoke that stuff." He said, "Well, that's all right, try it." I said, "No, I'm not—" I tried a little. I didn't like it. I said, "No, I'm not gonna smoke that." That's the start of my marijuana days. Charlie Parker and I. [laughs] Here's a little guy. I was against jazz. Charlie was into jazz. I said, "No, it's not for me. I'm into Afro-Cuban. Sorry, buddy." He said, "You should listen to jazz." I said, "No, you should listen to Afro-Cuban." He went to Cuba, and he heard it, and he came back with Dizzy Gillespie. They tried to copy a little bit of Afro-Cuban and jazz. You can't dance jazz! The Jewish community of South Beach, the grandfathers, my age, who were my pupils at that time, carried into their children the love of Afro-Cuban rumba. And from that, they brought it into the young kids of today, who are doing salsa. Goes to the grandfather! Who taught the grandfather? Me! They had exposure in my dance studio, in the number-one hotel. They had no dance studios in those hotels. They had to put dance studios in after I started them. There's a pioneering thread throughout the ten hours that I'm talking about. [00:41:12]

So, who gave the money to build schools, swimming pools, libraries, hospitals, civic centers? The Jewish philanthropic community, who were giving money to the blacks from the South. They started to say, "Let's help the Puerto Ricans and Cubans." They built in Harlem all these facilities, centers for community, thanks to the money coming from the ancestors. Thank god for the music that made us happy, and we learned to show our appreciation, not so much to the blacks with the jazz music. Al Jolson came back from Cuba, fell in love with the Afro-Cuban music, wanted to paint himself black, and present himself to the Jewish community, American public, as a blackface entertainer. The Jewish community said "no." They were not, as yet, open to having their prime star in America, Al Jolson, "mammy," to be portrayed as a black influence. But that was the Cuban influence that he brought with him, and married, and made my partner

his mistress. She was the number-one rumba dancer in Miami Beach. I had several women who became partners, and teachers. I taught at Grossinger's in 1948. Who the hell ever heard of that? After that, it went up. Jerry Lewis and all these other entertainers, they all learned dirty dancing at Grossinger's. So you can say you started the rumba movement in America!

When I danced rumba at the Waldorf Astoria one night—with a countess, by the way—well, we were dancing a frantic rumba, and the manager, or the maître d, or somebody in authority, came over and he said, "Sorry, sir, you'll have to leave the dance floor." Because my rumba was not the Arthur Murray rumba that the other people were playing. I was doing the Afro-Cuban rumba. Which, in the Village—I used to put on parties, in Charles Street especially. Guys from Harlem that I met when I went to dance in the dancehalls in Harlem, musicians would come to my party and play Afro in the Village and we would go to hear Afro from kids in the Village, to have them hear Afro, in Harlem. So there was a black-white cultural exchange. I brought Harlem to the Village, and I brought the Village to Harlem. They became interested in literature. In Harlem, nobody had an education. They had no shoes! No money, no heat, no hot water, no mommy, no poppy. So we did that sort of cultural exchange consciously.

When I walked with Anatole down MacDougall Street, having come from the San Remo, where I said to Anatole, "Let's have lunch in my Italian restaurant here," cause I knew the San Remo, having lived in the Village, on and off, until I took the apartment with Anatole, we came to the Village and knew where the places to go were. In the Village, you were not allowed to go in the San Remo if you were black. 1937, [19]38. They saw Anatole and I come in, and they said, they shook their head. And I said to them, "Wait a minute, he's ok, he's with me." They let us sit down. But Anatole had to stand up until I said, "Come on, sit down, Anatole," at a table. We were going to have lunch. And they reluctantly didn't serve him the way they would normally serve a customer. They threw it, sort of, like making sure he would not be comfortable. Because he had an appearance, slight coloration, which to me and anybody who ever met Anatole, said, "What the hell is that? That doesn't mean shit, we don't care about that." And naturally he responded that way, that he's not going to go around saying, "Look, I'm black," or "I don't want to be black." He never had that quality about him. He took mankind as he saw it, as people of interest rather than a specific interest. Or non-interest, rejection. When they heard Anatole and I talking about Dante Alighieri, or Pirandello, or Grazi Deledda, or Boccaccio, or

D'Annunzio, because Anatole and I knew these authors—the Italians heard this conversation going on at the table. You know they all applauded us? [00:46:44]

Jesus Christ. It gets to you. These are situations where you can't help but be emotional, because it involves applause. Applause is an emotional reaction. I had never been applauded. I had been kicked. Thrown under the garbage! I used to hide under the bed with my dog, with the dirt. And my father was so desperate at one time that he stood on the window ledge. That's the kind of childhood to have, huh?

So everybody feels that they're getting beaten today. They don't have heat and hot water, sure, get the city on the ball, you know, it's how much you put into life what you get out of it. I put my soul into life because I was probably directed to do so. There was a reason. Why did I go to Cuba? Of all places. Cuba, who the hell goes to Cuba in 1940? A kid twenty years old, leaving Brooklyn, family, my girlfriend. Anatole was very impressed by my activity as a misfit, often, in society, so he made a special appreciation of my story. He went and followed my life, and I followed his life, going up and marrying into high society, Martha's Vineyard. I had high society in the palm of my hand on the cruise ships. They followed my schedule. My daily events schedule that I set up myself, to please me, rather than the passengers. Because I had to handle the situation, entertaining people for long travel on the ocean, boring, for thirty-eight days, once in a while stopping for one day here and there. But it was a challenge to keep people's morale up. I had a talent, it seems, to do that. Where it came from, I don't know, but people sort of accepted, if I said, "Well, eleven o'clock, you're going to come to my lecture," they dropped everything and obeyed me, came to my lecture. "At five o'clock we're going to play bingo on deck." "At two o'clock we're going to have water sports in the pool."

So they went, Vincent Livelli is leading, pioneering, the entertainment program that did not exist on ships until—thanks to a woman, god bless her, Eleanor Britain, a woman from Nutley, New Jersey, who ran for a beauty contest, won it. She was associated with the steamship company that one day, I went out and looked for a job after World War II. It was freezing around Wall Street. Wind from the harbor. I said, "I'm gonna go in this office and get warmed off." It was a steamship office around Wall Street, lower Manhattan. And the woman said, "Can I help you?" I said, "Yes." I said, "I would like to apply for a job." I had heard the word "cruise director" somewhere. No, I had the word "dancer." On a ship. I said, "I could teach dancing on a

ship.” She said, “Well, we don’t need a dancer. We need a cruise director.” And I said to myself, “What’s a cruise director do?” Nobody had ever heard of a cruise director. There was no such category in the Department of Labor. There was no union. There was no cruise director. It was a purser, chief purser who ran the kiddie party, the horse racing, little things like that, birthday parties. But no serious morale-building entertainment with huge Broadway shows and fifty people on a staff to have entertain—I had three: I had a hostess, a travel officer, a photographer, and then we got a comedian, and then we got a dance team, and from that we started to build entertainment with shows directed to entertainment on ships. [00:51:32]

That eventually became gambling. The industry took over. I started the gambling on the ships, but anyway, with three slot machines that Mayor LaGuardia threw in the Hudson River to get rid of gambling mafia in New York. He was a person who was anti-mafia. They threw the damn slot machines, three of them, in the Hudson River. The mafia went and drew them up, put them on my ship. They were all barnacled! I said, “What the hell is this?” Barnacles from having been in the salt water. They had to scrape them off. I have a photo of those three original slot machines that began the gambling industry on ships, which today is millions.

Well, Anatole and I are walking down MacDougall Street, coming from the San Remo, and there’s Sheri Martinelli, and William Gaddis. People like these people are unknown. Stanley Philips, who was the director of Myrna—what’s the woman that had blonde hair over one eye?

**Zapol:** Myrna Loy?

**Livelli:** No, not Myrna Loy, the other one.

**Zapol:** Oh.

**Livelli:** Was it Myrna Loy? A woman who, who had hair, blonde, over one eye? Was it Myrna Loy?

**Zapol:** I think so.

**Livelli:** That’s it, she was doing a Broadway show, and Stanley Philips was the director, until he broke his back falling off the stage and he was a wonderful part of the Village, because he represented the theatrical aspect of the actors and actresses who were in the Village at that time,

coming in, to appear eventually on Broadway if they could make it. And Myrna Loy, no, it was another woman. He was able to also be an influence in the San Remo, which collected all these people that had individual talents, that they could contribute to newcomers starting to arrive in the Village from Bennington, from Barnard, from Bard College, from Smith. Who brought them to the Village? They started to hear from one girl talking to another, to another: “Anatole Broyard, you should meet him!” They fell in love with Anatole. He had a way of just taking a woman by the elbow, walking her to the bedroom. To the Museum of Modern Art, first stop, and then from there, the bedroom. It was a triangle. Coming from Cambridge—he became Professor at Cambridge University. But that’s another story.

Anyway [laughs]. I used to watch him. He would sit with me in Washington Square Park, waiting for the girls to get off the bus, which came down from Fifth Avenue, parked in the park. That was the station for the buses, until they got rid of them. And we would sit at a certain bench, where you would have to go by to get out of the park, and he would sit there, and he would sit every day, at that time, around five thirty, five o’clock, and he would look at the girls and comment on their muscular legs or their trim ankles, or their posture, and have a complete diagnosis of whether he was going to take her to bed or not. He could pick his choice. He had a unique quality about women, that they came prepared forehand, to meet Anatole. They came from Boston. Why? To come to the Village, to meet an author, a brilliant guy that they were studying Chaucer. They wanted to know about Henri Michaux, a very complicated painter, who was the first painter painting psychedelic, LSD. He was in an institution. They called him “Paint.” I bought one of his oils, in Paris. Henri Michaux. [00:56:11]

Anatole said to me—we opened this bookstore on Cornelia Street. He opened it, because I had a woman benefactress. Her doctor said to me, “If she continues drinking, I give her three months. See if you could get her off Courvoisier. Very strong. Get her to drink beer.” I said, “Impossible.” I knew she would die. I wrote it up in the story called “A Story of Birth and Death.” The story of the bookstore on Cornelia Street. She was going to open. He said, “Take her mind off drinking. Get her involved in a business of some sort.” I said, “What business?” I spoke to her. She said, “Well, maybe you’re right. We’ll open a florist shop in the Village.” I said, “Florist shop, you know, why don’t we open a bookstore?” Because Anatole had been saying we want to open a bookstore. Have no money.

I said to this benefactress—she had been supporting me, paid my tuition at the University of Miami. I had no tuition. I went to her, and I said, “Look, can you help us out?” She wanted to invest money in something. I said, “Well, we’ll open a bookstore.” She was living on Cornelia Street. [doorbell rings, Louis Lazar enters] So we rented that little plumbing store that had a little quality to it, and it became the Greenwich Village Bookstore, Cornelia Street. 1938 Brooklyn College, withdrawn from school to learn outside of the academic ivory towers. Which did not appeal to our psyche. He was a boy from Bed Stuyvesant dressed like a bum, and I was an Italian Sicilian Genoese misfit. Couldn’t hear. We became closest friends. You can’t get closer than Anatole and I. I was at his interment in Martha’s Vineyard. As I said, from cradle to grave. He was nothing, and he became great, and I was nothing and I became a historical figure thanks to this guy. [laughs] Now I’m being interviewed. You see, that’s popularity. When people are interviewed, it’s like asking for my autograph. In words. And I used to ask people for their autographs. I had Carmen Miranda’s autograph, with a kiss. [blows kiss] He [gestures to Lazar] knows it.

We came from the San Remo and did not do what Anaïs Nin and Sheri Martinelli—Anaïs was not there. Sheri was Anatole’s girlfriend, and she said—here she is, sitting on the street in the dirt, against a wall. And she was with Stanley Philips, who was the pusher—no, Stanley was the director, Stanley Gould was the pusher, supplying marijuana and black market shirts. After World War II there was a black market in white shirts. Cause we were—you seem to be following me. Do that, continue to do that, whether it’s true or not. [Zapol laughs] [01:00:01]

So I was able to say to Anatole, “Are we going to join them in the dirt, sitting in the sidewalk?” Cause they were hippies. That was the start of the hippie movement in the world, on MacDougall Street, in 1946. When people no longer wore ties. Anatole and I were dressed well. I took him to the San Remo. I mean, that was another occasion when we went to the—first time was in 1938. And this is 1946, so he’s dressed differently, and he’s known by the Santini brothers who own the San Remo. That was the Court of Francis I. Getting all the intellectuals of Europe in one spot, which is what Francis I had set up: a salon in his castle. So the San Remo can be compared to a nucleus, like Gertrude Stein’s salon in Paris. And there’s one in Italy, too, in Milan. So here we are, I said to Anatole, and he agreed, and he said, “Yup.” He wasn’t very into conversation except with girls. Then you saw his stuff coming out. Poetry! But normal

conversation was normal. He said, “Yeah, that’s it,” you know, he didn’t go into discussion. What was it? It was the beginning of sloppy shoes, hair, long hair, pants with holes in them, punk! Yeah, all this stuff came along because Sheri was on drugs and she was getting into the Ginsburg mentality. The Jack Kerouac bullshit.

**[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE ‘Livelli\_VincentGVSHPOralHistory2.mp3’;  
BEGINNING OF THIRD AUDIO FILE ‘Livelli\_VincentGVSHPOralHistory3.mp3’]**

**Livelli:** The William Burroughs sickness. And that’s what was happening to America, because the Communists said, “Good! We’ll bring down these kids from New York University, and bring American culture into garbage! And bring down America.” All right, I don’t blame this guy, he has an approach to it, which he has to have. He’s not going to say, “Man, you’re wrong, you’re wrong,” because he inherited it. It’s like saying, “My uncle was a son-of-a-bitch.” But you have to respect what I’m saying, because it’s the way—look how beautiful that curtain is. Look how nice that set there, the whole room is set off beautifully. I’m on a stage! [Zapol laughs] Anatole was able to see the point I was making. He said, “Yes, they’re going to turn into drug addicts.” Drugs didn’t do very much for our country. In the beginning, if they had just left it, a little bit of this, a little bit of that, ok. I was into grass, eventually. And I approved of it. I’m all for it today. I’m all for anything that you can show me is not harmful. It’s different. It’s lead to a brilliant generation; these guys are brilliant because of what they’ve had exposure to.

**Louis Lazar:** Grass!

**Livelli:** And that might be worth a sacrifice. I mean, you don’t know what the future is. But if you’re a drug addict, to the extent that—Burroughs, Ginsburg, Kerouac: KGB. The Russians used to put parties with prostitutes together, invite New York University young guys to meet girls who were being paid by the Communists to infiltrate, bring down the culture, turn these guys onto drugs. Ruin America!

**Zapol:** So—

**Livelli:** The American Student Union was set up with a lot of other fronts. The American this, and the American that—they were Communist fronts. You’ve heard of the word “front.” Well, you didn’t know anything about it if you were a New Yorker. It was not part of your culture, or

your exposure, or your politics. You said McCarthy's a whatever the hell they call him, a Nixon-type guy? Well, these guys knew something that, in the government, we didn't handle it right. We just put McCarthy up on a pedestal maybe, which was wrong. They should have put somebody else, maybe, but it failed. We didn't save our culture.

**Zapol:** So what happened with your bookstore then, as Kerouac and Ginsburg started to come in? Did the bookstore continue, Anatole's bookstore?

**Livelli:** Oh, I was talking about the bookstore, right.

**Zapol:** But also, did that continue, and tell me also about any stories you might have—

**Livelli:** Well it had an excellent, yeah—

**Zapol:** —about Kerouac, or—

**Livelli:** It had a strange effect on the culture of the Village. It split. Some went into the Communist category, and they became radicals, and Chicago riots and the Kent killing and all that. That was the result of the Communist influence that were—boy, they're killing each of the good, they're going to bring down the Communist, the American system is going to become Communist, we're taking it over! And with the help of the student body, and all the colleges that they infiltrated, San Francisco became drugs. San Francisco was nice! Little by little. Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Detroit. Ah! University of Wisconsin, where I went tuition-free. The Army sent me there. I saw it all happening, little by little, picking it off. And I said, "Anatole, what are we gonna do?" I said, "I'm getting out of the Village. It's depressing as all hell to see it going downhill. It's supposed to go up, with European literature and exposure to paintings and Museum of Modern Art." The kids that were here learning were learning how to be Communist, and agricultural movies that they took them to, free movies to show how the Communist system was superior to the American system. And here it is, in front of you, people working in the fields, happy, singing, bullshit. Workers' paradise. Bullshit. Propaganda, up to, I had—and that's what's taken over the Village. If you go back to the [19]50s and the [19]60s, garbage, it was — just, "You're leaving a hole here, you're leaving it."

I said, "I can't help it, Anatole, I've got a wonderful offer to go on ships, to go around the world, and I—the hell with, you take it. It's yours." And he couldn't handle it. He had to shut up.

When he worked on the *New York Times*, they tolerated him. Because the *Times* was liberal. And still is, I guess, today. And he had to be one of the only people that they said, “All right, we’ll manage to take him.” Because of his brilliance, he kept up with the *Times*. He never spoke against Communism. He never spoke about the black race criminals. He understood, he was black himself. He said, “You can study it all you want, read all you want, [Ralph] Ellison, but you’ll never know what the black man is.” And he wrote from that perspective, of being, intelligence about the approach to the racial problem. It’s because of the lead poisoning in the houses in Harlem that destroyed the black children’s mental capacity, and it’s against the drug infiltration in Harlem, which was the mafia. Who burned Harlem? The mafia. They burned the buildings so they could buy it from the city at auction for nothing. They own all the houses that they burned. Insurance! [00:06:25]

**Zapol:** So you chose to leave—

**Livelli:** See those are questions that people of today said, “Oh, you know, I don’t blame him, he doesn’t know the history.” It’s like not reading the history of the world, it’s right there. You’re hearing it! It was serious. It was the Communist influence that, fortunately, he doesn’t show what I’m talking about.

**Zapol:** I just want to say, we also have another person in the room here, and so—yeah, I’m just going to give you my mic for a second, and if you can just say your name, and maybe a bit about your relationship with Vincent.

**Lazar:** Hi, my name is Louis Lazar. I’ve infiltrated this interview [laughs] and I am Vincent’s good friend and I’ve been helping him put his writings together to a format of a book that is just finished now.

**Zapol:** And Louis actually introduced me to Vincent, and so that’s a part of the connection in this interview. Would you like me to pause for a second? And go ahead.

**Livelli:** Adolf Hitler was menacing America. So were the Communists. We were in bad shape. We had Roosevelt, but a refugee coming to America, New York, especially a cultured person, professors, artists, teamed up with the New School for Social Research, which brought a liberal element into the environment in the Village. We were an Italian community, with baby carriages,

and we were able to understand there's something else in the world out there. Well, Anatole and I chose the literature, and the cultural aspect of high quality, whereas the liberal element in New School had an influence on the young New York University who were getting into the Ginsburg environment. So, unfortunately, Ginsburg became the king of the people who counted, in the East Village, which was garbage! If you lived in the West Village, you'd put the East Village down because it was alcoholics, but a low quality of American citizens. It's become better, but still has that tinge of seediness of some sort, which makes it so avoidable. I just don't go there. But there are other people moving in, becoming part of it, maybe not liberal. But that's what we're facing. The Village was cut into two parts, Anatole, quality, culture, European, beneficial feeling of environment—your wholesome East Village, “Howl,” Yoko Ono, horrible!

Anyway, what's happening was that was a conflict there, and Anatole had to stick it all out. He was exposed to it. And the *Times*, I went up into the *Times* building, with tourists, who were journalists. That's how I got into the inner sanctum of that *New York Times*. It's a closed community. They don't let you into the rooms where the reporters are. But these people were from France, and they wanted to interview American journalists. They were journalists. So my job was always with people of prominence taking him on specific—mostly intellectual, also business. [00:10:25]

But anyway, when you're touring people around, you're an ambassador of America in their eyes. They don't meet too many Americans in their visit. They meet maybe the guy in the restaurant who serves them, and they have a conversation with a waiter, or the concierge. The concierge didn't know anything about taking care of tourists. There was no concierge, in New York.

Now getting back to the bookstore, I think?

**Zapol:** I think we were starting to talk about your trips on the ship.

**Livelli:** Alright.

**Zapol:** And maybe what you saw—how the neighborhood started to change even more here as you went back. So you would go off for thirty days, and then would you come back here or would you go to port elsewhere? Where would you stop?

**Livelli:** Well, you see, when you work on a ship you don't need an apartment in New York. You live on the ship. That's where you work, no commuting. You have your office, and you set your own program, which is something I had the privilege of doing. How many people can fashion their lives to their own liking? I will build a world to my own specifications. I think every one of us would like to put a world together to suit themselves. Marry the right person, have the right mother-in-law, have the right job, travel. Nobody, not that I know of, has that choice to be able to fashion a living based on his own specifications. It's like being given a clean plate.

To go on a ship. I never knew anything about ships. What do you know about ships? What do you know about ships? How to entertain for long, boring voyages. People who are expecting—they began to expect a nice, pleasant trip in terms of weather and sight-seeing, but how to become accustomed to days of nothing but water. Nobody ever considered how to take that into consideration. Until you started playing games.

Well, I mentioned Eleanor Britain. She interviewed me, saying “We do need a cruise director.” And I said, “Well, I would like to apply for the job,” even though I didn't know what a cruise director was. What does he do? Does he steer the ship? [laughs] Well, in a way he does. The captain is responsible for the safety of the ship, but the cruise director is responsible for the morale, and the pleasure involved. So my life was spent thinking in terms of joy, happiness, pleasure, good times, vacations. People came aboard, now, little by little, expecting to be entertained. Before, it was just to get from point A to point B. They were looking forward to being entertained. How do you do that? Well, you talk about the ports you're going to visit, some of the history in the Mediterranean. You give them talks of history, especially in places they want to know about: Greece, Roma, Africa, Rio, Buenos Aires, Bombay, Tokyo, Cairo. Each trip, you pick up something. And I did this for twenty years: picked up history. Taught myself architecture, painting, culture, languages. I learned *mierda* in college, but when I got out of college I was able to read Latin inscriptions on Roman ruins with the other people who couldn't decipher what the hell that means. Because I had thought in terms of several different things. Global approach to the world, and, because Columbus was my hero, as a child—he discovered the world at that time, he thought he was the first, but he wasn't. And I made myself in his image. I'm going to go to Europe, as he went to America. So I was able to follow the right direction in my thinking. [00:15:07]

I'm not going to learn anything in America, in these schools. I went to the University of Brazil. I learned samba. In Havana, I taught the Cubans how to dance New York-style rumba. And they taught me how to dance Havana-style rumba. I brought the rumba from Havana to New York, and the rumba from Harlem to Cuba. What happens when you do something like that? You become outstanding. You become a figure that they can—"Remember that guy, he brought the Cubans, he brought the Havana?" You know, they bring you together with something that they identify with, in terms of nice feelings.

What I did was, when in Cuba—let me get back to Cuba a minute. It's very important in my life, because I was blessed by a religious person in Cuba that made my thinking change, and see myself in a different fashion. When I learned rumba in Harlem at the Park Plaza dance hall in 1938, taught by the number-one dance team, Africans, blacks, René and Estella, who, if you mention them to any Latin American in South America, Central, or North America, they will say, "What! Did Estella teach you how to dance?" Yes. She came over and said, "I see you sitting here, come on, dance." "Oh, I can't dance that stuff." I was just a little young guy. I was eighteen. She got me out on the dance floor, and from that step, that first step, I went out and carried the dancing to all over, every place, as I'm doing now, I'm talking to you about it.

Afro-Cuban. What is Afro-Cuban? It's slavery, the message of the black man working from sunrise to sunset in the fields, chopping. That's no way to live. Chained! Until he was able to play his drums. The government under the Spaniards eventually relaxed, and they allowed a Mardi Gras carnival atmosphere. It wasn't to celebrate Lent or the Catholic Church. It was to celebrate the possibility of playing their drums because it was illegal to play drums. It was a form of rebellion against the Spanish authorities. They feared the black slave that eventually threw off the chains. Thanks to the music. Now, I told you, I was kicked off the dance floor at the Waldorf Astoria because I was dancing the real Cuban, not the Arthur Murray Cuban? Okay, he made a million dollars. I didn't make any money, but I made people aware of something more authentic. Not commercial.

When he came over, the maître d or the manager said, "You'll have to leave the dance floor now," cause I was dancing the real rumba. Miguelito Valdés was singing, with Cougat [phonetic] [00:18:22] at the Cirque room at the Waldorf Astoria. All English, high quality, notable audience. Not Harlem people. You know what happened?

**Zapol:** Tell me about what that looks like, the real rumba.

**Livelli:** Well, I will. The real rumba had an effect on the people who saw me dancing. They said to the manager—the people at the ringside, who were Jewish, by the way, they probably knew the real rumba. Not all the Jewish people took lessons from Arthur Murray, although most of them did, not knowing that there were other possibilities. Other people, even Fred Astaire taught the wrong rumba. Cause that was commercial, and it was easy. If you want to know Afro-Cuban rumba, you have to learn certain movements that include *tornillos*, where the woman or the man go down on one foot and put a glass of water on their extended leg and carry a glass of water on their head without spilling it. That's the kind of stuff you find among the black quality performers. They are dancing not a dance to feel pleasure, but a dance to be a ritual thanking gods. That's a lot of it. Part of it is show business, but drumming has a profound effect on dancing proper, and also on the individual as a recipient of something that you don't get everyday. [00:20:04]

**Zapol:** I know you're in the middle of a story, but, can you tell me about what it feels like, to you, to dance the real rumba? What does it feel like in your body?

**Livelli:** Well, yes, when I was doing it in Cuba, showing the American version of the Afro-Cuban, which was a little different—we involved—well, when I went on stage, we were taught lifts, to lift a girl during an Afro-Cuban piece, which was not incorporated originally. Those movements were aside and imposed upon Afro-Cuban movements. I had to lift a girl weighing about a hundred and twenty-seven pounds over my head and allow her to slowly rejoin the floor, and I did it to begin the beguine. Which had a certain West Indian quality to it. It was the number one song in America, Cole Porter, "Begin the Beguine." At this time in history, you don't hear it anymore, but there is a part where you lift the girl and then slowly put her down. And I brought that to Cuba.

And that's, it's an interesting—[laughs] he knows the story [gestures toward Lazar]: the first day in Cuba, I went out to look for a place to hear some music and dance. There was a bar next to the hotel playing a record. In Cuba you hear music all day long, everyplace. It picks up from one place to another, continues. I stopped by this club. It was open, they had a radio playing, or maybe they had an orchestra. Cubans play all day long with instruments, not only the

radio. And a girl came over to me, and she said, “Would you like to dance?” And I said, “Well, I’m not used to being asked by a woman to dance.” That was not done in America. You had to ask the woman, even in Harlem. But René and Estella, she came over to me, and said, “You sit here, come on and dance.” And I said, “I don’t know.” I was low self-esteem, don’t forget. And I was able to dance with her, and I got out of that shell. What brought me out of the shell of deafness and lack of self-esteem and non-participation in society was the bright lights of Detroit, Michigan, and the applause.

That whole thing—if you put a black kid from Harlem on a stage and utilize, idolize him, he’ll get a whole different personality emerging. He’ll feel like something. Until he gets that particular feeling, you could try and take him to the doctor, analyze him, psychoanalysis. He’s still missing a key ingredient, which is the public admiration to believe in a person. When you’re deaf, nobody believes in you, and you don’t believe in them because you can’t understand them.

Well, getting back to, what, Cuba? When I walked around Havana the first few days --

**Zapol:** So the woman who asked you to dance—

**Livelli:** She asked me to dance?

**Zapol:** Yes.

**Livelli:** In the club.

**Zapol:** Yeah.

**Livelli:** It wasn’t a woman.

**Zapol:** In Cuba.

**Livelli:** It was a lesbian—not a lesbian, a homosexual. I thought it was a woman, cause I smelled perfume, and I never think of a man working, wearing perfume. But it was a homosexual bar. So I was able to show them. Here’s what happened: when he or she came over and danced with me, I danced very well with her, the basic rumba, but I was not dancing what they thought was a good rumba. And they were going, “Look at that American guy trying to dance our rumba!” I was dancing New York-style rumba, which to them was nothing until I saw, out of the corner of

my eye, that they were mimicking, laughing at me. Look at that guy, American, dumb. If I was going to do something to impress them, I said, “Wait a minute.” Here’s a good moment in my life when I redeemed my authority. I felt, “Ok, you want to ridicule me, you bastards? I’ll show you how to dance the rumba!” I picked her up—I thought it was a woman—and I put her up over my head and took her down and swirled her and threw her away, and they said, “Wow!” They had never seen it, keeping in time with the rumba. Cause I was already, you know, show biz oriented. You have to hit people. You can’t just stand there and do an ordinary rumba. [00:25:00]

So after that incident—and that happened to be an important area in the center of Havana, that people from there went on to broadcast around Havana, “Hey, there’s that guy that brought the rumba from New York. Look, that’s, there he goes, he’s walking down, he’s wearing a necktie.” They weren’t wearing neckties. So everybody was able to see Vincent Livelli in Havana, a young kid from New York City, the only young tourist in Havana in the hot summer with a tie. So, you know, I stood out, and I was able to feel at home, and Cuba made a lot of difference in my life. My friend at the university said, “You’re always talking about this music, this dancing, this language. Let’s go to see santero, and he’ll tell you about what you’re interested in.” I wanted to learn the African language so I could hear the lyrics and interpret what the songs were about: slavery.

We had to row across Havana Harbor. There was no ferry boat, to go to the outskirts, where nobody goes to: Regla. Today they take you there, you have to pay a fifty-dollar tour to go and see what I saw for nothing. There were no paved streets. After a while it became all gravel. Just a few paved streets in Regla. Now there’s a Cuban song that starts out—Miguelito made it famous. Miguelito did so much for the cause. His first song, that he sang at the Waldorf Astoria where blacks were not allowed to perform in show business, in spite of what I said about the blackface, Al Jolson. Well, Cougat [phonetic] [00:27:04] presented Miguelito behind the curtain, a blackout spotlight moves to the curtain. Behind the curtain: “Babalaaaoo! Ba-ba-lao.” He’s calling santero, the gods. Babalao is a god. A fixture in the religion. He’s appealing to him for help. That voice coming from behind a black curtain, the audience was not prepared in any way. They thought Cougat [phonetic] was violins. They hear an authentic—and Miguelito was number-one. When he sang his music—and they say “*la música*.” When they use the word “music,” they’re not referring to rock and roll. It’s *la música! La música*. It’s almost saint,

sacred. It's a music that's coming from outer space into your being. They're talking about Afro-Cuban music. Drums. It had, originally, only drums until they imposed instruments on it. But to be influenced by the music, you have to hear the pure music. It's like being exposed to arithmetic, you have to learn "one-and-one is two" first.

Well, you're talking about Miguelito singing. When you open the curtains, here's a black man singing, a mulatto, a very handsome mulatto. You don't think of a handsome mulatto, but he was, personality-wise. He played the drum, danced around the floor, gave you that African feeling. That people started to say, "Yeah, there's something in all that, listen, look at that, listen to that!" He would chant, not sing. And then he would sing partly in English, sort of teasing you, but he started in African, so people would say "What the hell is that?" Then he would throw in and interject some American: "I can no longer live. *Voy a morir, no puedo mas vivir*. I can no longer live a slave. Twelve years a slave." It's that sort of thing, and they heard little bits and pieces of American lyrics, and they started to understand. Now, with me, it was the same process, because I heard the words, I began to understand Spanish. That taught me Spanish. I would probably never have learned otherwise. I wasn't learning anything. And I figured, it's sad to hear. The way they sang it, you could feel the heart that they put in the lyrics: this is not music, this is religion. This is something that affects you. Music comes and goes. It's beautiful. Well, he played successfully to hundreds of people. Great! He brings joy to their life. I don't know if he can bring religion to them. For your country music, has it any aspect of religion?  
[00:30:19]

**Lazar:** Country music? I wouldn't know! [laughs]

**Livelli:** Yes, you would! In fact you should put some religion in it. Some of them do, some religious—

**Lazar:** No, there should be. I agree, there should be a sacred side to all music.

**Livelli:** I think so, a little praise to god, which is sort of necessary if you want to penetrate people, you speak a religion. Religion's part of you, you're born with it.

**Zapol:** So you said for you, then, the religious aspects then touched you?

**Livelli:** Yes, here's what happened: they were having a contest in Harlem at a theater called Cervantes, and I applied to play a fifteen-cent harmonica. But what song did I play? I played the number-one song at the time, among the community in South America, wherever, they all knew an African song called "Bruca Manigua." He knows it. *Bruca* is not Spanish, *manigua* is not, it's a corruption. *Bruca* is African; *manigua* is sugar cane field, corrupted; the whole word is *manigual*, with an "L" but they dropped the "L". They say *bruca manigua*. Everybody knows what that means. It's the place where you go to work as a slave, and the lyrics are talking about working as a slave in the sun.

I took that song to heart. It hit me, because I felt a black man, talking, myself. I was black when I heard that music. I was suffering. Because I was a misfit. The black is a misfit. I identified, totally, with the blacks. I went from Fort Hamilton Brooklyn, an hour and a half, to Harlem, to be with my people. I got on the stage, I played "Bruca manigua," without flats, just sharps. When I started, people in the audience—here's a kid from Brooklyn, doesn't speak Spanish, up with the microphone. The master of ceremonies didn't know how to introduce me. He just said, "Here's a fellow going to play the harmonica." When I started playing "Bruca manigua," which is a difficult song, because it trails off and you have to have the proper quality about it, or else it doesn't happen. It's a difficult song without proper—it was a cheap little harmonica. If you buy a harmonica today it's probably ten dollars or five-dollar harmonica.

But guess what, I won first prize! The place went wild! I just stood there, at the microphone. It was dark, I couldn't see the people. But the way they reacted to me, they jumped up with the guy from Brooklyn playing this song. They never thought of playing it on a harmonica. Didn't exist. They played on proper instruments, with drums. But there's a part in "Bruca Manigua" that when you trail that sound, I don't know if in country music you can do this, where you just hold one note—

**Lazar:** Sure!

**Livelli:** —and go off with that one note, and you leave people so aghast that they're knocked out. You knock them out, because that particular note has the whole concept of the song in it. That "Bruca Manigua" is the guy dying from the maltreatment of the Spanish authorities, who beat

him, put him in jail, put him in chains. And when you hear that, and they hear that, they respond with love for you. I won five bucks! [laughs]

**Zapol:** This was when you were younger, when that happened?

**Livelli:** Yeah, I was nineteen or eighteen. And they knew me in Harlem! When I walked around, “There’s the guy who played ‘Bruca Manigua’ at the Cervantes Theater!” That’s like in Havana, I was the guy that brought the lifts into Cuban rumba. I brought entertainment on the ships, “There’s the guy that put gambling in the casino!” So, I had a life of support from authorities other than myself. I couldn’t do it myself. I couldn’t get up and play a harmonica knowing I was going to knock everybody in the theater out. [laughs] I didn’t expect it! My life was full of unexpected pleasure. His appearance in my life, who brought him into my life? [00:35:04]

There’s stuff around here that we don’t know about. So, anyway, that’s not what I should be talking about. I should be talking about Greenwich Village Historical Society.

**Zapol:** I want to ask you one more question, and then we’re going to have to end the session today.

**Livelli:** Sure.

**Zapol:** But here you are. You just had a birthday. How old are you now?

**Livelli:** I’m only ninety-six years old.

**Zapol:** So you’ve been living in this particular apartment, you said, for fifty years.

**Livelli:** Yes, I took this apartment expecting to stay just one or two nights in between trips, because the ships in the old days used to come to the piers in New York, and they still do, but not to the extent where they used to. It was the port, from Europe. Now they go to Miami or New Orleans. And I love to be near the sea, for some reason. The river, right down here. Perhaps because Verrazano, Italian, discovered it, and I sort of felt a little pride in that, because nobody gave any credit to the Italians for having come to Greenwich Village. Maybe he set foot in the Village, I don’t know. So I took this apartment thinking I would stay here just—and I rented it out while I was on the ship. And I was able to remain here, up to today, thanks to the city giving me the discount for senior citizens. My neighbor is paying about 1,300. I won’t tell you what I’m

paying. I'm ashamed to admit it, because it's the only thing that keeps me going. I spent all my money. I had, on the ships—he knows [gestures to Lazar]—forty ways to make money on a ship as a cruise director.

Should I—is this Greenwich Village or not?

**Lazar:** No!

**Livelli:** No. But that's a whole different story. But the Village was not saved. It was saved in a way that it's keeping its head above the water. It's not the drug hippie environment of the '60s anymore. It's fragile, because you have people here that may still like to tear down the American democratic system, society. And you may have liberals that are in positions.

Now, if this is going help anybody—I don't like de Blasio because he changed his name from Italian to Puerto Rican. Day or De. He also wanted to bring in all the families that can't pay rent, incorporate them with—yeah, okay. Well I'm gonna apologize, I think I'm on thin ice.

**Lazar:** Yes!

**Livelli:** He's going to help a lot of people who will have better housing by having billionaire investments and housing, low-income people. However—wait, let me—

**Lazar:** Vince, Vince!

**Livelli:** —so you get the grasp, the feeling. The road to hell was built with good intentions. He intends well, to help the grandmothers who have no ceilings and no hot water. They're going live in a decent apartment. No! What's going happen eventually, if you carry it—I always look way ahead. The grandmother's going to say to her drug addict nephew, “You have no place, you're sleeping in a shelter, come, I'll put out a bed for you, in the other room.” He calls his girlfriend, “Come, we live with my grandmother, we have a decent place to—” What happens to New York City?

**Lazar:** Don't worry about it.

**Livelli:** What happens to New York City?!

**Lazar:** It's gonna be fine!

**Livelli:** You have people next to people with money, and they're going to bring crime into the area because they're coming from the South, bringing drugs into New York, and guns into New York. This is not a city for that sort of situation. This is a community growing up to show the world that we're not gangsters in the street with killings and stabbings. This is New York City and this is the city that I want, so I'm fighting, in a way, de Blasio. He's trying to help, but he's Italian. Italians are always trying to help the poor people. They have a reputation. They're taking all the refugees off the boats. Well, the bad intentions are still—he's going to see it, and he's going to say, "I remember when Vincent was talking about that." I hope not. [00:40:06]

**Zapol:** You have a lot of pride in—

**Livelli:** He may have a way of telling people something that will change the whole situation.

**Zapol:** Can I—

**Livelli:** I hope so. I hope a little influence from me will help you. Go ahead.

**Zapol:** You have a lot of pride in the community. It sounds like you have a lot invested, and you have a lot of pride in this community. You grew up here.

**Livelli:** No, I have nothing invested in the community. They don't know who I am, really, cause I was away. I was on ships. I should have had an involvement. I belong to this other society, the Greenwich House. I knew the founder of the Greenwich House, Madame—I say Madame—Simkhovitch [phonetic] [00:40:49]. Are you familiar with that name? She—and my family helped to set Greenwich House pottery shop, taught pottery to the children. Sent me to the camp in the summer. So I grew up in the area of poor children blessed with the Greenwich House community, which my family contributed to. So I'm a part of Greenwich Village!

**Zapol:** You are.

**Livelli:** Yeah, I am.

**Zapol:** And tell me, I know that you two met around the corner at a café—

**Livelli:** Yeah, that's right. It's such a mystery how I met him, it's sort of a nice mystery. I think of it in terms of having fallen from heaven, that's how I met him. So it's nicer to think I met him at a bar.

**Zapol:** I'm interested in hearing about some stories of places that are important to you now in this neighborhood.

**Livelli:** Well, it would be Havana, Cuba, where I heard the santero say "Why have you come?"—

**Lazar:** In the neighborhood!

**Livelli:** Oh, in the neighborhood! I'm sorry, I can't, you see, you're incapacitated. Well, in neighborhood we started the bookstore, which was a phenomena. A success! People used to come to hear Anatole talk about Dostoyevsky—

**Lazar:** No—

**Zapol:** It's ok.

**Livelli:** —everybody was carrying *War and Peace*.

**Lazar:** But places that are still around now, that you think are important now! Your favorite places in the neighborhood.

**Livelli:** Well, believe it or not there are two places that just have the name, but they don't have the patrons. One is called Kettle of Fish, and I think they have guitar players. The other one is called the Corner Bistro, and the other one is called—it's on, next to the—I'll tell you the story of the Stonewall Inn. The true story. He knows it.

**Lazar:** Mm. [laughs]

**Livelli:** The true story is not publicized. Nobody knows it except me. Let me see, me, because I never heard anybody—I went to this church, St. Anthony. There were some guys in there who were anti-gay. Italian kids, six of them, talking about, "We have to get rid of the gays in the Village." And I was sitting within hearing distance—well I just had to hear what the subject matter was, and I knew right away what they were talking about. They were the kids that once in a while beat up a gay, because there was that period beginning when the gays took over the San

Remo, flocked in there, made it their nucleus, got rid of the literary crowd, got rid of the tourist crowd who wanted to see Village types. Anatole was drawing people in there, who got rid of the original Italian patrons who were card players, social club. In come all these people from out of—where are they coming from? Des Moines, Iowa; Chicago; and they were bringing an element of, what do you call the gay who is too flaunting his gayness? We didn't mind gays, I had gays—I still have—Beauford Delaney, the painter, was my very close friend. Black guy. And Earl Pilgrim, black guy. And all the blacks in Harlem, they were my boys, and I was their—he's left the room for, perhaps he doesn't want to hear it. Well, anyway, the black people were closer to me than the black people living close to themselves. I was fighting for them. I was crazy for them because—

**Zapol:** But you were talking about Stonewall, and the story of the—

**Livelli:** Well, here's what happened: they went out and they said, "We have to close these gay bars and get rid of this element from the Village." Their mothers were children and we don't want any of these garish people walking with women's skirts and all that. There was a period when they were intent on getting rid of that element. But the Village has always attracted people of that interest, and it made them comfortable. Until some of them were garish and behaved in a way that was offensive to the morals and the other stuff. I've seen things in the park that I can't talk about among—the poor guys, I feel sorry for them. They were drug addicts, spoiled it. Because until the homosexual was free of drugs, he was a great guy; I had people over at my house all the time who were gay. [00:45:54]

**Zapol:** So what happened—

**Livelli:** But here's what happened with Stonewall!

**Zapol:** Uh-huh.

**Livelli:** They went to the police. The police and the mafia and the community people. Maybe not mafia, but they had incursions of mafia influence. They said to the police, "Let's close some of these clubs, they are too many occupants," or "They're too noisy at night," or "they spoil the street." We closed them. Violations. They put violations on the Stonewall. Went in and raided the place, kicked everybody out. Started a revolution!

Now, who is responsible for the Stonewall Inn today being an international, historical—probably forever. It's the police who went in and started beating up people. Of course, there was a reaction to that. That was started by the community guys who said, "We have to clean up the Village." Good intentions but look what happened. Well, it turned out to be better for the homosexual. It worked in a way that nobody could foresee. It's become a nice neighborhood with everybody happy. I don't think anybody's unhappy in the Village. I don't see any unhappy homosexuals. They found their level. It's leveled off, and that's a wonderful feeling. My neighbor over here, 42, he always helps me, comes up, buys food for me. I take him to places he's never been, to Harlem, so there's a very nice feeling in the Village, thank god.

**Zapol:** Tell me, when you—if I can ask you to just move your hand, because of the mic—yup. I wanted to clear the mic so that I can hear you, here.

If you can tell me about, when you think of Greenwich Village, what images, what sounds, what movements come to mind?

**Livelli:** What rhythm comes to mind? Wow. Well, of course, at my ninety-six, the rhythm has sort of tapered off in my life. I do not dance anymore, which is an integral part of my whole upbringing. My mother danced on tables at family dinners to show off with a red dress. I did that in life. I carried that through and away. Showing off, the first on the dance floor, the last one off the dance floor. So I handled it in a way that made myself stand out. Otherwise I was ignored.

Well, in terms of rhythm, I tried to make other people get into the rhythm that I found to be the most perfect manner of handling life in New York. He's overburdened by New York life. He's going to leave New York for a while to calm his nerves. Everybody in New York has talent. Competitive talent! You can't become what you want to become because somebody has more talent than you, or you haven't got the breaks. So you have to be a hundred percent unique, and if you're not unique, forget about it. I have become rather unique because of my message to people who want to hear about the Village, my Village! I happen to have started certain qualities in the Village that are important and obvious today. You have people who are putting up a balcony where the balcony was torn down, to replenish the Village character that once existed. I remember when there were beautiful grillwork all throughout the Village that were used during the World War II effort to have metal, to build armaments. The Village was such a beautiful

community, with gates and balconies, like New Orleans. This Italian guy, who just bought the building, he said to me, “I’m spending, it’s going to cost—” He put it up, you’ll see it. It’s out on his building—he put it up, he did it—a balcony, that he saw an old picture of this building that he bought and it had a balcony on Perry Street. He put it back up. However, it’s painted black, and I’m going to tell him, “It looks like a fire escape, paint it white.” I used to tell tourists, when they said, “Why are there all these staircases in the Village here? They’re ugly.” The original building was nice to look at. Well, he put staircases. What is it? I make it fun, I said, “Well, when the husband comes home, the lover can get out the fire escape.” So I had a lot of humor in my—I found, I had talent. To speak languages to foreigners who immediately embrace you on that, when they hear “*Saludo amico*,” right away. [00:51:20]

So I was able to fake it. I faked all my life, I pretended I’d lived, I made a category of comedy my own with foreign influence. Mistakes in languages have humor that they don’t—if you say something in English, for example, I’ll give you one. When we would come back to the hotel for the tourists at the end of the tour—four hours, Chinatown, Brooklyn, Harlem, Wall Street, the stock exchange, United Nations. I took all these people around. Well, we were able to end with a note. I knew it was going to be a fun, good note; I would say to Italians, Spaniards, “*Bueno, hemos*—we have arrived safe and sound, back to our hotel, please go up and *descanso en paz*, and rest, take it easy, go out, rest for dinner.” That was the end of the tour. However, in Spanish, Italian, *descanso en paz*, what does it mean? “Rest in peace.” So they would laugh, because you say to a dead person, “rest in peace,” so I took that little flavor, put it in my commentary. [claps] Come on, let me hear it.

**Zapol:** Yes, yes, yes! I do clap you! [applause]

So, done! [laughs]

**[END OF THIRD AUDIO FILE ‘Livelli\_VincentGVSHPOralHistory3.mp3’; BEGINNING OF FOURTH AUDIO FILE ‘Livelli\_VincentGVSHPOralHistory4.mp3’]**

**Zapol:** So, this is the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Oral history Project. This is Liza Zapol. It’s session two, with—

**Livelli:** Vincent Livelli.

Hi, everybody out in Greenwich Village. I think I would like to mention the fact that my father, who graduated high school, was a member of the Pen and Pencil Club on Fifth Avenue around 1920. That was mostly composed of members of journalist society. They were mostly reporters, and there was another club on Fifth Avenue, around 17<sup>th</sup> Street, that was called Salmagundi. It may not register, but he was a member of that. He was also a member of the Knights of Columbus, an Italian fraternity society located and still in operation, believe it or not, around the tunnel area. So we were proud to be Americans. What happened with Italians arriving in the Village in those early years, beginning with 1861, which I can prove. My grandfather must have been about twenty years old, or nineteen, when he came to what at that time was called Little Italy, and later became Little Africa, and then became Greenwich Village. In Sicilian: *Ou* [phonetic] [00:01:40] *village*. *Ou village* is the dialect pronunciation of Greenwich Village, whereas the Italian members of the Italian community were from Genoa, who pronounced Greenwich Village the proper way, in Italian, would be *il villaggio*. *Il villaggio*.

So, we did have that benefit of hearing three languages as an infant in Greenwich Village, where I heard the proper Italian, which would be Milanese or Piedmontese. I heard Genoese, which was close to the proper, the language of Dante Alighieri, who's considered to be the best example of most-closely spoken Italian to the original, proper Latin. However, I was exposed to the Sicilian from my mother's side of the family, which included also Neapolitans. However, this mixed bag of languages came in very handy, because no one in New York really understood foreign languages aside from English and some Irish members of the Village. We had very few Anglo-Saxon neighbors. In fact, I only remember one across the street. I'm speaking of 1920, [19]22, growing up in, on Sullivan Street, in the heart of Greenwich Village at that time, because it had not as yet expanded to Bleecker Street. There were still black families living in Bleecker area in the [19]20s because there was a black theater there, for black plays. It was described in the West Village newspaper recently, in the *West View* newspaper, about five issues ago.

Now, what happens with Italians that come to America? They don't speak English, and furthermore, there are no other Italians to help them get started. The Italians got more help from the Chinese community regarding how to handle life in New York in 1861. Now, if you have a problem with language in a foreign country, which I encountered when I moved to Brazil—I had to learn more Portuguese than I already knew thanks to having been exposed to it in Greenwich

Village in the Portuguese community that in the [19]20s lived in the area of Cherry Lane. But the language problem is secondary to the food problem. You have an Italian family coming to Greenwich Village. They have to be acclimated to the food that they're going to be exposed to. That is a very detrimental aspect to living in a foreign country. The cuisine is so different in Brazil as in Argentina or France. So the Italian community had to adapt to the American, or rather the Anglo-Saxon cuisine, which had no flavor for the Italian taste. So, my grandfather had a problem with not only getting food settled for the family, spaghetti and all that, but there was no wine in America when he came, so he had to use his ingenuity and start raising a vineyard. Some of the Italian community, because of the encounter they had with problems of this sort—not finding their vino, my god—they moved down to Vineyard, New Jersey, where they established not only a vineyard for producing wine, but also they moved upstate to New York, and they also started a vegetable industry in New Jersey, which today is known as Progresso wine, with spaghetti and vegetables, and they became quite wealthy there. My grandfather may have had something to do with encouraging that economic situation. But what he really did was, since he had been familiar with the German aspect of Europe, having traveled across Germany—I have his old passports—he started selling beer rather than wine. Although he made wine, my whole family made wine in the cellar on 117<sup>th</sup> Street. They would get once a year and make *grappa*, which is the strongest wine you can drink. [00:07:03]

Well, anyway, this takes care of the—no it doesn't. They're starting little businesses in the Village, principally along Prince Street and Sullivan Street with the Italian influence. When you have what is now in the Washington Heights area, Dominicans or people from Venezuela—they have to have their food, and when they first arrive, now, in America and New York City in particular, they began—by “they” I mean any outside alien influence has to have their food. And they put together restaurants and also shops that sell the food that they would normally be eating in Venezuela or the Dominican Republic. Especially in Washington Heights.

**Zapol:** You were about to say about your grandfather and beer. What was his connection to beer?

**Livelli:** Well, he was very familiar. Well, he spoke German. He enjoyed beer more than the average Italian. Genoa has sort of a slight German influence, being closer to Germany than most Italian cities. And he was in the German area for probably months, trying to get up north, or

maybe to Scandinavia. Many Italians are very attracted to Scandinavia. They have similar customs and traditions. For example, in Italy, at three o'clock you take a break, throughout Italy, north and south, to go have your café espresso. That similar tradition is prevalent in Sweden. I don't know about Norway. It has a name—it's called *flika* [phonetic] [00:09:03] in Swedish. So, the Italians find themselves at home for that simple reason, that they have their coffee. In Greenwich Village there was no coffee, espresso, or cappuccino.

**Zapol:** So, then those stores started to open.

**Livelli:** That's right. Thank you. On Prince Street, you had Simonetti [phonetic] [00:09:28], a beautiful, spotless, perfumed environment selling ice cream. Well, ice cream is international, I think, so that store really made a lot of money and I think it's still in existence today, for generations. Simonetti. Very clean, with aprons and a washed marble counter, all white. There's a replica of it in the Greenwich Village now on Bank Street, called Hamilton, with the same type of fan, and—no doubt, copied on the old ice cream parlor, which always had a smell of vanilla. When you could pass by on the street, it's like passing a coffee espresso. You could smell it. Well in those days we smelled the ice cream, which was vanilla smell, and it was beautiful. [00:10:31]

Now, they also opened a meat market called Sclafani [phonetic] [00:10:33]. That may have been on Sullivan Street. Then there was a bakery opened, called, I think, Vesuvio, which is still open. Then to the left of the building we owned was Gusto—G-U-S-T-O—which is a short form of Augusto, which is a gentleman's name, August. I think D'Agostino today may be related. I did try to contact the D'Agostino lady who's the owner. No reply. But I asked her if her great-grandfather was Gusto on Sullivan Street. I think that's the way, because D'Agostino would be the same name, brought with a little more flavor or a little more panache.

**Zapol:** Can I ask you about what special meals you would have with your family growing up? If there are special—

**Livelli:** Oh yes.

**Zapol:** —meals or foods that you would eat that your mother would prepare, or your grandparents?

**Livelli:** Here's what: we had a big deal about food in the family, in all the relatives. So you had three women cooking: my aunt Sarah, my aunt Rose and my aunt May and my mother. My mother was lazy. She was the youngest. She didn't know how to cook Italian. And my father, on the other hand, having been born in America, wanted only American foods, so I grew up as a child not eating—when we went to family dinners, we of course ate Sicilian, Neapolitan, Irish, corned beef and cabbage, but in my house, my mother prepared strictly American. Which was beautifully prepared, because I had an uncle, Uncle John. My mother would serve mashed potatoes because, I guess that was the equivalent of spaghetti. And my uncle would form a little volcano—like in Italy, Vesuvius?—with the mashed potatoes, and he put a pat of butter on the top and it would fall down the sides like lava.

So the Italian family always beautifies their life. They have to make it artistic. My mother served me lots of spinach. However, the salad had little white worms. No, that's all right! Eat it, it won't hurt you. Protein. So I used to eat these worms, but not too voluntarily. She said, "Go ahead, eat it." We didn't have to clean the lettuce, because there were no pesticides. Everything was pure. Lots of fruit. And lots of vegetables. No meat. We could not afford meat in those days. When my mother would go to the meat—the butcher was on Sullivan Street also, and she was very smart because during the Depression years of the [19]30s we had to put money in jars in the kitchen until you could pay the rent. So my mother would go to the butcher and buy bone. I think Jewish families had to do that to make soup from the interior of the bone. Then she would come and put it on the table and my father would say—because the meat we bought was so inferior, and hard to chew, and he may have had trouble with teeth—and he would say, "We spend good money and we don't get good results with this food." But my mother had been putting a bit in her cookie jar, without telling my father, so that she had a little reserve. I think Jewish women do the same thing [laughs] with their husbands. [00:14:51]

So, food became a critical issue. When you went to the family dinner—oh my god, the other people in my family were wealthier than my particular situation. Abundance in Brooklyn. They were kind of tough people out there, in Brooklyn, around New Utrecht, and they may have been in the rackets. So my uncle, Frank, was a tough guy. He had a gun. And he was very domineering with his wife. I felt sorry for her, because he hit her. We all have a favorite aunt. And she was a saint, as my mother used to call her. She put up with this. He hit her and

blackened her eye, and I saw that. I was just a little kid, and I wanted to hit him, but that's the way, you know, the Italians didn't treat—my father was very nice to my mother. He was educated. When an Italian is educated in New York City, ready to go up the ladder, guess what happens: he is despised by all the other Italians' jealousy. And they do not help each other, as the Jewish community does. To do so in a Jewish community would be not only uncalled for, but wrong. But in the Italian community, these tough guys, they didn't like educated Italians. They wanted to keep the populace, the Italian populace down.

**Zapol:** So did your uncles give your father a hard time because they were jealous of his success?

**Livelli:** No, he gave her a hard time because he was abnormal in many other ways. He had a bad eye, and people with an affliction sometimes take it out on other people.

**Zapol:** I'm sorry, what I was saying was: did your uncle give your father a hard time, too?

**Livelli:** Yes. Those guys, my uncle Frank was the boss of the neighborhood. My other uncle Paul—who married a German woman, by the way—well, he had two daughters, and he was a little less aggressive toward my father, but those two fellas hung together against my father. My father had a quality about him where he was very quiet, introverted, a newspaper journalist. I was very honored to say that to my friends, that he was an investigative reporter for Hearst. So my father wanted me to have character, and of course I did not associate with the gang kids at all. However, getting character is more than just having your father sort of influencing you. You have to have something more than that. My teachers were not too helpful in the old days. They didn't know how to treat children in the old days. The nuns and Catholics, they were very aggressive. They spanked us.

**Zapol:** Yes, we spoke a bit about how difficult it was for you with, in schooling, with your hearing.

**Livelli:** Yes, you have no idea. I said—go ahead.

**Zapol:** I'm sorry. I just was wondering, cause I think you were about to tell a story about maybe special holiday meals, or a special dinner or food that you would have with your aunt and with your family.

**Livelli:** Well of course, all the holidays were celebrated in Brooklyn, not in my house. My mother was not a cook, so she was excused from many of those fiesta things. *Festa*, they call them. However, my uncle had such beautiful crystal ware, crystal lamps, wicker furniture, beautiful. He could afford it, and her table was probably a Portuguese embroidered tablecloth, which is today very expensive. Her furniture was—including a piano, the porch—everything was top grade, so we made a big deal out of Christmas. Christmas and all the Catholic holidays, especially Easter and of course Thanksgiving. But there was a time when my aunt May, who was married to an Irishman, cooked corned beef and cabbage and I was so delighted to have a change from Italian and American to Irish, cause it was salty, and the cabbage was delicious. She was, and the potatoes. [laughs] But anyway, I don't know—I went all around the world eating in all these cuisines, and I never really had any interested in learning how to cook. [00:20:22]

**Zapol:** I have some questions for you, also, based on some of our conversations before, but perhaps you've had other thoughts about things about the Village that you wanted to share with me last time that you didn't get a chance to.

**Livelli:** Well yes, you see, I witnessed the construction of the Sixth Avenue subway, where I jumped down into the sand, came home all full of sand. My mother would be furious, but the kids—that was fun. We'd go up to the top on Sixth Avenue, and that's a very steep, if you go up on the subway, you know how far down that is, and I was very impressed by everything that was being built uptown, also. I witnessed the building of the Empire State Building, and also I witnessed the World Trade Center going up, because the ships would go by it, and I would see, from very close, the workmen cleaning. Each ship, each voyage, I would see another floor going higher and higher. Unfortunately, I never took photos or movies of the construction. It would have been interesting.

Well I got into the ship business by—how did I get into it? Oh, just by meeting a woman who had a great influence on me, and needed me because of my Portuguese and Spanish.

**Zapol:** Yeah, we spoke about that.

**Livelli:** You know, some people say, oh, they can speak Spanish, and they really can't. Especially Portuguese. Well, I did happen to speak Spanish, better than most of the people who claimed to do so, because I was always going up to Harlem from Greenwich Village to bring

Harlem down to Greenwich Village, and bring Greenwich Village up to Harlem musically. And I succeeded, because in the Village during the period of 1946, there were many black musicians in the Village Vanguard, and other spots, later, at Louie's, and a club that nobody seems to know anything about except me, called Georgia's. Where was Georgia's? It was on the triangular corner, on the tip of Bleecker and I think it's where the Greenwich Village House is, that street, it's—sorry, you take Sixth Avenue, Bleecker, and there's a little corner there where there used to be a Pagani piano store. It became a clothing store, near Ottomanelli—and by the way I saw the Greenwich Village program last night, with the Ottomanelli introduction. You may have had something to do with that.

Well, if you want to know about cuisine, I think I've just about exhausted that topic.

**Zapol:** [laughs] That's fine, that's fine. I'm curious, you know, one other thing, and I'm sure we'll just reach the tip of the iceberg here, but you must—I mean you spoke about you and Anatole—

**Livelli:** Oh, gosh, yes.

**Zapol:** And we spoke about that quite a bit last time, but Louis also mentioned that you had Anaïs Nin.

**Livelli:** Ok.

**Zapol:** I'm interested about any parts of that story that you would like to share, and perhaps other—

**Livelli:** Similar stories.

**Zapol:** —stories of—

**Livelli:** All right. Well here's the whole problem with Greenwich Village. It's a political issue, in a way, because people take sides, especially in an intellectual community, discuss who's right and who's wrong. I mentioned a gay liberal situation? Well, there was no situation in the 1940 period until the [19]50s and [19]60s. It came to a head. So, we all got along very peacefully. Now I can mention many friends who were gay. One of the most distinguished, who was the

lover of James Baldwin, named Beauford Delaney. Well, he was a dear friend of mine. I saw him every day, we spoke philosophy in Washington Square Park.

And who else? A gentleman named Earl Pilgrim. Tall, thin—everybody was skinny. He was a jeweler, and he produced some authentic designs and jewelry. He made my wedding ring, which could be reversed by putting diamond studs that I was given as a gift by passengers, who customarily at the end of the cruise would give the cruise director a little gift. Either money or a souvenir: cufflinks, clasps, fountain pens and such. [00:25:37]

So, Earl Pilgrim had the honor of beginning with another Charlie, another guy whose last name I can't remember. Charlie something. He started the Greenwich Village Washington Square outdoor art exhibit, putting the paintings on different—that was started by Earl Pilgrim. People don't know that, but he and a painter, well, Beauford Delaney, Ashcan School [painter], put this stuff out on. Later I ran into Beauford in Paris, and he wanted to do a portrait, which would have sold for about 30,000. That's how much money he made in just going to Europe as a black man, to Paris. They should have done that, because they were very well received by high society. A black man was entertained in Europe more so than an American. In those days.

**Zapol:** Tell me a little more about Beauford Delaney. How did he look?

**Livelli:** Oh, yeah, he was—

**Zapol:** Or tell me a specific story about him.

**Livelli:** Well, Beauford was just precious. First of all, I described once in writing like a little Buddha. He would sit in a position in a comfortable manner on the bench in the park, wearing a little skullcap, which sort of identified him. You never saw him without that particular little skullcap, which nobody else had. So he was distinguished in his comportment. He was very proper and very sort of pursed lips, and he was very quiet. He had a religious quality about him. Probably having come up from the South. We, in New York at that time, were kind of rough, but he had a proper demeanor. I went to visit him several times at his apartment. In his flat on Greene Street, which consisted of no water, no heat. I think I may have mentioned that to you? Broken window. He had to have a fire in the center of the room to keep warm. I think he had it

on an iron plate. It was not even a stove. And I felt so sorry for him, because he was always bundled up. Which was part of his appearance. He was always covered by some sort of a robe.

Now, I noticed that he enjoyed listening to drum music. That's my whole life, is drums. Not playing, but interpreting what they're talking about. He had a drum, and we used to beat it. And when I went to Japan, I brought a drum back from Japan, a drum back from India, and when I left to Florida I left them with him. So he inherited my two drums, which were not known in in America at that time. I'm talking about the 1940s and [19]50s. Nobody had those drums, two-sided. I forget what they're called. So that was a thing we had in common. Now, when I spoke to Beauford, about his lover named Dante Pavone—no? If you read *The Life of Beauford Delaney*, it has the whole description of his relation with Dante Pavone, who was his partner, his lover, and he also was the founder of Provincetown community. Because Dante left the Village. He was a piano teacher. He and Beauford were—what would I say? A couple, because they both dressed as a monk. Beauford was a little monk, short, and Pavone was heavy, fat, and he wore a cassock, not a suit. So those two people were part of the Village flavor, and then Dante came to my house, and Anatole and I had a house on West 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. Dante used to come. We used to talk in the afternoon about whatever, going on in the Village, in the world. So there was always something interesting to her or learn or talk about, especially with Anatole, because Anatole was dressed like a Bed Stuy black, changed over to a necktie and jacket and gray flannel with brogans, so he made a complete new impression on people. As an intellectual, he became a professor type. All he needed was a pipe. But Anatole was the most prestigious, the most irresistible person in the world. [00:31:02]

Wow. I don't do this very often, but when I talk about my friends—you see, we were young together. And here I am ninety-six. Emotions are not part of my—I never cry, but you may find me crying over this sort of stuff, because—I'm not crying, I'm just feeling emotional. Anatole was setting a pace in the Village that nobody could really keep up with, so he tried to teach people how to improve their intelligence, how to become more mature, get rid of this American quality of rough guys or kind of aggressive, and be polished. Have something to say of intellectual content. And he succeeded, until he was defeated by the East Village crowd who came in. Fortunately, they couldn't afford the rents in the West Village, so we were separate

from them, until the real estate agents started to call the whole shmeat the Village, incorporating east and west.

Well, Anatole was able get the people from NYU—young students, mostly guys, who were either attempting to write, becoming writers, poets, and stuff like that—that would be the basis for a community of intellectuals, which made Greenwich Village outstanding in the minds of other people outside of the Village.

**Zapol:** Great. And I think we spoke a bit about this last time, too. I'm mindful of time, we've been talking for a half-hour now, and we've covered so much, even in this little period of time. So I want to thank you for this, today—

**Livelli:** Are we leaving? We are leaving, huh? Are you coming back, perhaps, maybe?

**Zapol:** I hope the conversation continues.

**Livelli:** Just let me know something, one more fact: if you wish to know anything particular, come back. If you don't, well, I think that's sufficient.

**Zapol:** Fantastic.

**Livelli:** I think that's about it. Turn it off and give me a minute to think of something vital—oh, Anaïs—

**Zapol:** So we're just starting up again, just for a few minutes, about Anaïs Nin.

**Livelli:** Well, we were very lucky to receive Anaïs Nin. She and Sheri Martinelli, who was Ezra Pound's lovmate, formed the feminine nucleus, along with Maya Deren. These women, with a woman named Helen Parker and another one called Sampas—a Greek name, S-A-M-P-A-S—Stella, who was allegedly married to Jack Kerouac. I don't know if that's true or not. But the women quality in the Village in the [19]40s. You could name the women who were important here on one finger, because the influence of the women had not arrived until Anaïs Nin arrived. And she threw a party. And she knew how to throw good parties, and she was able to attract the people that counted. The owner of a bookstore called Four Seasons, a Jewish-Polish woman, Valeska Girt, the founder of punk music opened the Beggar Bar. Did I mention it? On Morton and Bleecker, downstairs, with a broken mirror and bottles. Punk! She came in 1939 from

Germany, from Hitler, and she was in a Fellini movie. You look up Valeska G-I-R-T. Can you? G-I-R-T. I think if you get that under your belt you'll get a better feeling of the Village than I already have given. [00:35:20]

All right, we'll end on Valeska Girt.

**Zapol:** Ok

**Livelli:** Punk! She was the originator of punk in 1939.

**Zapol:** And, I just want to check and make sure, cause you wanted to talk about Anaïs Nin but you, that was what you wanted to share?

**Livelli:** Should I admit that I have something in common with Gore Vidal, and perhaps Tennessee Williams also? She was very amenable to receiving male guests, and she looked at us—she was usually older than any of us, so she was, I think, in a way, taking advantage of a young guy. Well Anatole told me, I think I mentioned it, “When she’s receiving you, climb up as fast as you can. She judges the vitality of her lovers on the basis of the time it takes them to reach the last floor.” She was up on the roof. Married to Henry Miller.

Alrighty, end on Henry Miller [Zapol laughs] *Tropic of Cancer*, you know we went on through that.

**Zapol:** Alright—

**Livelli:** The books you are reading today in the schools are the books we started people reading in the [19]40s.

**Zapol:** Yeah, of course.

**Livelli:** Keep it on, while we go out.

**Zapol:** —in the bookstore that you were talking about. The bookstore you started!

**Livelli:** Well of course the bookstore was a failure. Nobody had money, and nobody was interested in European books like Kafka. Until Anatole made sure that they got to know something about European literature, and not expect America to be strangled by English teachers

teaching Shakespeare only. The hell with Shakespeare! I just wanted, people to know more about European culture and follow that course rather than send the young kids to the Caribbean islands where they learned about calypso music instead of good literature.

So, you're taking your little gift with you I think, where is it? I think this is it. Oh no.

**Zapol:** Here, I'm going to stop now. Here we go.

**[END OF INTERVIEW]**

**Additional Photograph**



Vincent Livelli at his home at 44 Perry Street on April 19, 2016. Photograph by Liza Zapol.