

**EI-13**

**YOLAN SZENCY BATTA**

**BIRTH DATE: 1897**

**INTERVIEW DATE: DECEMBER 6, 1990**

**RUNNING TIME: 20:19**

**INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.**

**RECORDING ENGINEER: BRIAN FEENEY**

**INTERVIEW LOCATION: ST. JOHNLAND NURSING HOME,  
KING'S PARK, NEW YORK**

**TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.,  
1993**

**TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: JOHN MURIELLO, 4/1995**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.**

**HUNGARY, 1921**

**AGE 24**

**SHIP: "THE ROUSSILLON"**

**PORT: LE HAVRE**

**RESIDENCES:**

- **HUNGARY: SZANTO**
- **THE US: NYC, CENTRAL PARK WEST**

**SIGRIST:** Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. We are here at St. Johnland speaking to Yolán Batta, who came from Hungary. She arrived on Christmas Eve at Ellis Island in 1921. Mrs. Batta, could you please tell me your name when you were in Hungary?

**BATTA:** Yolán Szency.

SIGRIST: Could you spell your last name, please?

BATTA: S-Z-E-N-C-Z-Y.

SIGRIST: I see. And what year were you born?

BATTA: I was born in 19, 18, 1897.

SIGRIST: Okay. And what town were you born in?

BATTA: I was born in Szanto.

SIGRIST: And is that the town that you lived in?

BATTA: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk a little bit about what life was like when you were in Hungary. Let's talk about, let's start with your parents.

BATTA: Well, my father left when I was only about three years old.

SIGRIST; I see. Where did he go?

BATTA: He came out to United States. He came to Cleveland, Ohio, he used to live. I don't see my father since I came back here, so I met him again in 1921.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

BATTA: John Szency, John Szency.

SIGRIST: So you were with your mother, then, in Hungary.

BATTA: I was with my mother in 1905 and in 1905 my mother died.

SIGRIST: And what was her name?

BATTA: Julia.

SIGRIST: I see. And what did she die of?

BATTA: She, uh, I don't know. She died.

SIGRIST: And were there other brothers and sisters?

BATTA: I had a brother and I had a sister. I have a sister and an older brother, two years older. And my brother was taken away and my grandparents took me up for a while. My mother's parents.

SIGRIST: I see. And they lived in the same town?

BATTA: Yes. They lived in the town and they raised me. They raised me.

SIGRIST: And what were they like as people?

BATTA: They was nice but they had a little business, a pork store, a pork store they had. My grandma used to sold pork, pork, I don't know...

SIGRIST: Like a butcher shop?

BATTA: Butcher shop, yes, something like a butcher shop, yeah. So we had all right. We had no, everything. And when the war came out, my father couldn't write a letter. We don't hear from him, nothing. After the war he wrote a letter. He wants us to come out. All right, in the meantime I lost my sister in 1916. I lost my sister. She died, soon she died in...

SIGRIST: And what was her name?

BATTA: Nadia, Nadia. So I and my brother, my brother was a soldier. He was in the army, he was in the army.

SIGRIST: Now he did not go to live with your grandparents, though, yes? Or he did?

BATTA: Who?

SIGRIST: Your brother.

BATTA: My brother was, yeah, sure.

SIGRIST: I see. Your grandparents took all the children.

BATTA: Yeah, yeah, took all the three of us. Three of us, yes. Yeah, sure. They raised us.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit about life with your grandparents. For instance...

BATTA: Was all right. I lost my grandpa in 1913, 1913. It was only my grandma.

SIGRIST: Did Grandma do the cooking?

BATTA: Yes, she did, sure. She was a good cook. My grandma was a great cook.

SIGRIST: I see. What did she make that you liked? What was your favorite?

BATTA: Everything.

SIGRIST: Everything was good.

BATTA: Everything.

SIGRIST: Did you ever help her with the cooking?

BATTA: Once in a while, yes.

SIGRIST: But she actually was running the shop with your grandfather.

BATTA: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Did you or your brother or your sister, did you ever help out in the shop?

BATTA: Not much.

SIGRIST: Not really.

BATTA: I was too small then.

SIGRIST: Did you go to school?

BATTA: Yes, we had school. I go through sixth grade, sixth, sixth grade.

SIGRIST: I see. Did your...

BATTA: Grammar school. Otherwise I don't have high school. Just the grammar, the sixth grade.

SIGRIST: Did your grandparents supply music lessons, piano lessons, anything like that?

BATTA: No.

SIGRIST: No.

BATTA: No.

SIGRIST: They were not musical people.

BATTA: No, no. No, it wasn't.

SIGRIST: Did you, when you were a little girl in Hungary, for instance, what sorts of games did you play? Did you play with the other children?

BATTA: (she laughs) All kinds of games. I was like a tomboy.

SIGRIST: I see. So you were kind of an active little girl.

BATTA: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What about your sister and your brother? Were they active children, also.

BATTA: Same thing, same thing.

SIGRIST: I see. What about religious life? What religion were you?

BATTA: I was a Catholic.

SIGRIST: Catholic.

BATTA: Roman Catholic.

SIGRIST: And were you very devout? Did your parents...?

BATTA: I would say yes. I went to this Catholic school. Every week, once a week. Once a week, Catholic, it was.

SIGRIST: And then did you go to mass on Sunday.

BATTA: Yes. I still know the stories. I still know the stories.

SIGRIST: They drilled it into you.

BATTA: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: And let's talk about the holidays, for instance, was Christmas a big deal or Easter a big deal?

BATTA: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. A big deal. Christmas or New Years. We had all the holidays. We had all the holidays.

SIGRIST: Did you have parties at your house?

BATTA: Yes.

SIGRIST: Who came?

BATTA: What do you mean?

SIGRIST: Well, who, like, did...?

BATTA: No bars, no. We were kids, kids, kids.

SIGRIST: I see. All right, let's talk about, you side your sister died later on...

BATTA: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: What happened after that?

BATTA: I was with my grandma, then I came...

SIGRIST: Your brother was gone at that point.

BATTA: My brother was a soldier. He was a soldier. And he came, he was almost home less, in the war all the time, because in 1918 it was all over. Then he came home. He got married, he got married and I stayed with my

grandma 'til I came out to United States.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk about, why did you come to the United States? Who made that decision? Did you decide that you wanted to come?

BATTA: I did! I did and my grandma, too. They wanted to send me to my father but my father sent a letter saying he wanted to see me, he wanted to have me.

SIGRIST: What was your father doing? What business was he in? What job did he do?

BATTA: Well, my father, oh, my father had a very good, boot, he made the boot, bootery, boots.

SIGRIST: Boots, shoes.

BATTA: Shoes, yes.

SIGRIST: In Ohio?

BATTA: No, not in Ohio. In Europe. Here he was working in the railroads, railroads in Ohio someplace. I don't know where. He was sent there. Out to Cleveland, Ohio they sent him, and they bring him out. He had some property there and they want to take over, the Italian people, they came around and they want to take the property from him and he don't want to hear it. So they burned the whole area. One day he came home. There was only the ground left over. Nothing left over. So, in 1930, he died in hospital. I was up there. I was there when he died.

SIGRIST: All right. Let's get you to America now. Let's, so you decided you wanted to go to America...

BATTA: Yes.

SIGRIST: And your grandmother decided she also wanted to go...

BATTA: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: So you both came together?

BATTA: No, I only came alone.

SIGRIST; You came alone. Grandma didn't come over here.

BATTA: My grandma, I lost my grandma in 1918. She went, she died in 1918.

SIGRIST: I see. And, so did you save up your money to come?

BATTA: No! My aunt. I had an aunt here, my mother's sister and in the meantime she was home visiting. She was between visiting. She was home visiting.

SIGRIST: Where did your aunt live here? Where in America?

BATTA: In New York, in Central Park West. So, I know my aunt, so when my father came to get me in Ellis Island, I refuse to go with him. I told him, "I want to go with my aunt." My aunt came to see me everyday and brought me some eats, something to eat because I don't like the stuff that they

gave you there. (she coughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember the boat ride over?

BATTA: It was the "Leon."

SIGRIST: It was on the "Leon."

BATTA: Russian, uh, French line. (she coughs)

SIGRIST: From what port did you leave?

BATTA: Le Havre. Le Havre. The "Roussillon."

SIGRIST: So did you go by train from Hungary to France? How did you get to..?

BATTA: The train. Thirty-two...

SIGRIST: And you travelled alone?

BATTA: Thirty-two of us. Thirty-two of us. A bunch, immigrants that came out.

SIGRIST: (misunderstanding her) That's a long ride, thirty-two hours. So, okay, did you travel, what class did you travel on the boat?

BATTA: Third class, third class.

SIGRIST: Third class. Do you remember that at all? Do you remember what it was like? Did you have a cabin?

BATTA: I don't remember. I don't. All I know, it was all young people. All young people, thirty-one of us put together. I saw all kinds of people there, you know. I had a good time, believe me, I had a good time there.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) Was the boat ride rough at all? Did you get sick?

BATTA: Unstable boat. It was terrible. I thought every minute there was plenty. (imitating a rolling boat) It was checking and nicking gliching and everything. And then finally the water, it came up like mountains, big mountains that curled over the whole thing. The water was terrible.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how long...?

BATTA: ELEVEN days!

SIGRIST: Eleven days.

BATTA: Eleven days. I remember fresh.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you arrived?  
Were you happy to see the Statue of Liberty?

BATTA: Do I remember it?

SIGRIST: Do you remember it?

BATTA: Do I remember. Early in the morning, early in the morning it was. We was all on the deck. We was all on the deck. (she gestures as if waving)

SIGRIST: Everyone came up. Waving at everything.

BATTA: Waving.

SIGRIST: Wow. So you were probably very happy to see land after...

BATTA: Of course I was happy.

SIGRIST: That kind of a boat ride.

BATTA: Oh, boy. It was terrible, it was.

SIGRIST: All right, let's talk about Ellis Island now.

BATTA: I liked it there.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about Ellis? Do you remember, you were there for two weeks, you said.

BATTA: Two weeks.

SIGRIST: And why were you there? Why were you detained?

BATTA: I'm telling you, my father came to get me and I don't want to go with him. I don't know him. When I saw my father first, I looked at him and he looked at me and he was a nice looking guy, he was nice looking, and, you know, he's strange. But I see my aunt and he got insulted, I guess or something, you know, so he left me and went back to Cleveland, Ohio. And my aunt

came to see me and they don't want to let me go with my aunt. So I don't know what to do, so there used to be a lady there in Central Park West, a lady that belongs to a Senator. They had a friend that was a Senator. The lady called up the Senator. They called up the President. The President sent a telegram to Ellis Island, "Let the girl go immediately! Let the girl go." I saw the telegram. My aunt saw the telegram, too. So they let me go. That's how I came out to the Central Park West.

SIGRIST: When you were at Ellis Island, you said the food wasn't very good. Why? Was it just strange to you?

BATTA: Strange and everything. Here's what happened, I don't know, where I came from there's plenty Jewish people and I was friends with Jewish. So I used the Jewish kitchen. I go into the Jewish kitchen, they see and I gave a pass, food. I go over there to the Jewish kitchen. They give me herring and give me a bowl of potato and a plate. (she laughs) It was unbearable! I got a herring on a plate and a bowl of potato. I'll never forget it! (they continue laughing)

SIGRIST: Did you eat in a big room?

BATTA: Big room, big room.

SIGRIST: Lot of people. Were there a lot of people who were detained with you? Lots of people on the island?

BATTA: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. About two thousand people. They was coming and going, they're coming and going, they're picking out and sending back some of them, some they were sending back, some they were sending

out. There was, everyday, commotion. Always something going on there. Always.

SIGRIST: When you were at Ellis, were there other people from Hungary that you could talk to, because you didn't speak English?

BATTA: There were thirty-two of us.

SIGRIST: There were thirty-two who had come over?

BATTA: Yes!

SIGRIST: (realizing he had misunderstood Mrs. Batta earlier in the interview) I see. So at least you had somebody there that you could talk to.

BATTA: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep, do you remember?

BATTA: Oh, yeah. (she laughs) That's another one. (they laugh) They had a gate like, a gate, you know, yes, a gate. And we sleep in there. So I had a girlfriend, a "monkey cage" she called it. She called it a monkey cage. It was all right.

SIGRIST: And that's where you stayed for the two weeks you were there. Did they ever show you movies or was there anything to do there?

BATTA: Oh, I don't remember that. No, no, no.

SIGRIST: Well, then you must have been very relieved when they let you off of Ellis Island.

BATTA: Yes.

SIGRIST: Okay, so you go to Central Park West. Talk a little bit about, because you went to stay with your aunt...

BATTA: Yes, my aunt.

SIGRIST: And what did she do or what did her husband do? They must have been rather affluent.

BATTA: Yes, she was living there. She was in an apartment there on Central Park West, there.

SIGRIST: And you were twenty-one, right.

BATTA: I was twenty-four. (she coughs)

SIGRIST: Twenty-four. So did you get a job in New York?

BATTA: Yes, two weeks later.

SIGRIST: What did you do?

BATTA: Domestic work, domestic work. I went to Jewish people, working for people, for a...

SIGRIST: For a family?

BATTA: Yeah, a family.

SIGRIST: Do you remember their names? (she shakes her head) No.

BATTA: Russian, Russian. They were Russians.

SIGRIST: They were Russian people.

BATTA: Russians. I started to make, I'll never forget it, I started to make my strudel. I make a Hungarian pastry, they call it strudel. So they, the lady, they let me do it. She wants me to make her strudel, make her strudel so I started to make it. And I open the whole thing, you know, the dough and everything. (she gestures) She called out the whole house, she called out the whole house, "Look at that what she do! Look at that what she do!" because she never saw something like that before. I pulled the dough out all together on a table, you know, big table, big, stretch it out. So she called up the whole house, "Look at what she's doing! Look, look!" (she laughs)

SIGRIST: She had never seen anything like that. Were they nice people to work for?

BATTA: Yeah, they was all right, yeah. (she coughs) I was in there about six months.

SIGRIST: I see. And then what happened?

BATTA: I came, then changed to a different place. I learned English. I learned the language as much as I could.

SIGRIST: How did you do that? Did you go to night classes or anything like that?

BATTA: No, I just, uh, people was talking so I learned it. And when I came out I spoke Bohemian good. Bohemian and German (she clears her throat) and Hungarian. So English just came to me. In six months I was speaking in English.

SIGRIST: How long did you live with your aunt?

BATTA: Oh, I don't live with her. I was working.

SIGRIST: I see. So you had your own place?

BATTA: No, I was working and then I got married. When I got married I don't live with aunt.

SIGRIST: I see. What year did you get married?

BATTA: 1928, I guess.

SIGRIST: And to whom were you married?

BATTA: Hungarian guy. I don't have it here. I just had it this morning. I took it out. I got a picture here but I put it back. Hungarian guy.

SIGRIST: So after you married, you...

BATTA: I went to job for a shop, working for a shop. I learned what I'll do, uh, furrier, I'll be a furrier. I was a furrier, (she clears her throat), and I was a twenty-nine, thirty-nine years a union lady, a union lady, the furriers union, thirty-nine years.

SIGRIST: You're saying "furrier," yes? Right. Furrier union.

BATTA: Making fur coats, mink coats, best, the very best coats are sables. Best all around, everything.

SIGRIST: Did you hook up with your father again?

BATTA: He died in 1930. I lost him in 1930. (she coughs)

SIGRIST: Did you see him before he died or you never did, he never?

BATTA: No, not after that. I was there before, about a week before.

SIGRIST: Oh, before he died.

BATTA: Before, yeah. He was in the hospital when I, he let me know if he wanted, if I want to see my husband, my father I should go see him. So I went to see him. So a week later he died and I couldn't go back again. I was married at that time and I just wasn't so close with my father, either.

SIGRIST: Right, right. So you worked in the fur business...

BATTA: I work in the fur business for thirty-nine years.

SIGRIST: Thirty-nine years. And your husband was in the fur business also?

BATTA: My husband, he was the same thing.

SIGRIST: And you were living in New York City at that time? You were in New York all that time?

BATTA: Yes, in the Bronx, the Bronx.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you have any children?

BATTA: I lost two.

SIGRIST: I see.

BATTA: Lost two.

SIGRIST: And after you retired from the business, did your husband retire first or did you sell the business?

BATTA: I don't know. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Okay, no problem.

BATTA: All I know, my husband lay down and then forget to get up.

SIGRIST: I see. What year was that?

BATTA: He died.

SIGRIST: What year?

BATTA: I think '47. I think it was '47 or '57.

SIGRIST: So when did you move to this area of Long Island.

BATTA: Twenty-five years ago. I live in Woodside. I live there twenty-two, twenty-five years, about twenty-five years.

SIGRIST: I see. A long time.

BATTA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, I think that probably wraps up this interview. I want to thank very much for giving us your time...

BATTA: Thank you. Thank you for coming here.

SIGRIST: And for telling us about your experiences.

BATTA: I hope, I hope they use it.

SIGRIST: Oh, it's great. We really appreciate you letting us do this interview. So, anyway, this is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service.

END OF INTERVIEW