EI-1010
NANCY BARBERA VEGA
BIRTH DATE: JULY 10, 1960
INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 27, 1998
RUNNING TIME: 1:01:25
INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 11/1998
TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

PRIMARY TRANSCRIBER FOR THE ELLIS ISLAND ORAL HISTORY PROJECT BEGINNING IN 1985

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Monday, July 27, 1998. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Nancy Vega. Nancy was originally hired in 1985 to transcribe what we now call the AKRF interviews, and has remained with the project until the present day as our primary transcriber. I should also say that it's very cold in here in the recording studio, and that Kevin Daley is running the recording equipment for us. Anyway, Nancy, it is a great pleasure to actually have you here. And, uh, can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

VEGA: Yes, and it's a pleasure to be here. I'm so happy. I

was born on July 10, 1960.

SIGRIST: Can you say your full name for me on tape?

VEGA: Um, Nancy Barbera, B-A-R-B-E-R-A, Vega.

SIGRIST: V-E-G-A.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: And, um, why don't we just begin quickly with, um, sort of your own family background, and who you are, and where you came from. First of all, where were you born?

VEGA: Okay. I was born in Women's Hospital in Manhattan, which kind of no longer exists, but I think it was like St. Luke's uptown. And my mother is Czechoslovakian, and her parents came through Ellis Island and then settled in Western Pennsylvania, then her mother died and her father moved the kids to New York.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

VEGA: Um, well, she's still living, Anne Barbera.

SIGRIST: Maiden name?

VEGA: And her maiden name is Zadarlik, Z-A-D-A-R-L-I-K.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

VEGA: And my dad is Stephen Barbera, and he is, um, the son of Dominick and Antoinette Barbera, who are deceased, who came from Sicily. My grandmother was six months old when she came through Ellis Island. And I'm not sure, you know, about my grandfather, when he came. Um, both John and Catherine Zadarlik and Antoinette and Dominick Barbera are on the Wall of Honor here, so that, um, and I guess my mother finished growing up on the Lower East Side, and my father in Harlem and the Bronx in the Italian communities. Um, and it was, you know, hearing the interviews over the past thirteen years is a lot from my own parents' background, because, um, for example, my maternal grandfather was a coal miner in Pennsylvania, which was very much a Pollack Slovak thing. And, um, my grandparents, maternal grandparents, had a spaghetti store. My grandfather was a barber. I also think that the name was La Barbera, and they dropped the La when they came in.

SIGRIST: Why do you think that?

VEGA: I mean, I remember, I have heard that it was La Barbera.

SIGRIST: As a child, can you tell me what things stick out in your mind about your grandparents and their different ethnic backgrounds. What impressions did that make on you when you were growing up?

VEGA: Well, I guess it was more my father's parents very much lived in the Sicilian tradition as far as the Catholic church and having a lot of children. Like I have a lot of aunts and uncles who had a lot of kids, who they are also having a lot of kids. Um, and very much Sicilian tradition with the Christmas with the fish on Christmas Eve.

SIGRIST: Can you give me an example of one thing that you remember from your own childhood that was a specific Sicilian tradition that your grandparents maintained.

VEGA: The fish on Christmas Eve, that before Christmas you only eat fish because you're kind of fasting in preparation, and there's a huge feast with all different types of fish, and then at midnight you go to Mass, and then you open your presents. And then on Christmas you would have, um, meat, the next day. So,

you know, I'm very much in touch with, that would be an example of how they were very Italian in that way.

SIGRIST: What about the Czechoslovakian side?

VEGA: Only Easter, you know, that we had, um, kielbasa and colored eggs, you know, so that was more of that. But my mother sent me to Slovak school as a very young child. So, I don't remember much. I can say (Slovak), I think that's "Our Father, who art in Heaven." That's it. Um . . .

SIGRIST: Why? Why was that decision made? Why were you . . .

VEGA: To send me to Slovak school?

SIGRIST: Why did you go?

VEGA: Well, I think actually my mother speaks Russian, and sang in a Russian church on the Lower East Side, which she's shown me in the East Village. I mean, the East Village is so rich for her, and showed me the church where she sang, and her traditions meant a lot to her. I guess, just without, like, family kind of around to keep it up, it's all up to her as a sole person to keep up her own contact. Um, she would go purchase pierogis in the East Village in this little Russian

place. And as a transcriber I heard about the potato flour and rolling out the potato flour for the pierogies so that, you know, was something that I identified with.

SIGRIST: Which, is there an ethnic side that you lean towards in your family?

VEGA: No. But I'm an international cook.

SIGRIST: Oh. (he laughs)

VEGA: So I make everything.

SIGRIST: Were there any conflicts between these two different ethnicities in your family?

VEGA: No, because they were Catholic and Catholic so, you know, there wasn't much conflict, no.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit more about, um, any other traditions that were maintained in your family, and I don't mean in your grandparents, but I mean between your mother and your father with you.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: First of all, do you have brothers and sisters?

VEGA: No. I'm an only child.

SIGRIST: You're an only child. So, were there ways that your parents maintained their cultural heritage when you were growing up, apart from the grandparents.

VEGA: No, there really weren't. So I guess we were, got American right away. We watched The Flintstones and, you know, ate meatloaf.

SIGRIST: That sounds like American culture. (they laugh) Watching the Flintstones and eating meatloaf. Well, all right, great. Uh, why don't we just, tell me a little bit about how you decided that you would like to transcribe things, and how you got involved with what was at that time the Ellis Island Oral History Project back in the mid-1980's.

VEGA: Okay. So, I was always a, worked in some kind of typing field. I worked at the United Nations.

SIGRIST: Where did you learn to type?

VEGA: I learned to type from Sister Grace at St. Francis Preparatory School, in high school. And then I held, you know, some secretarial jobs. I worked in advertising, um, law firms, you know, different

secretarial positions. And then as a newly married person I had a friend named Connie Kieltyka.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

VEGA: Sure. K-I-E-L-T-Y-K-A. And she said, "I'm doing this great project. I'm the sound engineer for these older people who came through Ellis Island, and they're telling their stories, and it's great. They need typists, so call this person Nancy Dallett, and you can have some work." And, um, then I was looking for work because I was pregnant. You know, I didn't want to go take a job like, um, because I wouldn't stay. I wanted to be with the baby. Um, and I contacted Nancy Dallett, and she's a very lovely person. That's D-A-L-L-E-T-T. And she was working through this firm called, um, Allee King Rosen & Fleming.

SIGRIST: Say that slowly please.

VEGA: A-L-L-E-E, King, K-I-N-G, Rosen, R-O-S-E-N, ampersand, Fleming, F-L-E-M-I-N-G, also known as AKRF. They're kind of sister firms. They are an environmental planning firm. And I guess what happened was there was a contract up for grabs to oral historianize this, for Ellis Island, for the National Park Service. So I

guess they made a bid, and they won it. And then people who knew nothing about oral history took Connie Kieltyka and went out to interview these people. But somehow when Nancy Dallett got involved, I don't know if she has a degree in history, or just an interest, or a love, or a compassion, or something, she really professionalized it and made it very, um, you know, the AKRF people were just going in there and going, "Hey, where'd you come from? All right, that's enough," kind of thing, and Nancy was very much trying to, you know, genuinely, carefully extract these histories from these people in a very respectful manner, honoring them. And Nancy Dallett would always take their pictures whenever she went. She had a nice 35 mm camera, and she'd take their pictures and blow them up to black and white 8 x 10's. Did you know this? Do you have them? (he gestures) Oh, no. So they must be somewhere.

SIGRIST: I'm shaking my head no.

VEGA: (they laugh) Right. He gestures. I'll type that. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: That's right.

VEGA: Um, and then I met up with Nancy.

SIGRIST: What did Nancy do with the 8 x 10's?

VEGA: I don't know.

SIGRIST: Okay. Because we do have photos from that time period, but they're not big. They're like, um, proof sheet pictures.

VEGA: I'm sure that I saw them.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. That was part of the contract in those days, to do that.

VEGA: I bet. Oh, and it was beautiful, you know, it was just, the two went together so beautifully. And, of course, Connie was also a person who had the utmost respect for the people who were being interviewed and loved her job.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about Connie, because Connie is, um, one of the early recording engineers for this project.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: That people who were actually denoted as a recording

engineer, or a sound engineer.

VEGA: She's a very good sound engineer. I had been friends with her for about five years or so at that time. Um, and, um, she did a fantastic job. She's a complete professional.

SIGRIST: Do you know exactly what she had to do at that time?

VEGA: No.

SIGRIST: Did she ever talk about . . .

VEGA: She wore the headset and listened and, you know, took levels, the levels, made everything nice. That's all I know. Miked the people, I'm sure, with, I guess, Lanier microphones. I don't know.

SIGRIST: Lavaliere, Lavaliere.

VEGA: Right, Lavaliere.

SIGRIST: So Connie was your initial contact?

VEGA: Yes. And then I got in contact with Nancy, and then I went to AKRF.

SIGRIST: Is that a place?

VEGA: Yes, the offices of AKRF.

SIGRIST: Where were they?

VEGA: Well, you know, I, oh, yes, they were on 33rd and, Third? But, I know the new address, so I'll say the new address. That was their old offices. They moved. And, um, I'd go in the day, or at night, whenever I wanted to, and I'd type these things. And everybody was very impressed with how fast I typed, and, um, just as an aside, one day I was sitting there typing and, um . . . (she laughs) Christina Plattner from AKRF, I mean, she's not an important player in this but just kind of, um, a person who worked there. (she laughs) She was saying, "You know, we need somebody for traffic surveys." So I said, "What about my husband?" And they said, "Okay, tell him to call us." And he started off doing traffic surveys for them, and, we're separated now, but he's an artist, so he was looking for some extra work. We were having a baby, after all. And, um, he ended up working for them full time, and now he's the supervisor of their production department. (she laughs) It's all Connie's fault. (they laugh) Just what he wanted, a nine-to-five job. You know, but he's been able to

support us, you know, so that it's been beneficial for sure.

SIGRIST: Can you say your ex-husband's name, please?

VEGA: Rolando Vega.

SIGRIST: And what year did you marry?

VEGA: Um, that's a good question, '84, 5, one of those.

SIGRIST: One of those. (he laughs)

VEGA: I think it was '84.

SIGRIST: And it was with your first child that you were pregnant with when you first got the job.

VEGA: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Can you say your child's name?

VEGA: Jennifer.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

VEGA: So, um, you know, they gave me a baby shower, they gave him a job, and it worked out very well. And then I think that, um, you know, I had my baby, and, um, then . . .

SIGRIST: Talk about the conditions in the office.

VEGA: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: You were expected to go to this place.

VEGA: Yes.

SIGRIST: To do these transcripts.

VEGA: And, you know, it was very nice there because, um, you know, I kind of never was an office person. I used to ride horses. I used to, um, dance, and I also, um, let's see, what else did I do, you know, I was never a person to sit in an airless tower. Not appealing. So where AKRF was, like, they had windows that opened, and you could wear jeans. I mean, it was very homey, it was very nice. Now they're more in an airless type of place.

SIGRIST: What was the equipment that you used?

VEGA: And I used Wordstar, completely obsolete now.

SIGRIST: What is that?

VEGA: It's a word processing program.

SIGRIST: Were you, were you doing these on a computer?

VEGA: Yes.

SIGRIST: So in 1985 you had a computer at your disposal.

VEGA: Yes.

SIGRIST: To do this.

VEGA: They had it, and I went in there. And it was Wordstar, obsolete software.

SIGRIST: And what were you listening to?

VEGA: Tapes on a transcription machine with a foot pedal and headphones. Okay. So then I think I didn't work for the project for a while, and then when Nancy Dallett, I guess, got her own contract with the National Park Service, right?

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

VEGA: I mean, this is what happened. So she now contracted me. She started Nancy Dallett Productions, and then I worked for her, which brought me to the exciting place of, now I had a very cute little two-year-old girl, brought me to the very exciting place of buying my own

computer, which cost an unbelievable amount of money, which no computer costs that now, something like four thousand dollars. And, um, it was wonderful because, like, this word processing business has always helped me to support my family. But I never had the courage or the desire to buy a computer and get the clients and work so hard, so I really had it easy because I had the big client who was Nancy, before I even got the computer. Nancy just said, "Buy a computer, here's the work." And then that's how I started. I was living on West 89th Street, and, um, typing away at home, for Nancy.

SIGRIST: What was the difference between working in the office for AKRF and working at home for Nancy, pros and cons.

VEGA: You can brush your teeth while formatting diskettes. That's the pro. No, um, you know, of course, you can work whenever you want, and I worked when, you know, Jennifer took her little naps, or watched TV, or whatever. And then, um, I got pregnant with Henry, and I kept working, you know, for Nancy, and then I think it died down again, and I had Henry. And then, um, you say that it was '92 that I started working for you directly.

SIGRIST: Yes. We drew up our first contract. I have it written down here, September 30, 1992.

VEGA: That was an incredible thing for me because by that time I was separated from Rolando, and looking for a way to stay home with them, and that was really my biggest fear about, like, getting, you know, separating from him, because as parents, the type of parents we were, um, I should say that we gave birth at home to Henry, you know, and I breast-fed my children, since this is like my fifteen minutes of fame, these are the important things that I want to go down, you know, in history. Um, I didn't want to get a baby-sitter and leave them. And I especially didn't want to get a baby and leave them to go do something I didn't believe in, like some yucky job, you know? I did get a baby and leave them to go do work that I did believe in, because I had been trained to become a childbirth educator through the Childbirth Education Association, and I worked at North Central Bronx Hospital for about nine months. But even with work that I loved, it was just a hassle to try to find sitters and things, and it was weird hours, so that I just like ended up leaving there. But, um, you know,

working at home just afforded me this incredible opportunity to not need a baby or so many baby-sitters, and to be able to be with my kids. Then, because of the nature of these interviews, I mean, I just felt this incredible bond with the women who were, like, sewing slippers for a penny a pair at home, and doing, like, homework, they called it, you know, and here I was, you know, fifty years later, doing homework. I don't know if it was for the same reasons, but it just worked so beautifully for me, and in those years it was, people would say, "Wow, you have a word processing business," and I would say, "I don't have a word processing business. I have this one client." And I was comfortable with that.

SIGRIST: We being the one client.

VEGA: Yes.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

VEGA: And, um, then I got a little clients here and there, but very, very, very little, you know? And it was like, you know, and I really started to have a lot more trouble and stress was when my work for the National Park Service fell away and I recruited more

clients. Then I could honestly say that I had a word processing business, and I was honestly and still am not happy with it, you know, because it's really a hassle, and it's a lot of work, and it's, um, you know, it's really too much. Like when I was married to Rolando and I was doing the typing to supplement his income, that was a comfortable level of having a word processing business. But trying to earn enough money to support two kids just by typing, that's a lot of pages to type, you know.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what are some of the other types of clients that you have now, say?

VEGA: Oh. Well, I'm so glad you asked, because, um . . .

SIGRIST: Without giving out names necessarily. (he laughs)

VEGA: I've had very interesting clients. The most boring is that I, the most boring but very profitable, because I do it really fast, is I work for a place that's like a clearinghouse for people who either have car accidents or have Workers Compensation injuries, and they need to be evaluated in kind of like a, you know, a chiropractor, a neurologist, really boom-boom-boom, and then they give a little report, they spit it out,

and I transcribe it, and it's hundreds and hundreds and hundreds, and I've had that job for quite a number of years that they send me the work on Friday, and I have to give it in by Monday. Um, really boring, very profitable, you know, no big thing. Um, then I had, um, a semiretired psychiatrist, who was like a wonderful guy, and he used to give the kids presents, and free psychiatric advice for me, and just a lovely person. He was the best. But he's semiretired, so he doesn't work so much, but we're still friends. And, um, then I started doing films, because in order to edit documentary films, all the interviews with the, um, the participants in the film need to be transcribed so that the, um, the director and the producer can save time in the editing room and, you know, the editor, by looking at the paper and crossing off what they don't want, and circling what they do want, and making a note of what tape that's on so they can find it faster, because the editing suite is two hundred and fifty dollars an hour. So I started to do films, I guess through someone I knew in childbirth knew some filmmakers and said, "Oh, you're a typist, you've got to do this." And I worked on some very interesting films about, um, one was about El

Salvador, the war, one was called Love At First Sight, and it was about all these people who saw each other, it could be that she bought a bagel from him, and they fell in love at that instant, and fourteen years and three kids later were still married, and Love At First Sight. And that film, which I never got to see, I imagine it's finished now, um, there was someone who was rescuing in Nazi Germany and liberating, and he fell in love with someone who was being liberated, and then they lost each other. A lot of these stories are they lose each other and it's a one in a billion shot that they'll find each other again. Of course, she was emaciated, and said, "What do you mean, you love me?" You know. And he said, "I love you, I'm going to marry you. Just you wait and see." And they're still together, and I think that was fifty years or something they celebrated. So that, I thought, tied in. I think I remember telling you about that, that you should try to find that film, or maybe I'll try to find it for you. Um . . .

SIGRIST: My reason for asking you that question is that I just want people who are listening to this interview to realize that you're not just sitting there

transcribing all these oral history interviews, that you're also taking other things in.

VEGA: Right. Well, the other thing is, um, I work for a producer named Brent Owens, who is a really fantastic person and a very talented filmmaker, and he produces these things for HBO about prostitutes and pimps. That was really fun. Um, the most recent one was called Pimps Up, Hos Down, and I get to go to all the screenings, so there was, like, all the juicy language and, you know, sexual stuff.

SIGRIST: Words you don't have to type too often doing our oral histories.

VEGA: Right. (they laugh) Exactly. So that was really fun. And I get credit for some of these films, so it's fun, you see my name roll by. And, um . . .

SIGRIST: Of course, doing the transcriptions for the films, that would be very much akin to doing the oral history interviews.

VEGA: Yes.

SIGRIST: I should think.

VEGA: I think that that's, when I worked for the filmmakers, they're so pleased, and they say how you capture, you know, the essence. Because, of course, you have to know when to break a sentence, where to put the commas, you know, which times they say, "Uh, uh," is it important to put that, when they trail off, how to indicate that. You know, so I developed those skills over a number of years, and the filmmakers find that so valuable. And then, of course, you know, since I like to think of myself as a modern woman, you know, I just fell right into that, you know, street slang and everything of the pimps and the hos and, oh, that was so much fun. (Mr. Sigrist laughs) So you can see that film on, you know, Pimps Up Hos Down, and then the other one was called Hookers At The Point.

SIGRIST: Let's get us back to the Oral History Project. (they laugh)

VEGA: So those are the other things that I do, but this is certainly my most favorite work.

SIGRIST: What I'd like you to do a little bit now, and we're going to be breaking at the thirty minute mark in a few minutes so Kevin can flip the tape over, but what

I would like you to start talking about a little bit is the actual process.

VEGA: Okay.

SIGRIST: How do you do a transcript? And I can say, from my end, I have to prepare them for you to do.

VEGA: Right. I had to come face to face with my own mortality when you told me you were going to ask me this, because I realize that in a hundred years this will be hilariously funny, just as it was so funny, it's funny to us that the women stitched the slippers by hand for a penny a hair seems bizarre, so one day this will seem bizarre, but we know that it's modern. I have a transcribing machine that I put the tape in, and I use the headphones.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what a transcribing machine does? What is it, and what it does.

VEGA: You place an audio tape, a standard size audio cassette tape, and, um, you press down the play button so that the heads are engaged onto the tape, but then with the foot pedal you move the tape along to listening, or you can forward or rewind the tape with

the foot pedal, and then you have headphones in your ears. If anything's particularly funny, I take the headphones out and I let my kids hear the funny people, you know, because, of course, there have been many. But mostly, you know, I'm listening in the headphones. And then, um, I have these things, I use WordPerfect 5.1.

SIGRIST: Which is a computer program.

VEGA: Yes, computer software that runs in DOS.

SIGRIST: D-O-S.

VEGA: Disk operating system, for IBM computer. Um, this is not the state-of-the-art, but it works so well that I haven't seen a reason to upgrade. It works better than WordPerfect 6.1 and 8.0 and Windows and all of that stuff, because I have over twelve hundred little mini-programs that capture keystrokes that I make on the computer called macros, and so I never type the words "Paul Sigrist, National Park Service, Ellis Island, America, remember, grandmother, mother, father," all of that is in the computer all the time, so I just hold down this, a certain key, and hit the letter R, and the word remember comes out, so that

it's almost like court reporting, because it's not all typing.

SIGRIST: And that has to be done, you have to program that ahead of time.

VEGA: Yes. But, you know, so when I sit down to do a new one, I have to put in the interviewee's name, just once, and then it comes out every time, and your name or Janet's, or Mindy, whoever's the interviewer, and then I put in the country they're from, because then I never have to type Czechoslovakia over and over. But, you know, even Italy, anything, it just comes out. Um . . .

SIGRIST: We're going to, we're going to just pause for a moment so that Kevin can, uh, he's giving me the thirty minute mark, and we'll flip the tapes over, and then we'll . . .

VEGA: I know all about that.

SIGRIST: And then we'll start up again right where we left off.

VEGA: Okay.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: All right. We're now beginning side two with Nancy Vega, our illustrious transcriber for the Ellis Island Oral History Project. Nancy, you were just discussing what a macro was, that you can preprogram your computer so that instead of having to type the word grandmother every single time within the duration of the transcript, you can hit a key and the word "grandmother" will come out.

VEGA: Right, for example.

SIGRIST: That's great. That saves a lot of time in terms of the transcribing.

VEGA: I also have interesting little macros, like I have one that changes two sentences to one, because sometimes you think the person's going to say, is finished, and then they say something else, and it should be joined with a comma, and that becomes one sentence, so I have that, you know. I have interesting, I'm dying to teach you.

SIGRIST: This, well, of course, I do a lot of transcribing myself, so, um . . .

VEGA: So I'll love to teach you.

SIGRIST: I have to type grandmother every single time, though. I don't know how to make a macro.

VEGA: Well, you will, because I'm going to give, I'm going to teach you, and that's going to help you a lot.

SIGRIST: Make me go faster, anyway.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: Um . . .

VEGA: And then I do a spellcheck.

SIGRIST: Well, before we get to that, because different people do this differently.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: When you're transcribing, talk to me about, about what you're hearing versus what's coming out of your fingers. How do you type what you're hearing, and what I mean by this is are you typing while the person is talking.

VEGA: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Are you listening to a chunk and memorizing it and typing? Tell me how you're doing it.

VEGA: I'm typing when the person is talking. And, um, I really don't have to let my foot off the pedal very often, because I type a hundred and fourteen words a minute. Oh, I should say also that I use a Microsoft natural keyboard, and I started I guess around '94 to have symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome, but I was able to avoid it becoming that by going to occupational therapy and being fitted with hand splints. This is very, you know, much the thing nowadays. It's rampant. You must have heard of it.

SIGRIST: From so many people being, you know, using keyboards.

VEGA: Yes, and even the mouse, like graphic people with the mouse, there's "mouse finger" you can get, and things. Um, so I'm fitted with hand splints, and when I'm working a lot I sleep in them, and what it does is it keeps the carpal tunnel open so that when you sleep you don't bend your hand, which would, you know, for an average person it's fine to bend your hand in the night, but for someone with carpal tunnel, that's cutting off the tunnel. So it keeps the tunnel open

at night so it can have a rest. So between the natural keyboard, which is a curved keyboard which is raised in the middle, um, and it's more natural for the arms than the position of holding your hands very close together where all the keys are small and close together. Between that and the hand splints, and also, um, I use a homeopathic ruta ointment on my wrists.

SIGRIST: Ruta?

VEGA: R-U-T-A. And what else do I do? I guess that's it, because I don't take as many breaks as I ought to, you know? Um, I mean, I'm totally like working all the time taking care of two kids and doing this typing thing, you know, I mean, it's like, and all the things that kids, you know, have you do. So, you know, I'm totally a single mother of the '90s, completely stressed out all the time. Um . . .

SIGRIST: There's something not quite right about the fact that to create these transcripts which, as far as I'm concerned, they're just gold, it's actually taking its toll on the human body.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: To actually do these.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: Because the technology, I suppose, is so limited, you know, we're, we have to do all of this manually.

VEGA: Right. So this is going to be a joke one day, because voice recognition is already out.

SIGRIST: But not. Because this brings another thing I want to talk to you about. The voice recognition computer programs which are coming out and have achieved a certain degree of accuracy are still not successful with people with heavy accents and that sort of thing.

VEGA: Is that true.

SIGRIST: That's what we understand from, uh, when this stuff has been marketed to us.

VEGA: Ah.

SIGRIST: And I would like to ask you, because, of course, so many of our interviewees are heavily accented, they are elderly people, sometimes the tape recordings are done in adverse circumstances, you know, rooms with,

where we were just . . .

VEGA: Nursing homes.

SIGRIST: Nursing homes. We were just talking before the interview started about a woman who, you know, we had a vacuum cleaner go through the entire interview. How do you cope with accents with, with, um, uh, microphone disturbance, that sort of thing? How many times do you go back and forth to listen to something before you just say I'm going on, or type in 'unintelligible'?

VEGA: Many. I try to really avoid the blanks, you know, the unintelligible. It's really very rare exception, and I don't have to go back too much. Um, you know, of course, some people are easier than others. But, you know, when you go back once and twice, I mean, after all these years, I can just understand them, you know, a certain way. Like, for example, the Italians, they add the "a" to the end of everything. So, you know, I can't do the accent, but that was something that I got used to, you know, to go back. But, you know, the accents I got used to, and everything.

SIGRIST: How do you think listening to these interviews has

affected the way you hear things?

VEGA: I'm a good listener now. But, you see, when I'm typing them, I go on a little journey from the beginning. First, you know, I try to picture the interviewee and the interviewer and, you know, I'm typing from my New York City apartment, although I have a very nice apartment now, I've had degrees, believe me, of apartments during my career. So sometimes when you're visiting them, I mean, now I have a picture in my mind of what the Oral History Studio is, but when you're visiting them I like to, sometimes it's in a bucolic setting, and I like to just go there and try to, you know, picture, or if it's in a nursing home, I try to picture the people, or if their relatives are in the room, I try to picture them. You know, sometimes the relatives are like so interfering you have to tell them to sit down, and sometimes I imagine them seeing their parents or their aunt or whatever being honored and, you know, try to get a sense of the spirit in the room. But then when they start to do the interview, I go everywhere with them in my head, and I have, like, you know, scenes in my head that I've developed through

the years where, like, the family is living in a shack, you know, as you say, walk me through your home, or describe what type of brick or what type of material your home was made of, I have like, you know, the standard, you know, in my head, of just adobe house, you know, wood shack, thatched roof, you know, all the elements. I have, um, in my head, sharing your home with animals, which I just love that one, where you got your warmth because sheep were in the next room, or chickens, or horses, or cows. I know these animals give a lot of heat. I have pictures in my head of root cellars, and what that was like, pictures of the ovens that the children slept on top of, of the bread, of the fountains where you went to get the water, of the children, of the mothers. You know, you know, the beds, the sleeping arrangements. The food, just, everything. The, and the food, of course, is very descriptive, and I'm a good cook, I like to cook. So I really, you know, wholeheartedly joined in the descriptions of the food. But also, you know, just like, um, you know, when they would describe, like, a broth, or something really, you know, they're often describing it in this very, you know, kind of sarcastic tone, like, "What do you

think, honey? Hey, it wasn't anything fancy, you know. A couple of carrots. You ate what you got." But also I like the Italian, because my grandmother was very much into green vegetables and things, very healthy, you know? I never forget this Italian and they said, "What was your favorite food when you were a child?" "Broccoli." One of my son's favorites. But, you know, so I would see that green, and I would see the pastry from Denmark, and I would see the soup, or I would picture, you know, how it was to be hungry, or to have the old bread, or to pick the maggots out of the oatmeal because it's the war. You know, all of that, and the war, and the hiding, the different wars, and the killings, you know, and the atrocities, the concentration camps. You know, I have files in my head. It's not something one-dimensional to me. I have a place that I go, my little oral history imagination. I should have an EEG on me and see what's happening to my brain.

SIGRIST: Do you think that this kind of visual approach to the interviews has any affect on the manual labor of actually taking the recorded words and putting them into printed words?

VEGA: No, I think it's still hard on the body, you know. It's hard, it's not good, healthy, to sit. You know, when I went to Equinox for my personal training session, you know, he said, "Hey, computers, not healthy." Um, it's also really funny, because you hear about, I'm realizing the amount of labor that went into a day. Because we think, hey, you had a farm, wow, that's so healthy and nice. How unhealthy it was to toil three hundred and sixty-five days a year without a plow or any type of machinery, to walk behind the mule and do those kind of hardships that people did. So, you know, now I'm sitting in a chair, and I have to go jump on a step, you know, to disco music to work out, because I have the opposite of their lives. It's incredible, and it's, what fifty years' difference?

SIGRIST: Or more, in some cases.

VEGA: Fifty, seventy, it's not that long, really. You know, where things have taken the turn. Um, it's so interesting. You know, also I hear about, you know, making seven dollars a week, and then I'm typing away and my housekeeper is cleaning my house and she makes sixty dollars to clean my house.

SIGRIST: For how many hours of work?

VEGA: Four.

SIGRIST: Four hours of work.

VEGA: So instead of seven dollars a week, you know, now someone who, she's an immigrant, you know, is making sixty dollars in four hours. It's quite a difference. And she's using the vacuum and the washing machine, all the modern, you know. And then, I guess, like, this summer, you know, the days that I was working and the kids were in their expensive camps and, you know, so I'll go to, you know, the washing machine, put in a load of laundry, air conditioner's going full blast, sit down at the computer, you know, then have lunch, flip through the channels with the remote control. It's like, you know, take a break, check my e-mail. It's just like such a different world. And yet, there I go, all the way back, seventy years, to their time, and hearing, you know, what it was for them. And I love people, you know, so I'm very compassionate, um.

SIGRIST: How do you feel, because this happens so often, um, during an interview there will be sometimes an

emotional moment where the interviewee will be moved in some way.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: Because we're talking about his mother, and seeing the Statue of Liberty, or any number of reasons. How does that make you feel?

VEGA: Um, I can't believe I get paid to do this, it's such a thrill and an honor. It's incredible. I mean, I love it. It's so great. I remember this woman, you know, it's like these people are so sweet, you know, and how she said to, I guess, you know, I don't remember if it was you or Janet, she just said, "And you'll never believe what happened to my son." Well, what, you know? "He died of AIDS." You know, and here was this like, you know, modern phenomenon. And, boy, I hope in a hundred years that that will be something just of the past, whatever it doesn't exist now, smallpox, you know. And that was like so intense, because this is a person who has lived from the time where there was no penicillin to this, you know, terrible disease. Actually, my friend who died of AIDS worked on this project a little bit, because I shared my work a

little bit with my friends. Especially him. He demanded. He was like, "Let me do some of those!" You know. So I let him, but he didn't have the patience for it, and he didn't know the difference between your and you're, and there and their, so I used to tease him and say, like, "You're illiterate!" You know, "You can't do that!" You know, and so it became kind of funny. But his name was Joel, J-O-E-L, Odom, O-D-O-M.

SIGRIST: Now, when he was doing it, when, when, what part of . . .

VEGA: AKRF.

SIGRIST: In the AKRF.

VEGA: A long time ago. Um, so I just wanted to get his name in there, you know, so he was great. But . . .

SIGRIST: How many other people were working on the AKRF at that time?

VEGA: Not many.

SIGRIST: How many transcribers were there?

VEGA: Not many, because Nancy did some, I did some, Joel did

just a very few, but because he was a very good friend I wanted to mention him. There was this woman Christine Hatfull.

SIGRIST: Hat? Hatfull?

VEGA: Yes, just like it sounds. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: H-A-T-F-U-L-L.

VEGA: Since I'm going to type this, I know all the typing. (she laughs) Oh, I have a macro that raises a word to capital letters and puts the hyphens between the letters. Not such a big thing.

SIGRIST: Oh, you mean, so like when I ask people to spell things . . .

VEGA: Yes.

SIGRIST: You're not going, like, capital V, hyphen, capital E, hyphen, like I do. (he laughs) Capital G, hyphen.

VEGA: Like you do until you come and get trained by me.

SIGRIST: Till you teach me how to do a macro.

VEGA: Yes, which I'm thrilled to teach you, because you can imagine I've been developing this all the years, and

have no one to talk to about it. You know.

SIGRIST: I want to ask you some very specific technical questions.

VEGA: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Because I think that someone in a hundred years is going to want to know this.

VEGA: Okay.

SIGRIST: How long does it take you to type your average one-hour interview? Say the interviewee does not have a heavy accent . . .

VEGA: Three hours.

SIGRIST: Three hours.

VEGA: But that's going very fast, you know.

SIGRIST: How many pages?

VEGA: In three hours?

SIGRIST: Well, how many pages is roughly a one-hour interview.

VEGA: Um, forty-five.

SIGRIST: Forty-five, yeah. I would say even more in some cases.

VEGA: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Um, what are the things that slow you down the most? When you're listening to someone, what are the types of things that bring the typing to an absolute halt?

VEGA: Well, this doesn't apply to this project, because everything's well-recorded.

SIGRIST: Well, with this, with this project. What . . .

VEGA: Well, I would say, in general, poor recording, it slows down, and I just can't accept, I tell everybody up front, like, I don't deal with poor recordings at all. Agencies that I work for beg me to struggle along. I love my work very, very much, and I can't stand it when it's a poor recording. It's just not worth it. It's, like, awful, you know?

SIGRIST: There are occasions with us, though, where, for instance, uh, my colleague, Janet Levine, or myself, when we're interviewing someone we are sometimes, because of the layout of the room, quite a distance away from the interviewee, if we're in their house.

VEGA: Yeah, but it's always okay.

SIGRIST: But that's not really been a problem.

VEGA: Because they have microphones and things. So then I guess it would be really bad accents, or speaking in two languages at once. That's always fun.

SIGRIST: It's a little old Italian lady kind of thing.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: Slipping in and out of Italian.

VEGA: Right. And, um, those things, you know? And there have been some really, really heavy accents. And, you know, boy, they have just been really hard to get through and stuff.

SIGRIST: What do you do, when you're doing an interview that, and, you know, you're doing a ninety-five year-old man who came from Germany when he was thirty, so he's going to have a very heavy accent.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: And it's slow going, how do you pace yourself or give yourself time to clear out your mind when you get

to . . .

VEGA: I'll clean the whole house before I sit down and do that interview. You know, but I just try to get it kind of over with. But I have put some aside because it just, they're like, I have to work, and I can't do this, you know, and come back to him, or her.

SIGRIST: Well, and I should say for the sake of the tape that since you've been associated with the project, um, certainly you and I have been more intimately associated with this project since '91, that we've always been in contact, very close verbal contact, because there have been times where you've called me and said, "Do I really have to finish this guy?" (he laughs) You know, "His accent is so heavy, can I set him aside and do this, this and this?" That's happened a number of times.

VEGA: Right. But it's rare, you know. I remember a lot more of the people being older and having worse accents than, you know, then than now.

SIGRIST: Then meaning when?

VEGA: In 1985.

SIGRIST: Oh, in the AKRF set.

VEGA: I really remember when I first started there were a lot, but maybe that's just a flaw in my memory. Maybe that's not true.

SIGRIST: I wonder if it has a reflection of how you've learned to listen differently.

VEGA: Maybe.

SIGRIST: Remember coming, coming to this now as you're sitting down doing the ninety-five-year-old German man who was thirty when he came, your ears are trained highly differently than they had been in 1985.

VEGA: I did so well with the pimps.

SIGRIST: We're back to the pimps (he laughs)

VEGA: You just could not, he could not believe it. Because of my training, you know, with this project.

SIGRIST: Well, that's, I suppose . . .

VEGA: Because they used all the street talk, you know, and they had, they kept saying, "You know what I'm sayin'?" And I had a little macro going for, "You

know what I'm sayin'? You know what I'm sayin'?"

SIGRIST: But I just want to say for the sake of the tape that the pimps were not part of the Ellis Island Oral History Project. This was another project that Nancy was working on.

VEGA: But I'm very interested in language. I mean, I want to go to school to, for sign language? You know, whenever I get the time. Um, and, um, it, I think it's all part of the same. You know, like I have always loved language, like I speak Spanish, and, but I love it, you know? And, um . . .

SIGRIST: Well, your ability . . .

VEGA: I'm very multi-cultural.

SIGRIST: Your ability to speak Spanish assisted us when you transcribed the two Spanish sisters, Pilar Bertimou[ph] and Sally Sellis[ph], and they did this kind of, when they talked to themselves during the interview, I interviewed the two sisters right in this room, they would speak to each other in Spanish, which you, which you transliterated for us.

VEGA: That's another funny thing is when there's more than

one interviewee.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about the challenges that that . . .

VEGA: Right. Well, you have to be able to tell one from the other. And there have been some in the past that they really sounded alike, and you could not tell. But you were so good to me in these past, with Lillian and, um, you know, boy, you were just like, "Now, Lillian, tell us . . ." But then I noticed the difference in their voices. I'm sure I didn't make one mistake.

SIGRIST: Nancy's referring to the Fishman-Rabinowitz interview. And, um, yes, one sister had a very low voice, which made it easy to discern.

VEGA: Right, husky.

SIGRIST: Yep.

VEGA: So, you know, that would be a challenge. Um, but, you know, it's just been wonderful.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit more about just the, how this is done. So you got through the interview, okay? Then what happens?

VEGA: And I can work for about an hour without taking a break.

SIGRIST: And then how long do you take a break?

VEGA: Half an hour or so, you know, and come back. Then you turn the tape over.

SIGRIST: For how long during a day?

VEGA: If I work four hours, that's almost too much heavy of the day on the hands, because it's four hours straight, you know? Um, you can't get too rich doing this unless you hire people, you know, because it's too hard on your hands and your body, and you'll go nuts.

SIGRIST: So you finish, you type the last word in the interview. Then what happens?

VEGA: Spellcheck.

SIGRIST: Okay.

VEGA: So that's, like the computer is checking, um, every word, and some of the words won't be in the computer's dictionary, so you make your own supplemental dictionary. I can't really think of an example for

this project that's in there. And then, um . . .

SIGRIST: Well, I should think words like shtetel, which might not be in your dictionary.

VEGA: Right. Or, um . . .

SIGRIST: Or a shochet, which, we come up a lot, the ritual chicken killers.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: Those are things you add to your spellcheck.

VEGA: Plenty of them. Thank you, Paul. So those are examples.

SIGRIST: Having just transcribed myself those two words.

VEGA: Right, right. Um, you know, so then I make a note of how many pages, so I can get paid.

SIGRIST: And what is that procedure, from your point of view?

VEGA: Getting paid?

SIGRIST: Yes. What do you have to do to get your check from the federal government?

VEGA: Um, I have to finish my contract, and, um, then I type

up an invoice and submit it. Um, but, you know, finishing the contract can be lengthy, and then it takes me thirty days to get paid.

SIGRIST: Yeah, that's a government thing.

VEGA: I wish it was three days.

SIGRIST: Yeah. (he sighs) And I should say from my point of view we draw up . . .

VEGA: I'm getting a little used to it.

SIGRIST: We draw up the contract.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: And then they have to submit it to be approved by the, by the purchasing agent here at Ellis Island, who then appropriates the money. You know, this is where all the time takes. And then when the money's appropriated then I deliver the tapes to Nancy.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: To you, and, after preparing them, and then you do the work. And then when it's done, you submit an itemized invoice, we should say, because on your invoice the

interviews are listed by the interviewee and the number of pages each transcript came out to. That is then submitted, and then you wait thirty days to get paid.

VEGA: Right. So now I'm waiting. This is day one. Hopefully I'll get a direct deposit (she laughs) on the 27th of, um, (she clears her throat), of, um . . .

SIGRIST: Whenever it is. Nancy's taking out her contract, uh, her invoice.

VEGA: I'm taking out my invoice because I didn't put my direct deposit information on it, but I will. I'll just write it in.

SIGRIST: Okay. You're going to need that. Um . . .

VEGA: Boy, you're not kidding.

SIGRIST: What about AKRF? How were you paid for the AKRF interviews? Let's go back thirteen years. How did they do that?

VEGA: Um, oh, how did they do that? They wrote me a check.

SIGRIST: They just wrote you a check.

VEGA: Yes, that was easy.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. And was it by page again?

VEGA: Yes.

SIGRIST: As we pay by page, that's how they did it, too?

VEGA: Yes. It's always been the same, two dollars a page.

SIGRIST: Always been, even since back then.

VEGA: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. And, um, uh, we should talk a little bit, um, just quickly about the review and correction process, because that's something that you and I were both, that's how I first knew you was for those interviews with Nancy Dallett where I corrected and, we used to do it where I'd correct them and send them back. Now we don't do it that way, it's just faster not to do that.

VEGA: So then I would, you know, make changes. And I had quite a nice long running word list of how to spell Cherbourg and Marseilles.

SIGRIST: Le Havre.

VEGA: And The Lusitania, Le Havre, right. So that was, you know, doing the corrections. And then, again, putting them back . . .

SIGRIST: I used to write little notes in the margin.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: Correct it.

VEGA: So then I had, um, but, you know, all of this goes onto diskette, high density diskette, in the computer, and then I bring it in, so it's quite portable. So I was just sitting on the boat over here with twenty-four hundred dollars worth of work on a tiny diskette. But, of course, at home it's on the hard drive. It's not like if that diskette goes overboard I have to start typing everybody again, no.

SIGRIST: I think it's important for people who listen to this tape to really get a sense that this is a long process.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: That these transcripts, which are taken for granted by everyone who sits down and looks at them, as if they

just appeared by spontaneous generation.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: Are really the product . . .

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: Of a very long and involved process that, that could only happen with people who have special skills, special abilities, and an intimacy with the type of material that they're working with.

VEGA: Right, and the right equipment.

SIGRIST: And the right equipment.

VEGA: And time. And, you know, then, I'm always sitting there typing, you know, and being interrupted for my kids doing this and that, or the phone, or whatever. But I have a nice place to type now, because I have that sunny room, you know.

SIGRIST: You've sort of set up camp in the room.

VEGA: This is like, you know, I have it really good now.

SIGRIST: Are there any ways, Nancy, that your life has changed, or the way you see things has changed, through this

association with this very unique project.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: Because you are at this point the person who has had an ongoing association with the Oral History Project the longest. I suppose I would be the next person on it, coming in '89.

VEGA: Right.

SIGRIST: Are there any ways that you can see that this has changed you in any way?

VEGA: Um, I guess I know a lot about history. And, um, but, you know, nobody has ever asked me, you know, what I know or anything. I guess I had an Armenian friend, or I have an Armenian friend. She moved to Switzerland, and I miss her so much. Um, and, you know, I just could really identify with her feelings about the Armenian holocaust, which I guess people aren't as familiar.

SIGRIST: Did you know anything about it before you started this project?

VEGA: No. I mean, and, it's incredible. So that, you know,

and I was very, very close with this woman who moved, Shohig. And, um . . .

SIGRIST: You've got to spell that.

VEGA: S-H-O-H-I-G. Shohig Vartanian. So, you know, um, I guess, like, it enriched my friendship with her to really know her history. I mean, I should have really printed them out for her and given them to her but I never, you know, got around to it. Always the future. Um . . .

SIGRIST: Is that the main thing . . .

VEGA: She lives in Switzerland now.

SIGRIST: Is that the main thing that you got out of this, is a knowledge of history?

VEGA: No, that's just like, well, a knowledge of history but, like, also an understanding and a compassion, you know, for what things used to be like. And, um, almost an envy, also, because of the richness of kind of people living in communities in that way. You know, we're so ridiculously isolated now. And I like kids, you know, you could have as many as you want, but I guess you actually always didn't have a husband

then either, because he could have been in America, or he could have died, because a lot of people died, or left, you know, just, um, there was abandonment and things also, and I guess you couldn't always get remarried. There were cultural kind of taboos and things, you know? So, but, um, I identify with the women so much, kind of, as a woman, you know, um, and also, like, you know, the way I look at my children who are, you know, kind of spoiled American kids, as opposed to, um, how these people were treated as children? It's so different. And, um, you know, we don't have, really, the violence and the beatings that went on. Like, you know, supposedly now video games and TV are so violent, but then everything that was done to children was violent. And they just laugh about it. You don't hear anybody say, "Well, you know, I came from a dysfunctional violent family." They just said, like, "Boy, you got it then, you got it," you know? And the nuns beating them, or their parents beating them.

SIGRIST: We need to end now, Nancy. We're just about out of tape here.

VEGA: Okay.

SIGRIST: But, um, we're ending on the violent note.

VEGA: Okay. But, you know, so, how much things have changed and improved, I mean, in that way, I think, because school, you know how they went to school and they had to learn or they'd get hit. We don't really have that any more.

SIGRIST: Well, maybe we do, we just don't . . . (end of recording)