

DP-24

ELENA BRANDES

BIRTH DATE: 1902

INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 22, 1989

RUNNING TIME: 24:00

INTERVIEWER: ANDREW PHILLIPS

RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW LOCATION: SAN GABRIEL, CA

TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1989

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TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

ITALY, 1911

AGE 9

SHIP NAME NOT RECALLED

PHILLIPS: This is Andrew Phillips, interview with Elena Brandes, B-R-A-N-D-E-S. It's interview number 398 [DP-24], recorded on the 22nd of March, 1989, of May, rather, 1989. 22nd of May, 1989, at the home of her daughter and son-in-law at 606 Magnolia Drive, San Gabriel in Los Angeles. Okay, all right. So, Mrs. Brandes, can you tell me what year you were born, and what country.

BRANDES: I was born in Italy, 1902.

PHILLIPS: And can you tell me where you were born in Italy?

BRANDES: In Genoa.

PHILLIPS: Genoa. How many children were in your family?

BRANDES: Three.

PHILLIPS: Were you the first, the second or the third?

BRANDES: Third.

PHILLIPS: So you were the youngest. Can you tell me what your father did for a living?

BRANDES: He dug graves. ( she laughs ) That's what he did for a living. He dug graves.

PHILLIPS: Have you got any memories about your father coming home from work? Any stories he told you about his work? Tell us some of those stories.

PHILLIPS: Well, he didn't tell us any stories about him digging his graves.

PHILLIPS: And your mother? What did she do?

BRANDES: She was just a housewife and when he died, well, then

she delivered, uh . . .

PHILLIPS: She delivered . . .

BRANDES: Bread. I mean . . . ( she pauses )

PHILLIPS: Sandwiches? When your father died, how did your mother earn a living?

BRANDES: She delivered lunches to different men.

PHILLIPS: Did she have to make the lunches herself?

BRANDES: No. One woman made the lunches, and she picked them up and then took them to the men.

PHILLIPS: How old were you when your father died?

BRANDES: I was eight years old.

PHILLIPS: Was that very difficult for your family when your father died?

BRANDES: Sure. No way to make a living, so my mother made a living by taking in washing and taking, delivering lunches to men and, uh, and I just played around.

PHILLIPS: What one hears that families in Europe look after

each other more than, perhaps, we do in our age when people are in hardship. Did you experience help from other family members and friends?

BRANDES: No.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell me what your house was like?

BRANDES: Our house?

PHILLIPS: What our house was like. Did you live in a house in Italy?

BRANDES: We lived in a house but not, it was like, uh, like a flat.

PHILLIPS: Like an apartment.

BRANDES: Yes.

PHILLIPS: How many rooms did it have?

BRANDES: It had three rooms.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell me about going to school in Italy?

BRANDES: I went to sister school.

PHILLIPS: What is that?

BRANDES: IT was a Catholic school.

PHILLIPS: When you say sister school, do you mean it was run by the nuns?

BRANDES: Yes. That's the kind of school I went to, run by the nuns.

PHILLIPS: Were the nuns hard? Were they just very keen on discipline, or were they fine teachers, or was it difficult for you? What was the experience like in school?

BRANDES: It was no good experience. It was just a school.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember what you did during your holidays?

BRANDES: Our holidays we had . . . ( she pauses )

PHILLIPS: Was life good for you in Italy before you came to America?

BRANDES: Until my father died it was, but after he died then it was no life. We came because my uncle sent for us. We came to America with my uncle's money, and then we paid him back. When we got here we had to

pay him back.

PHILLIPS: Did your uncle invite you to come to the United States because he wanted to help you, or did you, I mean, who initiated that? Who suggested that that happen? Did that come from your mother, or from your uncle?

BRANDES: From my uncle. My mother didn't want to leave Italy. She wanted to stay there.

PHILLIPS: Was this uncle your father's brother or your mother's brother?

BRANDES: It was my father's, my uncle's, my, I think this was my father's relatives.

PHILLIPS: How old were you when you left Genoa to come to the United States?

BRANDES: I was eight years old.

PHILLIPS: So that was the same year that your father died. Is that right?

BRANDES: My father died a year before we left.

PHILLIPS: I see. Can you remember when your mother told you that you were going to leave Genoa and leave your school and go to another country. Can you remember that day?

BRANDES: I can't remember that day, no.

PHILLIPS: Can you remember those feelings when you realized . . .

BRANDES: That was great. We were going to another country.

PHILLIPS: It was good, great, you said.

BRANDES: Yeah, for me it was great, coming to another country there in another life.

PHILLIPS: Why do you describe it as being great?

BRANDES: I thought we would be coming here and living with my uncle, and we'd have a house of our own, and . . .

PHILLIPS: And so what happened? You actually left one day by . . .

BRANDES: Yeah, we just left. We had to sell all of our furniture and everything, and come to America. We

thought it was great to come to.

PHILLIPS: So you were not unhappy about leaving.

BRANDES: Oh, no. It wasn't. My mother was.

PHILLIPS: What did she tell you about that?

BRANDES: She didn't tell me anything.

PHILLIPS: Did she ever talk about it afterwards and miss her home?

BRANDES: No.

PHILLIPS: Tell me about the actual trip when you left from Genoa to leave for the United States. I'm assuming, of course, you came by ship.

BRANDES: Yes.

PHILLIPS: Tell me what you remember about leaving your home to travel to the ship.

BRANDES: Well, we were going, there was the cholera going around.

PHILLIPS: There was a carnival.

BRANDES: No, cholera.

PHILLIPS: Cholera, in Italy in your town, in Genoa.

BRANDES: Yes. So we had it going on in, uh, going to get on the ship, and stayed there for three days before we left.

PHILLIPS: Was that because they wanted to make sure that people who were on the ship did not have the disease.

BRANDES: Yes.

PHILLIPS: It was like a quarantine. Can you tell me what it was like in your village when cholera outbreaks occurred? Can you remember what that was like?

BRANDES: People dying like flies.

PHILLIPS: How did you know that they were dying? Did you see them on the street? Did people talk about it? How did you know?

BRANDES: We just knew. People just said this person died and that person died. We just, but I didn't know, practically didn't know anybody that died.

PHILLIPS: What did families do in your village when there was a cholera outbreak? How did they try to stop their children from getting the disease?

BRANDES: They didn't do anything.

PHILLIPS: Did they go to church more often?

BRANDES: They what?

PHILLIPS: Did they go to church more often, for instance? Did they pray? Were there . . .

BRANDES: No.

PHILLIPS: They didn't. Life went on fairly normally, except that more people were dying. So you were on the ship for three days before you left, waiting to leave. Do you remember what that was like? Can you recall any stories, or anything, interesting things that might have happened. Anything special?

BRANDES: Well, we were, I was a child. We just, it was on a long ship. We just played and . . .

PHILLIPS: There were many other children there was as well.

BRANDES: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: And did you have to, did you have a separate cabin, or did you sleep with a lot of other people?

BRANDES: We slept with a lot of other people.

PHILLIPS: You must have been a little bit nervous or afraid when you were leaving.

BRANDES: No, I wasn't.

PHILLIPS: Did you, did you get seasick coming across to America?

BRANDES: Did I what?

PHILLIPS: Did you get seasick?

BRANDES: Oh, yes. We were very seasick. It was a very rough trip.

PHILLIPS: And then you arrived in the United States. Do you remember . . .

BRANDES: We arrived in New York.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember that day, or night? Do you remember

when that happened, when you actually arrived?

BRANDES: We arrived in Ellis Island and they herded us like cattle, took all our clothes, and fumigated us off. That's all.

PHILLIPS: Did you see the Statue of Liberty when you arrived?

BRANDES: That's the first thing I saw.

PHILLIPS: How did you feel when you saw that?

BRANDES: I didn't know it was the Statue of Liberty.  
( she laughs )

PHILLIPS: Did your mother tell you about it when she saw it?

BRANDES: No.

PHILLIPS: When they took all of your clothes they must have, obviously they gave you other clothes to wear. Were you all dressed in the same clothes, or not?

BRANDES: We weren't dressed in the same clothes.

PHILLIPS: I mean, what sort of, what did, you said that they took your clothes to fumigate them. Did they give you other clothes to wear?

BRANDES: No. They kept us naked. They fumigated us.

PHILLIPS: Separately, or together?

BRANDES: All together.

PHILLIPS: And they separate the young children from the older children, and the men from the women?

BRANDES: Yes.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember, I suppose you were too young to actually, can you tell us a little bit about what that felt like as a young girl? You were very young, but can you remember that experience?

BRANDES: Nothing. I can't remember anything.

PHILLIPS: Did you remember anything else about being on Ellis Island? Perhaps we should start with how long you were there. Do you remember how many days you were there?

BRANDES: It seemed like just overnight. And then I remember getting caught in the railroad track. My brother took off my shoe to get me loose from the truck, from

the train. That's about all.

PHILLIPS: That must have been, was that on Ellis Island that that happened? I see. Then you left Ellis Island to come where? Did you come straight to Los Angeles?

BRANDES: Los Angeles, yes.

PHILLIPS: And your uncle was waiting for you here, or did he pick you up over there?

BRANDES: No. He waited for us here.

PHILLIPS: And do you remember anything about the trip to Los Angeles from New York?

BRANDES: I remember they gave us a suitcase full of stuff to eat. Each grown-up got a suitcase, and they made a mistake of giving me one as a grown-up. They gave me a suitcase full of things to eat. We just got stuff to eat. That's all.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember what the food was like? Can you remember that food?

BRANDES: No, I can't remember.

PHILLIPS: So then you arrived in Los Angeles.

BRANDES: Yes.

PHILLIPS: After quite a long trip, it must have taken you a long time to travel across the United States.

BRANDES: I forgot how long it took.

PHILLIPS: And then do you remember what happened when you arrived here in Los Angeles?

BRANDES: My uncle had an apartment ready for us. He lived upstairs, and we would live downstairs. That's how we lived.

PHILLIPS: And pretty soon after that, I suppose, you went to school. Is that right?

BRANDES: Yes. I went right back to school. I went and had my hair cut, because I was full of lice. ( she laughs ) I had my hair cut, and . . .

PHILLIPS: And then can you remember what school was like? Can you remember what you felt like going to school in America?

BRANDES: Like nothing. I felt like nothing. It was just school, that's all.

PHILLIPS: Did you speak English?

BRANDES: No.

PHILLIPS: And the other students, did they speak English?

BRANDES: No, yes.

PHILLIPS: So you must have felt a little bit separate or different, or were the students helpful to you, or were they . . .

BRANDES: They weren't helpful to me. I just learned to speak. That's all I did.

PHILLIPS: You learned to speak English. And then what happened? You finished school.

BRANDES: I went to school, I went to school till the fourth grade, and then they had the flu epidemic here, and I had it. I was supposed to go to school and go to the sixth grade. Instead, I couldn't go because the cholera was here and they closed the school, so I couldn't go to school.

PHILLIPS: That was cholera or flu? The flu.

BRANDES: It was just the flu.

PHILLIPS: The flu. And they closed the school.

BRANDES: They closed the school, so I just went to the fourth grade.

PHILLIPS: So because of the epidemic, you were unable to finish any more schooling because you were away from school, because of the epidemic. And you didn't go back to school afterwards?

BRANDES: I went to school till the fourth grade.

PHILLIPS: Let me get that clear. When the flu epidemic happened, were you in the fourth grade?

BRANDES: No. I was in the first grade.

PHILLIPS: I see.

BRANDES: And I got graduated to the fourth grade.

PHILLIPS: And then you left.

BRANDES: And then I went from fourth grade, on up to fifth and

sixth, to the eighth grade.

MRS. MILTON: Didn't you go to intermediate school, Mom?

BRANDES: Huh?

MRS. MILTON: Didn't you go to intermediate school? Didn't you go to Browel Heights Intermediate?

BRANDES: No, no. That wasn't intermediate, it was . . .  
( voices off mike )

PHILLIPS: What happened after you left school? Let me first ask you, did you leave school in eighth grade?

BRANDES: Eighth grade I left school.

PHILLIPS: Then what did you do?

BRANDES: Went to work.

PHILLIPS: Doing what?

BRANDES: I worked in a candy factory, wrapping candy and stuff like that.

PHILLIPS: Did you enjoy that work?

BRANDES: Yes.

BRANDES: Why was it enjoyable?

BRANDES: Because I was with other women my age. We'd have to wrap candy and pack it.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember the name of the company?

BRANDES: Combac.

PHILLIPS: Combac.

BRANDES: Combac.

PHILLIPS: Do you know how that's spelled? Is it C-O-M-E, or C-A-L-M? It's not very important, but if you just knew, we would include it in the interview. It doesn't really matter. Combac. And how long did you work there?

BRANDES: I forget how long.

PHILLIPS: Was it years? Then the first World War, of course, must have happened somewhere.

BRANDES: There was a World War going on now, then.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember what that was, felt like? Were you

aware of that, or was that important?

BRANDES: It wasn't important to me.

PHILLIPS: It was important.

BRANDES: It wasn't.

PHILLIPS: It wasn't important.

BRANDES: You used to see soldiers in the city there.

PHILLIPS: You saw the soldiers. Okay. I think that's pretty, unless there's, is there anything else at all you'd like to tell me before we finish?

BRANDES: No.

PHILLIPS: Okay. That finishes our interview number 398 [DP-24] with Elena Brandes. We started the interview at about five o'clock and it's now about twenty-three minutes past five.