

EI-313/DE NIGRIS

EI-313

MILLY KATE OLTHOFF DE NIGRIS

BIRTH DATE: JULY 5, 1911

INTERVIEW DATE: 5/15/1993

RUNNING TIME: 55:10

INTERVIEWER: DEBRA HEID

RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 6/1994

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 10/1994

GERMANY, 1924

BORN: HAMBURG, GERMANY

AGE AT IMMIGRATION: 13

PASSAGE ON: MINNEKAHDA

U.S. RESIDENCE: NORTH BERGEN, NJ

HEID: This is Debra Heid on behalf of the National Park Service. Today is Saturday, May 15, 1993, and I'm here in the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Mrs. Milly De Nigris, who came from Hamburg, Germany in November of 1924 when she was only thirteen years old. Good morning, Mrs. De Nigris.

DE NIGRIS: Good morning. ( she laughs )

HEID: Why don't we start, if you would state your full name for me.

DE NIGRIS: My full name?

HEID: Your full name.

DE NIGRIS: Milly Kate Olthoff De Nigris. Olthoff is my maiden name.

HEID: And how do you spell that?

DE NIGRIS: O-L-T-H-O-F-F.

HEID: And what is your date of birth?

DE NIGRIS: July 5, 1911.

HEID: And where were you born?

DE NIGRIS: Hamburg, Germany.

HEID: Okay. Why don't we start, if you would think back to Hamburg, Germany, back when you were born, what type of town was that?

DE NIGRIS: Well, Hamburg is a seaport. It's a beautiful city. And I can remember the First World War. My father was drafted in the navy because he was a sailor on sailing ships, and of course when the First World War broke out I was very little, and my mother was left to raise six children by herself.

HEID: My goodness.

DE NIGRIS: And many times we had nothing to eat, that I lost all my hair due to malnutrition.

HEID: What was your father's name?

DE NIGRIS: Wilhelm.

HEID: And your mother's?

DE NIGRIS: Scharnberg.

HEID: That was her . . .

DE NIGRIS: Emily Scharnberg, yeah.

HEID: And how do you spell that?

DE NIGRIS: S-C-H-A-R-N-B-E-R-G.

HEID: And you said you had a total of six children?

DE NIGRIS: Yeah.

HEID: What was your brothers' and sisters' names?

DE NIGRIS: Only one brother and five sisters. Four sisters, I was the fifth one. ( they laugh )

HEID: I bet that brother was spoiled.

DE NIGRIS: No, he wasn't. No, no, no. Not at all.

HEID: And what were their names, and how old were they?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, my goodness, how old. I'm the baby of the family, and the one above me, twins, were seven, eight, nine and ten.

HEID: And what were their names?

DE NIGRIS: William, Martha, Elsie, Mimi and Erna.  
( she laughs ) I had to think. Nobody's left any more. I'm the only one. I'm the baby.

HEID: You're the baby. Now, in Hamburg, where did you live? Did you have an apartment?

DE NIGRIS: Yes. We had an apartment, and I must say a very modern apartment. We had beautiful rooms.

HEID: Tell me about it. Think back and, you know, walk me through the apartment.

DE NIGRIS: Yes. Well, we had a big foyer. I can always remember, because my mother kept the floors very shiny all the time, even with the six children. And I can remember we used to play in the hallway, and rooms were off the hallway. And towards the end of

the hallway we had our kitchen, and it was a big, square kitchen, all tiles on the wall, tiles on the floor, very easy to keep clean. A big coal stove with a brass bar around it and that had to be shined every day or else. ( she laughs )

HEID: And who had to do the shining? You had to do the shining?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, no. I was too little. I was too little, yeah. And my mother worked in the shipyard. And I believe they're still operating in German, it's "Blohm and Voss". It's a familiar name. As a matter of fact, I only heard it on TV. I heard it mentioned on TV, and it kind of perked up my ears.

HEID: What did she do in the shipyard?

DE NIGRIS: They had prisoners of war there. They had Russian prisoners, and I can remember my mother telling us how horrible they were being treated by the Germans. What they gave them to eat was just horrible. They used to clean fish, and all the . . .

HEID: So they got all the leftovers.

DE NIGRIS: I don't even know if I should say this, but all the

scraps and that, they would just boil together and feed it to the prisoners. Horrible.

HEID: And this was during the war?

DE NIGRIS: The First World War.

HEID: Well, before we get to the First World War, though, think back to your apartment again, that you told me about the kitchen. Now, many other rooms did you have there?

DE NIGRIS: Uh, we had three others rooms. We had a living room and two bedrooms.

HEID: So your parents had one bedroom, and . . .

DE NIGRIS: Yes, uh-huh.

HEID: All six children . . .

DE NIGRIS: Right.

HEID: Squeezed into the other room.

DE NIGRIS: And with my mother and father. Uh-huh, yes. And we had two balconies. One off the living room, and one off the kitchen.

HEID: That must have been nice.

DE NIGRIS: Beautiful balconies. Yes.

HEID: What floor was it on?

DE NIGRIS: On the fifth floor. My father would never sleep lower than the top floor, I mean, go lower than the top floor. He never wanted anyone above him, the noise, you know. So . . .

HEID: So was it a walkup, or was it an elevator?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, no, no. No elevators, no. We walked it, oh, yeah. We used to slide down the banister. Well, my sisters and my brother did, I was too little, I couldn't. ( they laugh ) And that's about it.

HEID: Now, what was life like before the war started, though? Do you remember that? Do you remember going to school?

DE NIGRIS: Well, I tell you, we were always poor. That's the whole thing, we were always poor. And my father, being a seaman, couldn't stand Germany. He wanted to get out. And after the war when he came home, finally my mother said, "Look, you're so unhappy,

why don't you try and get a ship again?" He even drove a taxicab in the city.

HEID: What made him unhappy? Even before the war, what made him unhappy?

DE NIGRIS: Uh, the country itself. He just, he was never happy in Germany.

HEID: Why? Do you know why?

DE NIGRIS: I think it was conditions, you know, and living, hard to make a, very hard to make a living, even in those days, over there, it was hard.

HEID: Now, being a seaman, does this mean he was away for weeks at a time?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes, yes. Yeah. Uh-huh.

HEID: How was life . . .

DE NIGRIS: But not when, after I was born, then he was home. He worked as a longshoreman then, on ships that came in.

HEID: So that was a long day and hard work?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes, very hard work, and mostly he worked

nights, and he had to sleep during the day, and that is the reason he never wanted to live on a lower floor. It had to be a top floor or nothing.

( she laughs ) And it got so bad that my mother said, "Look." This is when the war is over. I don't know if you want me to go on like that, but . . .

HEID: Well, before we do that, just tell me about, you know, before we go, let's just talk about before the war. Now, you live in this big apartment.

DE NIGRIS: Yes.

HEID: And even though you were poor, this means you were able to make ends meet.

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes, yes. Uh-huh. Yeah. My father, he would take any kind of work, just to make sure we had food on the table.

HEID: Now, during this period of time, though, this is before the war, did your mother go out to work also?

DE NIGRIS: No, no. Only when the war started.

HEID: She was home with the children during the day.

DE NIGRIS: Yes. Uh-huh, right, right. Yeah.

HEID: What about school? Did you go to school?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes. I went to school for eight years in Germany.

HEID: So what type of things did you study?

DE NIGRIS: I, well, everything. Arithmetic, geography, history. Everything that we're taught here in the U.S. And I always had good marks, which made my father proud, because I was his baby. But when I started my first school, I should have brought my picture with me to show you. My first school day, I had to wear a hat, because I had no hair on my head.  
( she laughs )

HEID: Now, why?

DE NIGRIS: Due to malnutrition, because I had lost all my hair.

HEID: But this was before the war, though, right?

DE NIGRIS: During the war.

HEID: Oh, during the war.

DE NIGRIS: Yes, during the war. Uh-huh. We used to have what

they call a war kitchen, like opposite our house, a big hall. And my mother used to have to go over there and get food for us. She'd have to bring a pail, and we used to get, one day it was tapioca, and the next day it was oatmeal, and another day it was, but cooked already, buckwheat, you know. All that type of stuff.

HEID: So you had no idea what she would get each day.

DE NIGRIS: No. But my sisters wouldn't eat it, and I was the baby of the family, and my mother was worried about me, because it had worms in it, in the cereal. And I didn't know any better, so I can still remember at the edge of the table, standing on a chair, with a spoon in my hand. I couldn't wait to eat. And my older sister said, "Don't let her eat it!" And my mother said, "Keep quiet. She doesn't know any better. Let her eat." It didn't kill me. I'm still alive. I'm almost eighty-two. ( she laughs )  
But that's how it was during the First World War.

HEID: So that's the only thing you were able to eat, and that's why you lost your hair.

DE NIGRIS: That's it. And then when my mother worked in the

shipyards she used to put like an apron under her skirt, and if she could take a potato or whatever possible, she would put in this here pocket, and she would bring it home. And she used to take the potato and slice it so thin, thin, and fry it in water. It tasted good. ( she laughs ) You know, when you're hungry, people don't realize when you're hungry how you can survive on, you know, little things. Rough. That's why I appreciate, to this day, everything I have. Yes.

HEID: So during this time now, did you have grandparents?  
Were your grandparents alive?

DE NIGRIS: No.

HEID: So it was just your mother and your father. There was no other extended family?

DE NIGRIS: No. My father had two sisters, but that's all. So.

HEID: Tell me about your father. What type of person was he?

DE NIGRIS: My father was six foot two. He was a brilliant man. And we are always saying, if my father could have been born in the U.S. and gone to college I think he

would have had a big position or something. He learned to speak English and write English on the sailing ships, because he had sailed on many English ships. And he even wrote a story ( she laughs ) to a magazine about a ship that he worked on and this tough captain. They were tough in those days, you know. He was fourteen years old when he ran away from home to go on a sailing ship, my father. And, of course, he was very bitter when they drafted him into the navy with six children at home, you know. He realized hardship that it would be for my mother.

And he was stationed on a little island in the North Sea, Helgoland. So many people don't know what you're talking about when you mention that. And it's a very tiny island. It was like a fortress, you know, before you hit Germany. It goes into the Elbe River, the North Sea, you know.

HEID: Now, during this time did your mother hear from him at all?

DE NIGRIS: Did she what?

HEID: Did she hear from him? Was he able to write to her?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes. He was able to write to us, yes. And they

used to make my father shine the boots of some of these officers. I don't know if I should even tell you this, but my father said to this here young, very young officer, he couldn't have been more than twenty-five years old, and he said to my father to shine his boots, and my father said, "Me?" He said, "I'm not shining your boots." He said, "I have six children at home, and every night they fight to see who's going to shine my shoes. Everybody wants to shine my shoes, and they fight over who's going to have the privilege. I'm not shining your boots," my father said. And for punishment they sent him to some big, I guess close to Russia, in a weather station, with two German shepherds. For months he was out there all by himself in a little hut. You had to put the kites up in the air for weather reports.

HEID: That must have been very lonely.

DE NIGRIS: Yeah. So now you know why my father was so bitter.

HEID: That's understandable. But how was he with the children? Was he a loving person?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And he taught us. And, of

course, he was very strict. We had to have good manners. We had to learn to eat proper, never put an elbow on the table, never. If you did, my father would get up and all of a sudden your arm would go flying and you'd hit your chin on the table.

( she laughs ) Yeah.

HEID: Tell me about your mother.

DE NIGRIS: My mother was an orphan. She lost her mother when she was very young, and she was sent to farms to work. And she was a foster child. She ended up . . .

HEID: She had nobody else?

DE NIGRIS: No. My mother had no-one. They were two lonely people, my mother and father. I mean, when they met, you know.

HEID: How did they meet?

DE NIGRIS: My mother, after she was released from the orphanage, when she was old enough to be on her own, she worked in a factory. And my father was a sailor and, with a couple of other men, they would go by the same time, and he took a shine to my mother, I

guess, and that's it. My mother was very tiny. She was four-eleven. My father was six-two. ( they laugh )

HEID: That's a big difference.

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Uh-huh.

HEID: And what type of person was she?

DE NIGRIS: Uh, she was very loving, very hard-working person. She worked hard all her life.

HEID: I guess she had to.

DE NIGRIS: Oh, sure, oh, sure. And then to make sure that we're always clean, you know. And to go to school.

HEID: You think she wanted a big family because she was an orphan?

DE NIGRIS: I don't think so. I really don't.

HEID: It just happened?

DE NIGRIS: I suppose so. Because, the reason I say that, because when I had my first daughter, the first thing my mother said to me, "That's enough. Don't have any more children." ( she laughs ) So none of

us have, we don't have big families.

HEID: What type of food did she cook? I mean, when you had food, what type of food did she cook?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes. We had, she used to do a lot of baking. My mother could bake wonderful breads. She learned that on the farm where she was, where she worked, you know. And we used to have what they call ersatz, you know, it's imitation stuff. She used to buy honey. It came in a square, in a square box, and you could almost slice it, you know. And that was honey, and it was sweet. So it was filling, you know. And she used to put that on our bread, and sometimes that's all we ate. A couple of slices of bread and a slice of this honey imitation.

HEID: It's economical.

DE NIGRIS: Very economical, yeah. I can remember when my father worked as a longshoreman very hard. My mother would buy a quarter of chop meat, and she would make a hamburger for my father, and my father would not touch that hamburger unless every one of us got a bite out of it, yes. What I failed to mention during the war, we used to eat horsemeat.

We used to have a butcher where they would say the next day they would have meat. From six o'clock in the evening until eight o'clock the next morning people stood in line to get a piece or a bone, or even just a bone, just to cook soup on it, you know.

And my sisters used to take turns, like first my older sister and then the other sister for a couple of hours until the store opened, yes. And then my mother would take my brother's place, you know.

That's how we ate, yeah. It was hard, very hard.

( she sighs ) And then . . .

HEID: What about, now, we talked about school. What about religion? Did you go to church at all?

DE NIGRIS: Yes. We went to church, Lutheran church. And then my father got into the labor movement, was it, or the union, or whatever it was, and we went to church, but we didn't leave the church like a very, like a really religious, how shall I say, you know, when you go to church now you receive Communion or Confirmation, like that. We receive Confirmation through the union, sort of. I can't really describe it, how it was at that time, because I can remember my aunt, and my father's sister being very, very mad

at my father and mother, because we didn't go direct to the church. But we had our religious ceremony, you know, when we received Confirmation.

HEID: Well, did the reverend, you know, visit the . . .

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes, they had, uh-huh. But it was, I don't know whether it was a changing of the parties, the Democratic party to something else, to the Labor party. I think that's about the way it was, you know, at that time. I can remember myself, I had a little Bible in my hand with a beautiful handkerchief and a sprig of Lily of the Valley on top of it. It was very religious and very nice. Yeah.

HEID: So now during the war you said your mother had to work. She had no choice or . . .

DE NIGRIS: Well, no. She had no choice. She had to.

HEID: In order to support the family?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, sure, yeah.

HEID: So then after the war your father came back.

DE NIGRIS: Uh-huh. He came back. And every time my father hit

Hamburg, he would get an asthma attack. They would have to send him to the hospital.

HEID: He had that continually?

DE NIGRIS: It happened continually, yes. And . . .

HEID: And what did he do for a living when he came back from, you know, from the service?

DE NIGRIS: From the service, he was a longshoreman, yeah. And then he went and took driving lessons. This is when cars first came out, you know. And in order for my father to get a driver's license, he had to practically take a motor apart in order to get a driver's license. And then some time later he got to be a taxicab driver. And he made a little more money on that. But he kept telling my mother, "I want to get out of Germany." And, you know, my father was in Australia, and he was all over the world. And he said to my mother, "How would you like to move to Australia?" And my mother got panicky. She was afraid. To go all the way out to Australia? That didn't, no, she didn't want that. He said, "The only place left is the United States." So, I don't know if I'm, if I should go ahead how

my father . . .

HEID: Well, tell me, now. He's been all over the world. Did your mother know anything about the United States before this?

DE NIGRIS: Well, we all knew about the United States. My father, that's all my father talked about.

HEID: Well, what did he tell you?

DE NIGRIS: How wonderful the country is, and how we can all get an education here, and when we're grown up we can work for a living and not to be regimented the way we were in Germany. And that's it. One day he stopped, he was at a corner with his cab, and this man got in. And as soon as my father looked at him, my father knew he was American. So my father addressed him in English, and he said to my father, "Where did you learn to speak English like that?" So my father told him about the ships that he sailed on and so. And he said to my father, "What are you doing doing a job like this?" My father said, "Well, I want to get on a ship again. But," he says, "I want an American ship." He says, "You see me tomorrow morning," he says, "and you'll be on a

ship in one week." And that was it. He came home.

He didn't even finish out his day. He came home, and he told my mother, and he jumped for joy. We didn't know what was happening. And my father was off the next morning, he was, the White Star Line, they called it at that time. And he got a job on the Minnekahda. That's the ship I came over on.

HEID: So he went ahead of you?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes, a few years ahead of us. And he got my brother on a ship, not the same ship, a different ship. And then my father met a lot of people from the U.S., and they were so interested in my father and his family that they said, "We need a girl, a domestic." And my father got my one sister over first to Van Cortlandt Park by a doctor, and my other sister went to work for a lawyer in Montclair.

HEID: How did your mother feel? She was separated from him during the war, now he left her again. How did she feel about that?

DE NIGRIS: My mother was very used to it. She was used to it. And she didn't mind it, you know, because she knew whatever he was doing he was doing it for the

family, you know.

HEID: And was he sending money back to her at this time?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, always, always. And then, of course, he established, you know, residency in Jersey for us. And that's how it was.

HEID: How many years was he over here before you came over?

DE NIGRIS: He was here four years, yeah.

HEID: Working on the boats?

DE NIGRIS: That's right.

HEID: Was he able to come back and visit during those four years?

DE NIGRIS: Well, the first two years he went back and forth from Hamburg to New York and New York to Hamburg, you know. Every four weeks we saw my father. But then he said, "This is it. Now I'm going to stay in the U.S., and the girls are working, and we're all going to pool our money." And when the money is there then my mother and I were coming over.

HEID: So you were the last two left behind?

DE NIGRIS: Yes, uh-huh.

HEID: He got everybody else over.

DE NIGRIS: Yes.

HEID: Uh-huh. So what type of work did he do to save money?

DE NIGRIS: Well, when my father came here he became a truck driver. He worked for Kern's. It's like a slaughterhouse almost. It's right on Ninth Avenue. Yeah, he drove a truck for years and years till the Second World War. And then, of course, then he got too old to drive a truck, and then he got a job in the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

HEID: Oh, that's great.

DE NIGRIS: Yes. They needed his experience, believe it or not.

HEID: I do believe it.

DE NIGRIS: Yes.

HEID: But think back. If you were only, if you were left with your mother, it must have been lonely, especially with all, your brother and your sisters

gone.

DE NIGRIS: You know, see, Germany, the schools are different. After school you go home, but then we always had to go back, like for gym classes. And that was very, very important. We had to learn physical education. So it was really never a dull moment, you know. And we had lots of activity.

HEID: So you had a lot of friends there?

DE NIGRIS: Uh-huh. Oh, yeah. Yes, I did. Even my teachers didn't want to see me go. They said, "How could you leave the fatherland?" And my mother said to me, "Never mind the fatherland." She says, "You know how your father feels about the fatherland." Sorry to say, but that's really the way it was.

HEID: But how do you, how did you feel about it? You were thirteen years old at this time.

DE NIGRIS: I was thirteen years old. I was happy.

HEID: You were happy to leave?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes.

HEID: You didn't miss your friends?

DE NIGRIS: No, no. You know, my father had made arrangements two months before we got here. He had me enrolled in school already. And had, someone was going to pick me up on a, like when I got to the house, and the next morning already someone had to pick me up and take me to school in a strange country. I didn't know nothing. The only drawback was when we came, got off the ship and came onto Ellis Island, we were held here for two weeks. They were going to send my mother and me back to Germany because someone failed to put that stamp on the immigration paper. You believe this? And this stamp only cost two dollars at the time, and for that we were detained here for two whole weeks.

HEID: Milly, we're going to pause here for one moment so Kevin can take the opportunity to turn over the tape. Okay?

DE NIGRIS: I'm talking too much.

HEID: No, you're . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

HEID: This is Debra Heid speaking to Milly De Nigris. We're going to continue now, about your trip to America. Now, your father had already gone over, and all your brothers and sisters are here already.

DE NIGRIS: Yeah.

HEID: And he sent the tickets back to your mother for you to come over.

DE NIGRIS: Yes.

HEID: Now, what did you bring with you? Did you bring anything special with you, or did you have to leave everything behind?

DE NIGRIS: No. We had to leave everything behind, and whatever we could sell my mother sold. And we had a lady, she was a nurse in the hospital, and she was looking for an apartment. And in those days it was very hard to get an apartment in Germany, my part of the city anyway. And, but my mother advertised in the paper that an apartment was going to be available, and furniture was available. And we were very fortunate when she came around, you know. And she bought almost everything. And we just brought our

belongings. What my mother did bring was her Singer sewing machine. ( she laughs ) The one that you work with the pedal. Yes. That she brought over, uh-huh. But other than that, you know, some china. The usual, you know, from the household. And, well, whatever clothing we had, you know. That's about it.

HEID: And what was the name of the boat?

DE NIGRIS: Minnekahda.

HEID: And how do you spell that?

DE NIGRIS: It's, uh, M-I-N-N-E-K-A-H-D-A. When I was here last July my son-in-law, my daughter spotted the picture of the ship. This is her. ( producing a photo of the ship ) I call her "her." All my ships are "she." That's what, my father always referred to as "she." And she was a wonderful ship, a beautiful ship. It doesn't look that way here. But she was just one class, not like most ships in those days had, like, first class, second class and tourist, you know. This was one class. Nobody was any better, you know, than you, or lesser. And my daughter spotted this, and I couldn't read that.

But she spotted this, she said, "Mom," she says, "this is your ship!" Yes.

HEID: Now, as a thirteen-year-old, what were you feeling when you boarded the ship? Were you excited?

DE NIGRIS: I was in my glory. I was the happiest person. You see what happened? The reason it was such a wonderful voyage, everyone that worked on that ship knew my father. The captain, he was a Swede, and he used to have me come to his cabin, and he showered me with chocolates and the most delicious pastries. You cannot imagine how this man treated us. And he was, he had a red beard and, a real rugged-looking captain, you know. And so all the people, you know, that my father worked with. You see, my father was what they call Master at Arms on the ship, and this is, he met all the passengers, and he would describe things to them and, you know, about the ocean and, because he knew so much, you know. He even wore a handsome uniform. I wish I had one of his pictures, but I don't.

HEID: Now, during this period, did you understand English at this time? Did you learn?

DE NIGRIS: No. I knew a couple of words. I knew, "How do you do?" and "Goodbye." That's about it.

HEID: Now, what type of rooms did you have on the boat?

DE NIGRIS: We had a very nice outside cabin, yes. Very nice.

HEID: So you had a very pleasant trip coming over.

DE NIGRIS: Oh, we had a marvelous, my mother was seasick the whole time, but not me. I never get seasick.

HEID: So do you remember what you might have done? Did you play any games?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes. We played shuffleboard. We played hide-and-seek. There were other children on the ship, you know. And we were kept busy all day. We played cards. We played board games, you know. Yeah. Very, lovely, lovely trip. And I still love ships. I still love to go on cruises. But now I can't afford to go any more. ( she laughs )

HEID: It sounds like you were a spoiled little girl with all the pastries and the candy.

DE NIGRIS: I wasn't spoiled, really.

HEID: No, I mean by being pampered.

DE NIGRIS: Oh, on the ship I was, absolutely.

HEID: Pampered, yes.

DE NIGRIS: Absolutely, yes.

HEID: Well, that's wonderful. So as you think back now, do you remember coming into the harbor?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I remember very well. Such an impression. We were in New York! But it was almost like going in Hamburg, you know, because Hamburg is the biggest, one of the biggest seaports in Germany. And it was like going into Hamburg, almost. And, of course, then we had to come to Ellis Island.

HEID: But what about, did you see the Statue of Liberty?

DE NIGRIS: Yeah. Yes.

HEID: Did that mean anything to you?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes, oh. That's all my father ever talked about, you know, to us. "When you see the lady." He and his lady. My mother used to say, even in the last few years, "Your father and his lady."

( she laughs ) He always, yeah. He, my father was, I think, the greatest American ever. I really mean it. He was a wonderful, wonderful American.

HEID: So, now, what happened with Ellis Island?

DE NIGRIS: Well, due to this stamp that they failed to put on our immigration papers . . .

HEID: For two dollars.

DE NIGRIS: For two dollars. We were detained, and of course, we couldn't believe it. We just could not believe it. My father broke down and cried. He didn't know what to do. We were just devastated.

HEID: Did he come over to pick you up? Were you able to see him?

DE NIGRIS: My father, yes, oh, yes. He was here, and my sisters were here, and my brother. And they could not understand, could not understand. They said, "Well, without that stamp we cannot enter the country." And so they said that we would be detained, and my father would hear from them, from the immigration. So, in the meantime, my father talked to his boss, and the boss got, they got their

own lawyer, and he started working for us to get us and, you know, into the country. But in the meantime we were here, my mother and I. And the food was bad. We couldn't eat. So my sister talked to someone and said, "Couldn't my mother and my sister get maybe a boiled egg for breakfast, or something?" And so he said yes, he would see to it, but it would cost my mother money. And my sister said, "That's all right. She wants, she'll pay for it." So they charged my mother two dollars for an egg. It was boiled. It must have been boiled an hour. My mother said, "Don't eat the egg. I think you're going to be sick." But I was hungry. I ate the egg. And my mother said, "You could put a hole in the wall with this egg." ( she laughs ) Now, I do not ( she coughs ), I do not blame the egg, but after we were here three days I got a very, very high fever. And the room we were in, they had like the benches this way and this way and this way, you know, all around the room. And we sat there. They were all German people in one room, Italian in another room, all different nationalities.

DE NIGRIS: So you were all separated into different rooms.

HEID: Yes, uh-huh. I know, I just went through the room again before I came in here. But I, the women, they all said, "Oh, my God. If the doctor sees her with a fever like that, you're going to be sent back for sure. You'll never be able to get into the country." So they said, "Every morning the army doctor comes into the room. He stands by the door and he looks around and he says, "Good morning. How are you?" And everybody says, "Fine, fine." And he leaves again. He says goodbye. He leaves again. So the women said, "You lay down on this bench here. We're going to sit in front of you. And we're going to put some clothing on top of you, so that when the doctor comes in hopefully he won't see you laying down." And that's what they did for three days, yes. Until finally the fever subsided. And, so I don't know whether it was the environment or the excitement or the devastation of not being able to go home with my father and my sisters.

HEID: That must have been very frightening.

DE NIGRIS: Yes, it was. It was very frightening. My mother was ready. I think, to be truthful with you, I think my mother would have committed suicide if she

would have had to go back to Germany, yes. But then finally the day came when this gentleman comes in this room and he calls our name. And he takes, I can still see him. He was a very nice-looking gentleman. He takes my hand and he says, in broken German, "You're going with your daddy to New Jersey." I can still remember that. I will never forget that moment. And that was on a Wednesday. And on Thursday morning I was in school already. ( she laughs ) That was my father's doing, absolutely. I had . . .

HEID: He placed a great deal of emphasis on learning.

DE NIGRIS: And, you know, a lot of people say, "Oh, your father was all wrong." Because, see, my father told us, "We are not going to speak German in this house. We're only going to speak English." No German newspapers. I can remember only The Daily News and The New York Journal, the Hearst paper. Those were the only two newspapers, and we had to read them. ( she laughs ) And in three months I had spoke perfect English. ( she laughs ) Yes.

HEID: Now, tell me about that first day in school. How

did you feel?

DE NIGRIS: I felt strange because they put me in the same grade that I would originally have been in at my age. And, of course, I didn't know what they were saying. But I could read, you know. I could read all the words, and so then they told my father, they asked my father to come to school, and they explained to him that what they're going to do is put me into the first grade and I will sit with the teacher. And as soon as I can pick up some of the words, then I would go into the third grade, and so on. And like I say in three months I spoke perfect English and they put me right into the seventh grade. And the wonderful thing was all the children in that grade and in my graduating class, they were all my age, because by then, I was getting close to sixteen, you know. So in two-and-a-half years I had to make all my eight grades, so to speak. And they were all my own age, which was wonderful. They were all as big as I was, you know. So I didn't feel strange at all.

HEID: Did you experience any prejudice . . .

DE NIGRIS: No.

HEID: Because you were an immigrant?

DE NIGRIS: None whatsoever, none whatsoever. Not the way it is today. There was no, and, you know, where we lived in North Bergen, New Jersey, the majority of people were all Italian immigrants, and they were wonderful neighbors, wonderful, really. There was no, "Oh, this one is German," or "this one is Italian." Really, never, never. Not like it is today. It's pitiful, really.

HEID: Now, in North Bergen, what type of home did you have?

DE NIGRIS: All, mostly two-family houses. Real residential, yes. And, you know, where I, my first home in North Bergen, the end, it was a dead-end street at the time. We lived in the last house on the block. And my oldest daughter bought a house in the same block. ( she laughs ) About twenty-seven years ago, yeah. Unbelievable.

HEID: Everything goes full circle. So was your mother happy?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, yes. Oh, my mother was so happy. And, you know, my mother always said, "I'm in the United States. Never, never will I buy margarine. Never!"

HEID: Why?

DE NIGRIS: Only butter. She will not. We used to get margarine that was yellow like your sweater. It was horrible, just horrible. And all the years in Germany my mother had to use margarine. And when she came to this country and my father had, of course, well, we had ice boxes in those days. We had to have the ice man come, you know, and put ice in the box. And he used to put a card outside the window to see how much ice you want, twenty-five cents worth or twenty cents worth, you know?  
( she laughs ) People don't know how wonderful they have it today, believe me. But my father bought butter. He bought a pound of sweet butter and a pound of salt butter. My mother was in seventh heaven. ( she laughs ) Oh, my goodness, yes.

HEID: So tell me about your family now. You grew up. You met your husband. How?

DE NIGRIS: Yes. Well, my husband lived across the street from

where I lived, and when I was still going to school I was close to graduating. My husband was an artist, and he used to say hello to me and flirt with me and I'd say, "Aah." Because, well, I was close to sixteen, you know. And one day I happened to see him, a billboard. We had a billboard, like, across the way from us, and it was a Cadillac. And my husband was on the scaffold. He was painting the Cadillac, the car, and the lettering. And that was his job, you know. He did landscaping, you know, painting, though. And I looked up, and it was him. And then he waved to me, so I waved back to him. And I quick ran into my house. I went to the front window, and I looked outside and I watched him paint. ( she laughs ) And that's how we met. And then he asked me, when I was getting ready to graduate, I should ask my teacher if I could get an extra pass so he could go to the graduation. And he said to me, "Tell Miss Schlick," that was my teacher, and he had the same teacher when he graduated, and my oldest daughter had this teacher. ( Ms. Heid laughs ) And he said to me, "Tell her that Joe Denny." He used to sign his work "Denny." Never "De Nigris," always "Denny." And he said,

"Tell her that Joe Denny would like a pass to come to the graduation." So I told my teacher, and she said, "What?" She said, "Joe Denny?" She said, "You know him?" I said, "Yes. He lives across the street from me." She says, "I want to show you something." She says, "You see this?" It was a bust of Alexander The Great that my husband had sculpted for her. And then she took out maps that my husband used to draw for her, and all the paintings, like for Christmas or Easter or holidays, my husband used to have to do all the drawing on the blackboard for her. And that's it. And I eloped with my husband, believe it or not. ( she laughs )

And I was seventeen years old. But I had a wonderful marriage. We were poor. We got married in 1929, and we went through the Depression. It was just like being in Germany again, nothing to eat. And there was no welfare like the people are getting today. My husband painted patrol cars, put gold leaf. He worked with gold leaf. He put the lettering on the patrol cars and, you know, on banks and lawyers. They had lettering in those days, with gold leaf and black outline. My husband did that kind of work. And for that he got a big bowl of

eggs, during the Depression. No money, just a big bowl of eggs. One time he got a big bag of flour. And I said, "What am I going to do with the flour? I have nothing to put in it." ( they laugh ) But we managed, again.

HEID: And how many children did you have?

DE NIGRIS: I have two daughters. They were eleven years apart.

HEID: And their names?

DE NIGRIS: Emily, named after my mother, and Jean. She wasn't named after anyone. I just wanted her to have my husband's initial "J." ( they laugh ) So, that's it.

HEID: Well, we're getting close to the end of the interview now. And thinking back about it, Milly, do you have any regrets at all?

DE NIGRIS: Oh, no, no, never. Not even a one, not even a one. Even the hardship my husband and I went through during the Depression, no regrets whatsoever. No.

HEID: And your parents?

DE NIGRIS: My parents either, no. That's, oh, and especially

my father, especially my father. Yeah.

HEID: Thinking back about your father and your mother, is there something that they passed on to you that you passed on to your children, you know, their philosophy, or . . .

DE NIGRIS: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Especially my father's philosophy about the U.S.A. It's something we talk about all the time. Every time we're together, that's what we talk about, that the people do not appreciate this country. They do not. I see it. I'm a crossing guard. ( she laughs ) I'm going to be eighty-two. I don't tell everybody, but. When I see some of these children, and sometimes their parents come, and I am really appalled at what I see, because my father drummed into us Americanism to a tee, believe me. I'm not exaggerating. Even my husband always says, "Oh, if Pop were here today he would be horrified."

HEID: So your dad was very proud to be an American.

DE NIGRIS: Oh, absolutely. You know what happened? In 1955 my husband said to me, "Honey, why don't you take a trip to Germany?" He said, "And see where you

lived, see what it's like." And I didn't really want to go. I didn't want to spend the money because he worked so hard, you know. But he insisted, so I had to have my citizenship papers. But I became a citizen through my father, because I wasn't of age, you see? Do you know that my father would not let me take his citizenship paper? He said, "Milly, do me a big favor." He says, "Go and get your own, okay?" He says, "I don't want to leave this out of my hands." In 1955 I had to go and get my own citizenship papers. ( she laughs ) Yes, and I was over there for two weeks, and I stayed with friends of my father's friends' son. I got so homesick I couldn't take it. And, you know, the language itself got so high fallutin', I call it. I couldn't understand the people any more. And I got so homesick I said, "I have to go home. I'm going home." And they said, "Well, you want to go home that fast . . ." I went to the United States Line, because I came home on the America, so they told me, "The only way, the fastest I can get back is to go to France, to Le Havre, and catch the U.S., the United States. What a beautiful ship! In two weeks I was home again. ( she laughs )

HEID: Well, Milly, this is a good place for us to stop, you know. But before we do, is there anything else that you'd like to add?

DE NIGRIS: What I'd like to add is that, like I say, if people could only look back to what some of the people went through in Europe and other parts of the world, and come here and take this country for granted, that is something that I resent very, very much. And what I don't like, when people, over here when they say, "My country." My father used to say, "This is your country where you make your bread and butter. That is your country. Why are you leaving your country to better yourself? Because you feel you're going to have a better living over here. So why do you say, 'My country.' This is your country. If this is where you're going to stay and die, then this is your country, not where you came from." Maybe I'm wrong. a lot of people resented me for saying this. But I can't help myself. That's the way I feel. Because I see so much going on, like in my own town right now I cannot believe the things I see. Everybody's on welfare. And they have so many children. It's pitiful.

HEID: There's a big difference.

DE NIGRIS: It's pitiful. Because how is our government going to pay for all this?

HEID: That's very, very true.

DE NIGRIS: How, I don't understand it.

HEID: Well, on that note, Milly, let's, you know, I'm going to end the interview.

DE NIGRIS: Yes. I hope I didn't talk too much.

HEID: Not at all. I want to thank you very much.

DE NIGRIS: Oh, I thank you very much.

HEID: This is Debra Heid for the National Park Service. Today is Saturday, May 15, 1993. And I'm here in the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Milly De Nigris who came over from Hamburg, Germany in November of 1924.

DE NIGRIS: Right.