

EI-205

GIOVANNINA VERTONE BARBELLA

BIRTH DATE: JUNE 3, 1896

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 3/1994

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 5/1994

**ITALY, 1913
AGE 16**

**RESIDENCE: PIETROGALA, POTENZA
US RESIDENCE: BROOKLYN, NY**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today with Giovanna [sic] Vertone Barbella. And I'm here in the home of Mrs. Barbella and her daughter in Kenilworth, New Jersey. It's August 26, 1992, and Mrs. Barbella came from Italy in 1913 when she was sixteen years old. Well, I'm very happy to be here, and I hope you feel well enough to be able to tell me about your girlhood in Italy and coming here.

BARBELLA: I came with a boat. The boat, all broken up, that boat. I don't remember the boat.

LEVINE: The Columbus. The Columbus.

BARBELLA: It was all broke down.

LEVINE: What was broken?

BARBELLA: Everything. Water was coming in. We didn't, we

didn't have no seat. We were eating lunch on the floor. There was nothing there. So (Italian) and order macaroni, because they gave me the dish.

LEVINE: They gave you macaroni.

BARBELLA: "You got to eat, you got to eat." I sit on the floor, I eat. There was no seat. There was nothing at all.

LEVINE: Who gave you the macaroni?

BARBELLA: My father. The kitchen, my father used to go in the kitchen and get the macaroni.

LEVINE: Now, tell me who was with you on the boat?

BARBELLA: My sister Carmella. And one of my girlfriends, I don't remember. One other girlfriend and Papa mia.

LEVINE: And your father and you.

BARBELLA: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And was the girlfriend from your town?

BARBELLA: Yes.

LEVINE: And what town was that that you were from?

BARBELLA: The same, Pietragala, the same. Pietragala.

LEVINE: And where is that?

BARBELLA: (?) Potenza, near Potenza.

LEVINE: Okay. And when were you born? What was your birth date?

BARBELLA: August, August the . . .

LEVINE: June 3rd? June 3rd.

BARBELLA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. 1896? (voices off mike) Okay. And did you live in the same town all the time you were growing up until you left for America?

BARBELLA: In New York most of the time.

LEVINE: Before, when you were in Italy, you lived in the same place?

BARBELLA: Yes, same place all the time.

LEVINE: Could you tell me about the village? What was it like there?

BARBELLA: There was nothing there. It was 1948 when I went to

Italy.

LEVINE: Let's see, 1913? 1913 was when you left. But before that, like, what was going on in the town? What was the town like, the village?

BARBELLA: It's a small town.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BARBELLA: It was pretty small. There was nothing in there.

LEVINE: What do people do?

BARBELLA: They work on the farm.

LEVINE: It was a farming town.

BARBELLA: Because there was nothing there, no work. People, they were born, they go in the other town to work.

LEVINE: Oh, people left that town.

BARBELLA: Yes. Once they grow up they left that town.

LEVINE: And what did they grow? What did they farm?

BARBELLA: They farmed everything, vegetables, the oil, olive, all those things. And fruit, vegetables.

LEVINE: Did they grow things to sell, or just grow things for their own use?

BARBELLA: No, to the family.

LEVINE: For the family.

BARBELLA: Sometimes the other town used to come, vegetables, and sell. The other town, and they used to sell to us. We had a little store, people bringing vegetables, because it wasn't enough. And we were (she sighs), as I said, (?) we had a little store, and I worked for my mama in the store.

LEVINE: Did you have, your family had the little store?

BARBELLA: Well, my mama, my mama mia.

LEVINE: Your Mom and you had it.

BARBELLA: Italian, all my sisters. Because we didn't have enough to eat.

LEVINE: I see. Now, what did your father do for work?

BARBELLA: Barber.

LEVINE: A barber. Uh-huh. And did your mother, did your mother come to America?

BARBELLA: No.

LEVINE: Why not?

BARBELLA: My father didn't want her to come here to scrub floors. At that time lady scrub floors. He says, "Your mother not coming here to scrub floors."

LEVINE: So your mother stayed in Italy and you came and your sister and your father?

BARBELLA: Well, Papa mia stayed here for a while, then he went back.

LEVINE: Oh, he went back, uh-huh.

BARBELLA: Yes. When it was three years, three years old, Papa mia, she saw her, she saw her. But the others, they were in Italy. See, nobody was here. One of my sisters, I think, came with me, Carmella, but the other, they're all staying in Italy.

LEVINE: Did you think that you were going to come, you were going to go back to Italy? When you came here, was it your idea that you'd go back?

BARBELLA: Well, I wanted to, I wanted to see my mommy, and, in

1948, 1948 I went in Italy.

LEVINE: Well, tell me more. (silent exchange between
Dr. Levine and Mrs. Barbella's daughter) Why did
you come to America?

BARBELLA: Because we wanted to make enough work. What I make
here. (voices are heard off mike) Because she
used to say America is rich, America is rich.
(voices are heard off mike) And we came here.

LEVINE: You, were you going to marry someone?

BARBELLA: Yes.

LEVINE: In Italy?

BARBELLA: Yes. And I didn't want him, but my mother tell me,
"Either you marry this guy or you go to America."

LEVINE: You either had to marry the man in Italy or go to
America.

BARBELLA: No, I was going to marry in Italy, sixteen years old.
But I told her, "I don't like him." And my mother
say, "You marry this guy, or you go to America."
That's why I came in America.

LEVINE: Wow. How come you didn't like him?

BARBELLA: In the Italy? There was nothing to do there. Just church, there was church.

LEVINE: Was everybody religious in your family? You had a religious family?

BARBELLA: Oh, yes. I was singing in the church. I was living in the church, I was singing. And my mommy said, "(?), I can hear your voice." (Italian) But we go to the church all the time, really religion, it was religion. Because there is nothing to do, that's all, only in church. And we were really poor, really, really. Not much people. By that time eight, ten thousand. You know, because people, they were growing up. They wouldn't stay there.

LEVINE: Who was in your family? Your mother? And what was your mother's name?

BARBELLA: Angela, Angela Maria.

LEVINE: And do you remember her maiden name, her name before she was married?

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: Yes, you know.

BARBELLA: Barbella.

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: No. What was your mother's name.

BARBELLA: Vertone.

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: No.

BARBELLA: Oh, my Mama mia, my Mama mia, Gilotta.

LEVINE: Gilotta?

BARBELLA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. And how about, now, what were your sisters and brothers names?

BARBELLA: Well, the first sister was Carmella, and the second sister I think it was me. Then another sister was Marietta. Then another sister name Donata, and I think Lucia, named Lucia. I think that was the, when I came here my sister Rosina, I left six, six months old, Rosina. It was six months old when I left. When she came here, I don't know her. She came here because her whole family had two daughters and a husband, and they didn't have no, two brothers, two brothers.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

BARBELLA: My father Giuseppe.

LEVINE: Giuseppae. And now . . .

BARBELLA: My grandfather's name is Luigi.

LEVINE: Now, is that your mother's father or your father's father?

BARBELLA: My father, Luigi.

LEVINE: And what was his wife's name, your grandmother?

BARBELLA: My mother?

LEVINE: Your grandmother.

BARBELLA: Her mother?

LEVINE: Your father's mother.

BARBELLA: My father's mother? Angela, named too, Vertone.

LEVINE: And did they live in the village where you lived?

BARBELLA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did your mother's mother and father live in the same village, too?

BARBELLA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what were their names?

BARBELLA: Carmella. The mama of my mama mia named Carmella Gilotta.

LEVINE: And your grandfather, your mother's father?

BARBELLA: My mother's, uh, my mother's father. Because . . .

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: Was his name Louis, Louie? Wasn't your brother named after him?

BARBELLA: Luigi. And my mama mia, Angela, that's Vertone.

LEVINE: Well, now, did you spend much time with your grandparents? Did you spend much time with your grandmother and your grandfather?

BARBELLA: In Italy? Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Tell me what they were like. What do you remember about them?

BARBELLA: Well, my mama don't bother me. (Italian), because I was only young. She die early. My mama of Papa mia die early. I don't know much. I remember my

mama was a fat woman, a nice red woman with red hair.

And I don't remember the other.

LEVINE: What did you do with your grandmother, when you would be with your grandmother? What would you do together?

BARBELLA: That's right. We sell fruit. We stayed there. (a voice is heard off mike) Because I was the first one, and I used to do everything. I used to go to the brook and wash clothes.

LEVINE: How did you wash them in the brook?

BARBELLA: Beating a stone, and the water was around them.

LEVINE: Did everybody go to the brook in your town to wash?

BARBELLA: Yeah. There was no one, only one water, only one . . .

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: Fountain.

BARBELLA: What is it, only one water. Water, with the fall, with the water.

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: Faucet.

BARBELLA: You know, the water was coming down. That's all we,

at that time, had. There was no water at all that people had it on their head to get a little water.

LEVINE: Did you carry the water on your head?

BARBELLA: Yes. Once I came right back, the big bottle like this. See, when I went 1948, there was a lot of water.

LEVINE: When you went back.

BARBELLA: There was a lot of.

LEVINE: So what did you do, how did you, what did you play? When you were little did you play?

BARBELLA: Played with the kids in the streets.

LEVINE: What would you do?

BARBELLA: I played rope, and played things, that's all we do.

LEVINE: And when your friends came with you on the same boat?

BARBELLA: Yeah, one of the friends. I was a (?). I don't know what it was. But I seen, I didn't see her long, then she move here. She had a sister here, because her sister send them for this money. And then she was in a different town, you know. I seen a couple of

times, then I don't see no more that woman. I didn't see no more of that woman.

LEVINE: Did you go to school?

BARBELLA: Yes.

LEVINE: What was school, tell me about school.

BARBELLA: Oh, what a school. I'm in the fourth grade, the fourth grade. And then I don't want to go no more school. And . . .

LEVINE: What did you . . .

BARBELLA: We had a different, we had a different school for the boy, and different for the girl. We didn't go together like here now. Different schools, different schools.

LEVINE: And what did you learn? What did you learn? Did you remember school, what you did there?

BARBELLA: I don't remember what's her name in school.

LEVINE: Was it a Catholic school? Were there nuns teaching?

BARBELLA: No. No, teach, teach.

LEVINE: Did you like school?

BARBELLA: I didn't like school. I didn't like school. I didn't like school. I left in the fourth grade.

LEVINE: And when you stopped school, what did you do then?

BARBELLA: Nothing. Played. That's all. Played. I used to walk around at night and day, I walked around. That's all.

LEVINE: So why did your father decide to come to America?

BARBELLA: Oh, he came before me. He came way before. He brought my brother here.

LEVINE: Oh. And then he came back?

BARBELLA: He came back in Italy to get us.

LEVINE: Then did he go back again after.

BARBELLA: Yeah.

LEVINE: So he kept, he went back and forth.

BARBELLA: Back and forth. No, no. He came in two times.

LEVINE: Two times.

BARBELLA: Because he went. When she was born, he was three years old, and he went back again. Then he was the, what do you call it? Over here, the law, you've got to be a citizen. And you got to be not . . .

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: Communist.

BARBELLA: Not, if you was a religion, you not to be religion. Because it was . . .

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: Socialist.

BARBELLA: Huh?

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: Socialist.

BARBELLA: Socialist, Socialist. It was all Socialists there. And, uh . . .

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: He couldn't come back.

LEVINE: Oh, he couldn't come back because he was a Socialist.
(voices are heard off mike) He voted Socialist, so he couldn't come in.

BARBELLA: He wanted to come back, but he couldn't come back no more because he was a vote. That time it was a vote at that time. You got to be not Socialist, a

Democrat. And she wanted to come again, and she couldn't come no more.

LEVINE: I see. So do you remember what you took with you when you came? Do you remember what you packed up in your suitcase when you came here?

BARBELLA: Oh, not much, because American don't use, an old dress, and this and that. As soon as I came here, I change dress, I don't wear no more.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you wore when you came?

BARBELLA: A long dress. With puffed sleeves, white.

LEVINE: Now . . .

BARBELLA: With a kerchief I had.

LEVINE: A kerchief, uh-huh.

BARBELLA: I remember it's cold, I want to, it was rain.

LEVINE: And then you got rid of your clothes that you wore over?

BARBELLA: Yeah. We send them to Italy.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

BARBELLA: Yeah. We send them to Italy. All my sisters. Then I had one of my sister at that time.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember coming into the New York Harbor?

BARBELLA: Yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember when the boat came? What was that like? Tell me what that was.

BARBELLA: There was nothing there. Only when you got a whole (?) all the time. So one of my uncles, he was a lawyer, and he was up in the balcony, the balcony.

LEVINE: At Ellis Island? Uh-huh.

BARBELLA: In New York, in New York. And he came down. He saw Italian.

LEVINE: He saw?

BARBELLA: When he passed that everything was all right. So he came down, and he got a little boat and boated to New York.

LEVINE: He got a little boat, and he took you and your father?

BARBELLA: No. No, no.

LEVINE: It was a ferry boat.

BARBELLA: Oh yeah. When I came here?

LEVINE: No, when you came from Ellis Island to New York.

BARBELLA: It was a little boat. My uncle, I don't know. I don't know why. She (?) in the boat, and (?) Brooklyn. I had my aunt, one of my mother's sisters, in Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you thought when you first came and you went to Brooklyn?

BARBELLA: Oh, I was "God bless," I say, "God bless." And after a while I went to work.

LEVINE: What did you do?

BARBELLA: There was a coat, you know the coat and the sleeves?

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: A factory.

LEVINE: You went to a factory to work?

BARBELLA: Yes.

LEVINE: And what was that like? What was working there?

BARBELLA: Oh, we worked in a factory. (Italian) One of my uncle brought me there, brought my sister and me there. And maybe my legs cold.

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: Take the other blanket.

BARBELLA: (she sighs) I don't know what they were doing in this factory. Bread, bread, bread. They were making the bread in a big factory.

LEVINE: Bread?

BARBELLA: In Brooklyn. When I came, I stayed with my aunt. We had two rooms after that, and we were staying, me and my mom and my aunt and my father, two rooms. One my brother and my father, and one for me and my sister.

LEVINE: Now, what did your father do when he came?

BARBELLA: Barber.

LEVINE: He was a barber here, too. Uh-huh. And did your brother go to work too?

BARBELLA: He was a barber, too.

LEVINE: Oh. He was with your father, or a different place.

BARBELLA: No, not with my father. We call different workmen,

different . . .

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: Barber shop.

LEVINE: And did you like being here? Did you like being in Brooklyn, in America?

BARBELLA: I didn't stay long there, and then I went up in the Bronx with my father and my brother.

LEVINE: And did you write to your mother?

BARBELLA: Yes. All the time.

LEVINE: And what did you tell her? What did you tell her about America?

BARBELLA: America (?). You got to work, you go to work to earn the money. You got to work and make good money. A little money better than Italy. There was nothing in Italy, nothing in Italy. That's why we came. That's why we came here, says we'll find the work, because Italy didn't have no work.

LEVINE: So then how did you meet your husband?

BARBELLA: Oh, she came to see me. One of the sisters in New York, she came to see me. It was my paisano, same

(?), and she brought me there. And after that I had another boyfriend. I didn't like him.

LEVINE: (she laughs) You were very choosy about your boyfriends.

BARBELLA: And she brought me, my sister-in-law. And, you know, in Italy at night, during the day sometimes you rest. She saw me in the garden and I don't know what I was doing, laying down, I don't know. And she saw me since that time she came all the time, and came to see me.

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: He lived in Newark. She lived in New York.

BARBELLA: We lived in New York. And he used to live in Newark with his sister.

LEVINE: In Newark, New Jersey.

BARBELLA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So he came and he saw you. And then . . .

BARBELLA: Oh, yeah. She came over to my father before me here. My father went all around, to South America he went.

LEVINE: Oh, your father. Did he work on a ship?

BARBELLA: No, no. Barber, all barber. My grandfather was a barber, my father was a barber, my brother-in-law was a barber, my brother was a barber. That all went in the family. And my father-in-law and everybody. All, you got to learn how to barber, always teaching that.

LEVINE: But then he traveled around?

BARBELLA: Nah, no. I traveled around when my husband died. Then I started, who working then, who were working in the shop all the time.

LEVINE: Your husband, did he work in the shop too? No.

BARBELLA: One of my sisters with me, used to work with me.

LEVINE: You worked in the shop with your sisters.

BARBELLA: Yeah.

LEVINE: What kind of a shop?

BARBELLA: It was near a river, a north river. I don't know where. It was cuffs. We used to make cuffs on the machine. I always make a cuff. My sister used to

make a neckband. At that time, oh, cuffs, a big cuff. And it's work there. We used to take a trolley car to go there to work.

LEVINE: Now, did your husband come from Italy too? Your husband, did he come from Italy? He came to America from Italy, too?

BARBELLA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah?

BARBELLA: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. All from Italy.

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: Same place.

BARBELLA: Everybody make, everybody in America marry all paisano, all, all. All paisanos in there.

LEVINE: I see. So then you were living in the Bronx then?

BARBELLA: Yeah.

LEVINE: And when you got married, where did you live then?

BARBELLA: When I got married, I lived in Newark.

LEVINE: Newark, uh-huh. And what was your husband's name?

BARBELLA: Rocco.

LEVINE: Say it again.

BARBELLA: Rocco.

LEVINE: Rocco, Rocco. Uh-huh.

BARBELLA: That's my brother's name, his name is Rocco. Because he's in old families, and old the family name, old the family name.

LEVINE: Now, so did you see Rocco for a long time before you got married?

BARBELLA: No. He used to come over, because my father was at work. And my father told him, "You've got to come here when I'm here." So he got so mad. After three months I got married. After three months. He got so mad. "Why you have to tell me that?" I says, "Better meet him now, I come here." So he got so mad, after three months we got married. Show them the picture. Did you show them the picture?

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: Oh, yeah.

BARBELLA: Show them the picture when I got married.

LEVINE: So then what did your husband do after you got

married?

BARBELLA: Barber.

LEVINE: Oh, he was a barber, too.

BARBELLA: Sometimes he used to go in the town, he used to
barber. He used to sell jewelry, sell jewelry.

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: That was my grandfather.

BARBELLA: Then my aunt, and my aunt and her husband, one of the
cousins . . .

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: My daughter had this made from a
little photograph.

LEVINE: Wonderful. So let's see. Then how many children did
you have?

BARBELLA: Three.

LEVINE: And what are their names?

BARBELLA: Uh, the first one, and the second one . . .

LEVINE: What was the first one's name, your daughter?

BARBELLA: Mary. My cousin, my mama mia name's Maria, Maria is
Mary.

LEVINE: And then the second one, the second child you had?

BARBELLA: Yeah.

LEVINE: What . . .

BARBELLA: Joseph.

LEVINE: Joseph?

BARBELLA: Joseph. And then the last, after eight years I got him.

MRS. BARBELLA'S DAUGHTER: Ten years.

BARBELLA: Because I was sick, and the doctor said to me, "Make another kid." To cure myself. I was sick all the time, very, very. So the doctor take care of me, he said I can't do anything." Maybe you have another baby, maybe you change your life." That's why I got Rocky.

LEVINE: Rocky, uh-huh. And did you feel better after that?
(tape ends)