

EI-319

PILAR MENDEZ BERTOMEU AND SALLY (SALVADORA) MENDEZ SELLES

BIRTH DATE: APRIL 27, 1903 AND OCTOBER 18, 1908

INTERVIEW DATE: 5/19/1993

RUNNING TIME: 1:26:00

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 4/1994

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 6/1994

SPAIN VIA CUBA, 1923

AGES AT IMMIGRATION: 20 AND 14

BORN: BILELA, SPAIN

PORT OF EMBARKATION: CORUNA

RESIDENCES: BILELA, SPAIN

US: NEWARK, NJ

Oral Historian's Note: Although Mrs. Bertomeu states the year of her birth as 1904, the correct year is 1903. Transcriber Nancy Vega has supplied translations of the Spanish words and phrases used whenever possible. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Oral Historian, 6/13/1994.

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, May 19, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Pilar Bertomeu.

BERTOMEU: Bertomeu.

SIGRIST: And Sally Selles.

BERTOMEU: Sisters.

SIGRIST: Who are sisters. They came from Spain via Cuba in 1923. Pilar was nineteen, would eventually turn twenty.

BERTOMEU: Over here, when I came here.

SIGRIST: Here. And Sally was thirteen, and would soon turn fourteen.
Great. Well, it's a pleasure to have you both here.

BERTOMEU: (she laughs) Thank you.

SIGRIST: Let me begin by, I'll ask Pilar your birth date, please.

BERTOMEU: It's in April. Wait a minute. April 29th.

SELLES: Seventh.

BERTOMEU: April 7th.

SELLES: (she whispers) No, April 27th.

BERTOMEU: Twenty-seventh. April 27th.

SIGRIST: What year?

BERTOMEU: 1904.

SIGRIST: 1904.

BERTOMEU: 1904.

SIGRIST: Sally?

SELLES: October the 18th, 1908.

SIGRIST: I see. So there's roughly four years between you.

SELLES: See, my birthday's in October, and her birthday is in April, every year.

SIGRIST: I see. Let me start by asking Pilar, where were you born?

BERTOMEU: In Spain.

SIGRIST: And where in Spain?

BERTOMEU: Uh, Bilela.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that please?

BERTOMEU: (she laughs) Sally?

SELLES: I do.

SIGRIST: All right, Sally. You spell it.

SELLES: B-I-L-E-L-A.

SIGRIST: And you were both born in the same town.

BERTOMEU: Right.

SELLES: The same place. It was a small town, a very small town.

SIGRIST: Describe what the town looked like for me, Pilar. What did the town look like when you were a child?

BERTOMEU: Well, not much to see, you know. Small houses and, no. Nothing

too much alive, you know, to have something. I never went to school over there, never. They never sent me to school.

SIGRIST: Was there a school in the town?

BERTOMEU: Oh, yeah. Never. Because my mother got a, can I say all this?

SIGRIST: Yeah, sure. Go right ahead.

BERTOMEU: My mother got six children, and my father die very young. And she got six children. And, you know, she was, very bad for her. We all, I mean, you're small. So anyway, and her, her family, they told her why you don't go to Cuba and take the three.

SELLES: The oldest ones.

BERTOMEU: The oldest ones, and lead the other ones to a better life, because that was very bad in those times, you know.

SIGRIST: Did a lot of Spanish people go to Cuba? Was that a place to go to better yourself?

SELLES: Oh, yeah. A lot of people go to Cuba.

BERTOMEU: Cuba no like America. (they laugh) I like this place better.

SELLES: Can I talk now?

SIGRIST: Yes, sure, by all means.

SELLES: We were okay, you know. See, my father die. My brother, my oldest brother was fifteen, she was twelve, I was seven. Another five, another three, another one-year-old. And my mother, she got, you know, panicked, responsibility, you know.

SIGRIST: What did your father die of?

BERTOMEU: He got killed.

SELLES: He got killed on the train.

SIGRIST: Killed on a train?

SELLES: Yeah. He died on a train. He was looking out the window and the window fell right on the temple.

SIGRIST: Was there, was there a train accident, or did the window just . . .

SELLES: No. You know, they were changing the locomotive. They were having a change or something. And they even told him to be careful, because maybe he . . .

BERTOMEU: He traveled a lot.

SIGRIST: Let me ask Pilar. What did your father do for a living?

BERTOMEU: He was a decorator, painter.

SELLES: No, he was a contractor.

BERTOMEU: A contractor, nice.

SELLES: And then he work on the . . .

BERTOMEU: But he die on one of those trips.

SELLES: In the vine, the grapevines, you know, when you make it together.

SIGRIST: Oh, like grafting, grafting grapevines?

SELLES: Uh-huh. And then he was here in Florida, no, in, uh . . .

BERTOMEU: California.

SELLES: In California. He was here, you know. I don't know what.

SIGRIST: Your father had come to this country . . .

SELLES: Yeah, he came.

SIGRIST: To work in the vineyards in California?

SELLES: No. He bring it back, he sells that. He was a salesman. And then he went to Mexico. Who knows?

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met, either of you? Do you know how they met?

BERTOMEU: Oh, they were neighbors.

SELLES: Well, they were neighbors.

BERTOMEU: Neighbors.

SELLES: And I remember my mother saying, like when they were born they say, "Oh, they got to get married when they get big." (they laugh) Because they were one year old, you know.

SIGRIST: They were destined to be together.

SELLES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Were both your mother and father from this town?

SELLES: Yeah.

BERTOMEU: Yes.

SIGRIST: Both from this town. Let me ask Sally, what do you remember about your father? What was his personality like?

SELLES: (she sighs) I don't remember much. I was seven when he died.

BERTOMEU: He was a very nice looking man, very educated.

SELLES: I have a picture of him, but not here.

BERTOMEU: He was very, very good.

SELLES: See, I was seven years old, and I . . .

BERTOMEU: And he make a good money in those apprentice he doing. When he die on the train, we were in bed. And somebody about twelve o'clock at night they're knocking on the door, and it was the family live more close to the station from the train, more close. They coming with him. She get up, she thought it was, I don't know, somebody. And they tell my father got dead. We don't even see him. They owe a lot of money, they don't give a penny to my mother.

SELLES: They deny that they owe the money.

BERTOMEU: Denied it. Because he got a lot of money to collect from all that he's doing. But they don't give anything. So my brother was the old one. How old was Henry?

SELLES: Fifteen.

BERTOMEU: Fifteen, and I was a little older.

SELLES: He was the man of the house.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, do either of you remember the funeral for your father?

SELLES: No.

BERTOMEU: We don't see him.

SIGRIST: You never saw him.

BERTOMEU: Never saw him.

SELLES: Never.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little bit about how your mother reacted to your father's death.

SELLES: She was panicked. She was, my mother . . .

BERTOMEU: My mother.

SELLES: She even forgot about us. You know, she wanted to die.

BERTOMEU: It was very bad for her. It was very, very bad. She don't even take care of us.

SELLES: You know, with six children and no money, because they even took all the money that . . .

BERTOMEU: So the family . . .

SELLES: He's got it with him.

BERTOMEU: The family say why don't you try to go . . .

SELLES: No, hermana [sister]. My brother, he was a (?), you know. And

my, a cousin of ours, she says, "Don't let him go alone,
because . . .

BERTOMEU: He was going to forget us. He was young.

SELLES: He was going to forget you. "Why don't you go and take the trip
with her."

BERTOMEU: And the other one, to marry with her.

SIGRIST: Good. Well, let's not get to Cuba yet. I want to talk some
more about Spain and growing up in Spain.

BERTOMEU: In that time it was very bad.

SIGRIST: Sally, can you describe the house that you lived in?

SELLES: Oh. Well, the house (she clears her throat), it was up. You
know, you got to go upstairs. And it's two bedrooms, the
kitchen and the dining room.

SIGRIST: What was it made out of?

SELLES: What it was made out of, that I forgot. Brick?

SIGRIST: Pilar, do you remember?

SELLES: I think brick.

BERTOMEU: Brick.

SELLES: Yeah.

BERTOMEU: And we got a well in the yard, outside in the yard. It wasn't very, not many rooms, not many rooms.

SIGRIST: How, is the climate warm in Spain, or did you ever have to heat the house in any way?

SELLES: Well . . .

BERTOMEU: Not too much.

SELLES: Not a bad winter. The winter wasn't too bad, you know. Just mild.

BERTOMEU: It was Galicia. They call Galicia.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what kind of furniture you had in the house? Does any piece of furniture stick out in your mind?

SELLES: We have chairs, you know. Not sofas like here, chairs, chairs.

BERTOMEU: Chairs. The thing is, my father, when he died, before he died he said, "I want to make the house," because we've got a well outside in the yard.

SELLES: A spring well, you know.

BERTOMEU: A spring well, good water. And he wants to make a nice house,

because . . .

SELLES: Oh, that was the last trip he was going to make, and then, you know, remodel the house.

BERTOMEU: We got nothing.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me, I never did ask you, what was your father's name?

SELLES: Belisario.

BERTOMEU: Belisario.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please? (they laugh)

SELLES: B-E-L-I-S-A-R-I-O. Mendez, Mendez.

SIGRIST: Mendez. That's your maiden name, Mendez?

SELLES: Yes.

SIGRIST: M-E-N-D-E-Z?

BERTOMEU: We have our husbands' name, but they're dead, too. We are widows.

SIGRIST: Did your father have parents in this town? Did you have grandparents that were on your father's side?

BERTOMEU: No, no, no.

SELLES: No, they . . .

BERTOMEU: We don't see my father's parents.

SELLES: Only my mother's.

BERTOMEU: My mother's.

SIGRIST: So you were not close with your father's side of the family.

SELLES: No.

BERTOMEU: No.

SELLES: They died.

SIGRIST: They all died. Tell me, and what was your mom's name?

BOTH: Isolina.

SELLES: I-S-O-L-I-N-A.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

SELLES: Nunez.

BERTOMEU: Nunez.

SELLES: N-U-N-E-Z.

SIGRIST: With the little scrolly over the . . .

BOTH: Yes, Nunez.

SIGRIST: Can you describe in words what your mom looked like.

BERTOMEU: She was a very nice person.

SIGRIST: What color hair?

BERTOMEU: Black.

SELLES: Black.

BERTOMEU: She's not tall like us.

SELLES: A little taller than us. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Let me ask each of you individually, and I'll start with Pilar, when you think back to your mother is there a story that you remember? How do you, is there something that sticks out in your mind about your mother, a certain thing that happened maybe when you were a little girl in Spain?

BERTOMEU: She was sweet. But after my father died she don't even send the kids to school or anything. She never sent me to school. She was worrying and never was happy. Only when she went to Cuba she started changing, you know, because she got to work. And over there in Cuba is not like over here. You work as

housekeeper in the house for cooking, maid.

SIGRIST: Sally, is there, when you think back to being a little girl, of course, you were younger, what sticks out in your mind about your mother? What do you remember? Do you have a story about your mother that you remember?

SELLES: Oh, not much.

SIGRIST: Your memories are similar to Pilar's memories.

SELLES: Yes. She used to, I don't know.

SIGRIST: What did she cook for you for food? What did you eat?

SELLES: We got a lot of things in the orchard, you know. Grow potatoes, a lot of things. She didn't cook much because nobody work on the, in the, nobody, you know, the crop doesn't . . .

SIGRIST: Did you have your own orchard and your own garden?

SELLES: Yes, in back of the house, yes.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things do people grow in Spain? What kinds of things did you have in the garden?

BERTOMEU: Potatoes.

SELLES: Potatoes, carrots, lettuce.

BERTOMEU: We had a lot of food.

SELLES: String beans, lima beans, you know.

BERTOMEU: It's a small town, you know.

SIGRIST: Did you eat a lot of meat?

SELLES: We used to kill two pigs for the whole years, you know. The ham, they separate the hams and they make some, like sausages, but we call it chorizos, with nice lean meat, you know.

SIGRIST: Would you raise the pig, and then would someone come in and slaughter it?

SELLES: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: How did they do that?

SELLES: Well . . .

BERTOMEU: They take it out . . .

SELLES: My mother's father, my grandfather, used to kill them, and two more men to hold it. So they, I don't know. With a knife they stick it here, I think. (she gestures)

SIGRIST: Right under the throat.

SELLES: To the heart.

SIGRIST: The heart.

SELLES: And then they, with a torch, you know, they burn all the little hair, you know, that is on the pig, burn it all and wash it all, you know, with a pig hanging. And then they make, you know, the hams, they cut the hams.

BERTOMEU: Sausage.

SELLES: They cut the ribs, all that.

SIGRIST: Because you were a little older, Pilar, did you have to do a lot of work in the house?

BERTOMEU: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me some of the things you had to do in the house?

BERTOMEU: I had to go to, como se llama el monte? I used to go to, with my brother, to Rige. What you call that?

SELLES: Like, let me see, wait a minute, to describe it.

BERTOMEU: He got a horse.

SELLES: I forgot the name.

BERTOMEU: And something, they put him where they got the cows and the things, you know.

SIGRIST: Like a corral?

SELLES: Yeah. We have a corral. And then we have the pigs, we have a goat and a burro.

BERTOMEU: And he take me with him, he take me with him, my brother. I want to go along, he take me with him. And he take out the horse and bring him home and I stay there to get more, that stuff.

SELLES: Like bush, you know.

BERTOMEU: To be ready when he comes back, and he can come and get me, you know. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: These animals were yours?

SELLES: Yeah. Chickens.

SIGRIST: Were they pets, or were they just food, basically? And work, you know, the horse being the . . .

BERTOMEU: It was a burro, not horse. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Did you name your animals?

BERTOMEU: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of their names?

BERTOMEU: Like the dog.

BOTH: Tul.

SELLES: We have a dog named Tul.

SIGRIST: Tul?

SELLES: T-U-L. (they laugh)

BERTOMEU: And the horse, I don't know. There was a horse.

SIGRIST: What other kinds of things did you have to do around the house?

What were some of your other chores in the house?

BERTOMEU: Well, help my mother and . . .

SELLES: They usually go to wash, you know.

BERTOMEU: I used to go washing clothes outside.

SIGRIST: How did you do that in Spain?

SELLES: You got to go by . . .

SELLES: There was a brook with a big stone, you know, so you wash there.

BERTOMEU: So I used to go and wash our clothes, a lot of clothes. And the
lady . . .

SELLES: She go with my mother, you know, together. And we stayed around there.

BERTOMEU: I helped her.

SELLES: We stay around there.

BERTOMEU: A lot of times I go alone and the lady say to me, "Ay, if they send you to school they do very good than doing this. You don't going to grow." Because I got to come over here, my family. (she laughs) You know, things like that. It was not so easy, you know.

SIGRIST: What kind of clothes did you wear when you were young?

BERTOMEU: Well, the clothes was all right.

SIGRIST: Well, describe what your every day clothing would be.

BERTOMEU: A skirt, dresses. My mother could sewing very good, she's sewing.

SIGRIST: So you had nice clothes, then. Were skirts long at that time or were they short?

BERTOMEU: Well, medium.

SELLES: I don't know. I forgot.

SIGRIST: What about your hair? Did you grow your hair long?

BERTOMEU: Oh, they make the bun in the back at that time in there. I think now it's a lot of different, yeah. They make a bun.

SELLES: Yeah, a bun over here.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your religious life. What religion were you?

SELLES: We were Catholics.

SIGRIST: And was there a church in town.

BOTH: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you just, can you describe what the church looked like?

SELLES: Oh, they're beautiful.

BERTOMEU: The church was nice, very nice.

SELLES: Maybe in that time it means nice, you know. But maybe now if I see it . . . (she laughs)

BERTOMEU: Now it's much better, yeah.

SIGRIST: You may remember it differently.

BERTOMEU: Yes, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me, who was more religious, your mother or your father?

SELLES: Well, they're not really religious.

SIGRIST: Neither of them were.

SELLES: You know . . .

BERTOMEU: No, not really much.

SELLES: But we got baptized, you know.

BERTOMEU: We were baptized and all that, but not too much.

SIGRIST: Do you remember celebrating Christmas, for instance, in Spain?

BERTOMEU: Oh, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: How would you celebrate Christmas in Spain?

BERTOMEU: Oh, we make a . . .

SELLES: We, all the, the whole year, we wait all year for Christmas.

BERTOMEU: We make a lot of things.

SELLES: We were starving, but we make for Christmas.

SIGRIST: So it was a big feast.

BOTH: Yes. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Now, did you give presents?

BERTOMEU: No.

SELLES: No, I never knew that you get presents in Christmas there.

BERTOMEU: In Christmas there were never, no.

SIGRIST: So it's basically just a feeding kind of holiday.

SELLES: Yes.

BERTOMEU: A feeding holiday.

SIGRIST: Was there something special that would be made for Christmas only?

BERTOMEU: Oh, yes. We make . . .

SELLES: People, they roast like a little lamb, you know, a baby lamb, or a baby goat, you know. They bring it to the oven where they make the bread. Then you go, every year, let me see, every week, you know, they have an oven there where they make the bread. They make the long bread, and they . . .

BERTOMEU: Special ovens.

SELLES: A lamb, or a little pig, you know.

SIGRIST: So this is like a town oven, a communal oven.

SELLES: The one everybody goes and makes the bread there.

SIGRIST: And so lamb was sort of a Christmas kind of food.

SELLES: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Were there special songs or something that you sang at Christmas time? No? Which was more important to you, Christmas or Easter?

SELLES: I never remember Easter there.

SIGRIST: So Christmas, probably.

BERTOMEU: Over there, not much.

SELLES: No. Not in our town.

BERTOMEU: Well, we lived in a little town, you know.

SIGRIST: What did you do for fun in this little town when you were kids growing up? What was there . . .

SELLES: There was kids there, at least us. You know, after her and me and my other sister, they used to play outside. Oh, and there was a brook there. It's still, there still is the brook, because you went there, and there's a waterfall, you know, and

we used to take everything off and get under the water.

SIGRIST: Skinny-dipping.

BERTOMEU: Even in Cuba. It's not like here.

SIGRIST: What about, did, were there any dances in town or anything like that?

SELLES: Oh, yeah, the plaza.

BERTOMEU: Oh, yeah. In Spain, yeah.

SELLES: We come out the plaza, the plaza.

SIGRIST: That was in the center of town, the plaza?

SELLES: Yeah, yeah. And they, oh. And they, the music is the, I don't know how you call it, like the Scotch.

BERTOMEU: Not Scotch, pero [but] . . .

SIGRIST: But people played musical instruments.

SELLES: Yeah, that.

BERTOMEU: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was music an important part of your life in Spain? Were you a musical family?

BOTH: No.

SIGRIST: But you liked to go to the dances?

BERTOMEU: Oh, yeah.

SELLES: Well, we see them. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: I guess it was something to do, right?

BOTH: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Let me talk a little bit about school. (to Ms. Bertomeu) You said you didn't go to school. (to Ms. Selles) Did you go to school?

SELLES: After my father died I went to school, then I think one year because . . .

SIGRIST: Were your parents educated people?

BERTOMEU: My father, yes, and my mother, too.

SIGRIST: She could read and write.

SELLES: Oh, she went to school fourteen years. That's a lot over there.

BERTOMEU: But to me, you know, I'm the older, I got to do a lot of work.

SELLES: Well, nobody, my father intentioned, my brother, my older brother, he knew French and everything, he goes to school. But he don't believe in the girls to go to school. He wanted to sent us to sew, you know. In those times. So you'd be a dope, sit that way. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: But that was very disappointing to you, wasn't it?

SELLES: Sure.

SIGRIST: You wanted to go to school.

BERTOMEU: Very disappointed. I'm sorry I don't come to this country first.

SIGRIST: Did your mother, when you were young girls, anyway, when you were kids, did your parents teach you to read at home or read stories to you, anything like that?

BERTOMEU: I'm going to tell you the truth. I shouldn't do this, I'm sorry.

SELLES: Say it.

BERTOMEU: I had a book in Cuba, so nice. I don't want to hurt anybody.

SELLES: You know, write letters.

BERTOMEU: To write letters.

SELLES: Even to family or . . .

BERTOMEU: Even boyfriends. When she see that, she got the book and she took it out from me . . .

SELLES: Threw it away. I don't know what.

BERTOMEU: So, I don't know. I don't even want to come here, because I don't know. You know, what I know is talk with the people and . . .

SIGRIST: Did, was this typical, though, in this town in Spain? Girls, a lot of families didn't allow the girls in the family to have education?

SELLES: Oh, yeah, they all go to school, but not us.

SIGRIST: Just your family.

SELLES: My father was that away.

BERTOMEU: She like to show, teach us to sewing more than anything.

SELLES: To sew.

SIGRIST: Did you have to learn how to sew?

SELLES: I didn't. (she laughs)

BERTOMEU: I make a lot of things, but . . .

SIGRIST: But you weren't too crazy about it.

BERTOMEU: No. I never went. I never went to school in Spain.

SIGRIST: You said your brother, your brother's fifteen, and he's sent to Cuba, he goes to Cuba.

SELLES: No. He went to Cuba when he were eighteen. He wanted to go. And that's why we all, we came with him, because otherwise him alone . . .

BERTOMEU: The family started saying if he goes alone maybe he forget yous and this and that, you know. So we went, the three, and my mother, four.

SIGRIST: There are other, your mother's family is in this town, yes, in Spain? Does your mother have her parents? Are they in this town?

SELLES: No.

SIGRIST: You have no grandparents in this town.

SELLES: No, no, no.

SIGRIST: Because you mentioned your grandfather earlier, when we were talking about the pigs being slaughtered.

SELLES: He used to kill the pigs, you know.

SIGRIST: But you don't, you don't remember your grandfather?

SELLES: No, not much.

SIGRIST: They were not part of your life?

SELLES: Yeah.

BERTOMEU: No, the grandmother was nice to us.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your grandmother?

BERTOMEU: My grandmother, I'm going to tell you. My brother and I, I was the oldest. So, you know, the bread, the crust is hard, and she was old, so she can't eat it real good. So she save it for me and my brother. And while we were there, she say, "Okay, I got las caranchas." She calls it the name, you know, that name. (she laughs) And she says, "But you just got to dance, the two together." And here we go, "Da, da, da." (she laughs) And she sat like this. She do to me and my brother. We got to dance for her. She was very nice.

SIGRIST: She didn't live with you, did she?

BERTOMEU: No, no, no.

SIGRIST: Did they live nearby?

BERTOMEU: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember their house?

BERTOMEU: Yes, a little house. And they, not many rooms.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your grandfather at all?

BERTOMEU: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was he like as a person?

BERTOMEU: He was working very hard. When he gets old he walk like this,
you know. (she gestures)

SIGRIST: All hunched over.

BERTOMEU: He was very nice. They were nice.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Was your mother close to her parents?

BOTH: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Did they . . .

BERTOMEU: You know, I tell you. My father, when he went to California he
call my mother. And she, I mean, she wrote a letter. She say,
and he got a friend over there, a man. He got his wife, and

they're not close to us, pero [but] in the town. He say, "Sell everything and come over here with the kids."

SELLES: She got two at the time, her and my brother.

BERTOMEU: She don't want to go, because she don't want to leave her family, parents and sisters and brothers. She don't want to go.

SIGRIST: Her life would have been very different had she gone.

BOTH: Oh, sure.

SIGRIST: Did your father like America?

SELLES: He wanted to bring her, so that mean he like.

SIGRIST: He probably did.

SELLES: Sure. But she didn't want to come.

BERTOMEU: My mother don't want to go.

SIGRIST: When you . . .

BERTOMEU: So he coming back home, my father.

SIGRIST: And that's when he died.

BERTOMEU: That's when he died, after he started to that work.

SIGRIST: Now, when you both left with your brother and your mother to go

to Cuba, how did she feel about leaving the town then?

BERTOMEU: Oh, very bad. She feel very bad.

SELLES: And leave the three kids, and leave the three children there,
too.

BERTOMEU: With the family.

SIGRIST: With her, whom did she leave the children . . .

BERTOMEU: A niece.

SELLES: With her niece.

BERTOMEU: A niece. She got married, and they take care of the kids.

SIGRIST: Why did she leave the youngest kids?

BERTOMEU: You know, when you go to Cuba to those places, and so much
family. She suffered from them. She wants to bring them.

SELLES: We went there with the intention to bring them, too, after, you
know.

SIGRIST: And you're going to Cuba with the intention of setting up a
whole new life, right?

SELLES: Yes.

SIGRIST: You weren't going with the intention of getting to the United States ultimately.

SELLES: No, no, no.

BERTOMEU: Not at that time.

SIGRIST: You were just going to Cuba to start off a whole new life.

SELLES: Right, right.

BERTOMEU: My brother, her and I and my mother.

SIGRIST: Do you, one thing I do want to ask you, quickly, do you remember when Sally was born? Do you remember when your mother had Sally?

BERTOMEU: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: No. Okay.

BERTOMEU: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying goodbye?

BERTOMEU: I remember seeing a baby, pero [but], you know, I don't know. So many years. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: A long time ago.

BERTOMEU: I'm ninety.

SIGRIST: Did, do you remember saying goodbye to your grandparents or
whomever when you left for Cuba?

BERTOMEU: Oh, yeah.

SELLES: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Was that hard for you? Because you're a young lady, you're a
child.

BERTOMEU: Oh, my mother, she's so . . .

SELLES: I was happy because I'm going.

BERTOMEU: We're happy we go, but in Cuba it's not like over here.

SIGRIST: Yeah, what year is this that you went to Cuba?

SELLES: In, let me see.

SIGRIST: It must be after the war, right? After World War I.

SELLES: 1918 or '19.

SIGRIST: 1919, maybe.

SELLES: Yeah, I think, yeah.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause just for a moment, and Kevin's going to

flip the tape, and we'll get you to Cuba.

SELLES: Yeah. (she laughs)

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

SIGRIST: We're now resuming Side B with Pilar Bertomeu and Sally Selles.

So it's 1919, roughly, when you go to Cuba.

SELLES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember of World War I, both of you? You were pretty young at that time.

SELLES: I don't remember nothing.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, Pilar, anything about World War I and how it affected your town in Spain?

BERTOMEU: We not even know if it's a war or not there. (she laughs) We not even know.

SIGRIST: You were quite isolated.

SELLES: Yeah, yeah, we not even know.

BERTOMEU: In the little towns you don't know anything.

SIGRIST: Now, you took a boat from Spain to Cuba.

BERTOMEU: Right.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of that boat?

BERTOMEU: Bolva . . .

SELLES: Cadiz de Pinillos.

BERTOMEU: Cadiz de Pinillos.

SIGRIST: C-A-D-I-Z, like the city.

SELLES: Right.

SELLES: De.

SIGRIST: D-E.

SELLES: P-I-N-I-L-L-O-S, Pinillos.

SIGRIST: What does that mean?

SELLES: (they laugh) That's the name.

SIGRIST: Something from Cadiz. Right. (he laughs) And can you tell me what that boat trip was like to Cuba? Where did you sleep on the boat, for instance?

SELLES: In, down in the waterways. (she laughs) And a lot of people, it smelled.

BERTOMEU: We don't want to go to sleep downstairs because it stink, vomit.

SELLES: We sleep upstairs, you know, on the floor. We had a blanket, you know.

SIGRIST: So this was not a pleasant trip.

BERTOMEU: No.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of Spanish people going to Cuba at that time?

BOTH: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was in Cuba? Why did people want to go to Cuba?

SELLES: Who knows? I don't know.

BERTOMEU: I wish we come here first, but we can't, you know. We got to wait till the time.

SELLES: When we got to Cuba there is no, all of the restaurants, the hotels, they call a fonda, that means a motel, like. But they got food too, you know. Everything was full, nothing. So a family that we knew, you know, we stayed there for a few days in their house. That was nice.

SIGRIST: How long did the boat trip take from Spain to Cuba?

BOTH: Nineteen days.

SIGRIST: That's a long time.

BOTH: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Where in Spain did you leave from?

SELLES: From Coruna, Coruna.

SIGRIST: Which is where, roughly?

SELLES: It's in the north, too.

SIGRIST: So the trip takes nineteen days. Do you remember anything else about that boat ride, going to Cuba?

SELLES: They kill the, uh . . .

BERTOMEU: They kill the animals, the cows.

SELLES: The cows, you know, there. Yeah, they kill it. A lot of cows.
And they kill, you know, every day, some of them, to make
the . . .

BERTOMEU: The food.

SIGRIST: So they actually took livestock on the boat to feed the
passengers.

SELLES: Right, right.

SIGRIST: Did this boat have different classes to travel, or was it just . . .

SELLES: First class and second, and third. But third was awful.

SIGRIST: That's where you were.

SELLES: Yes!

SIGRIST: With the vomit.

SELLES: Oh, yeah. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: You remember being up on deck?

SELLES: All the time.

SIGRIST: You said you slept up on deck.

BOTH: Yeah, yeah.

BERTOMEU: My mother take us, because we don't want to go down to sleep.

SIGRIST: Was this the first time you all had been on a boat?

BERTOMEU: Yes.

SELLES: Yeah, the first time.

SIGRIST: Tell me how your mother reacted to this experience. Was she a good sailor? How did she, uh . . .

BOTH: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: She didn't get sick, or . . .

SELLES: I think we all got sick. I didn't get sick. I was a kid, you know.

BERTOMEU: Oh, we got a cousin there. She got a little daughter.

SIGRIST: Oh, she gave birth to a child?

BERTOMEU: No. She, we came with the two sisters.

SELLES: Our cousins.

SIGRIST: Your cousins.

BERTOMEU: Yeah. And she got a little baby. And she didn't give the breast. And before she went to the boat, she took one can of milk. And my mother said, "Oh, you got to get more milk. That's not enough." So after she started giving the baby all the food, and the baby died on the boat.

SELLES: She got diarrhea.

BERTOMEU: Diarrhea.

SELLES: She was about, let me see, ten months old, maybe eight.

BERTOMEU: Yeah, maybe eight months.

SELLES: And so, you know, when they, when we came, we got out. We came, you know, out. But they went to, like, some place like this.

SIGRIST: Like a medical facility or something.

SELLES: Yeah. They call them, which over here is Ellis Island, they call them Triscornio over there.

SIGRIST: Oh, that's a terrible story.

SELLES: And she died over there, the little kid, you know, the baby, she died.

BERTOMEU: And that's what, she killed him, because, you know, that food.

SELLES: You know, they give that, diarrhea.

SIGRIST: Now, where in Cuba did you land?

SELLES: In Havana.

BERTOMEU: Havana.

SIGRIST: And you said that when you arrived you couldn't get a hotel room.

SELLES: No.

SIGRIST: So you stayed with a family.

SELLES: With a family which, they were very nice.

BERTOMEU: A friend's house.

SIGRIST: Where did you meet these people?

BERTOMEU: Well, they (acquiescing to her sister), all right, okay.

SELLES: Well, my mother, you know, those people's mother, they told them to, you know . . .

BERTOMEU: Go see.

SELLES: To go there if we don't find, you know. That's what we did.

SIGRIST: And how long did you stay with them?

BERTOMEU: Well, my mother and I, we find a job.

SIGRIST: Oh, you found a job right off the bat, right when you got there?
What did you do?

BERTOMEU: Yeah. Because over there, even if they got a little store they got servants. The wife don't do anything in Cuba at that time.
They got two or three servants to do the house, the housework.

SIGRIST: And so you do this domestic work.

BERTOMEU: Yeah, domestic work.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the family that you worked for?

BERTOMEU: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What were they like?

BERTOMEU: Oh, they were nice. One man, he was in Spain, he was from Spain. And he went to Cuba when he was a young boy. But he don't, he don't do any, any jobs. He don't know. He was too young. And he went back home. (she laughs) And the parents, they thought he got a lot of money. But they see they don't have any money, he come back to Cuba.

SELLES: He had a deaf mother, you know, that's right.

BERTOMEU: He had a deaf mother, come back to Cuba again. So his mother was working over there. And wherever she worked, wherever she stays, you know, I have to stay with her, because she was . . .
(voices garbled)

SIGRIST: Because you're young, younger.

SELLES: I didn't work, I didn't work, though. Just stayed with over there.

SIGRIST: And, of course, you went to Cuba with the intention to stay in

Cuba, so you're trying to set up a life for yourselves.

SELLES: Who knows? Maybe with the intention to make money and go back to Spain, you know?

BERTOMEU: Yeah, but my brother, he got a nice job in Cuba.

SIGRIST: What did he do?

BERTOMEU: What did he do in that place?

SELLES: He was like a club, you know.

SIGRIST: A clerk?

SELLES: No, wait a minute. Like a country club, you know.

SIGRIST: A country club.

SELLES: And he work over there. He worked on paperwork, you know. It was a good job for him. And some friend going to come into the America. And he say, "Oh, come on, let's go to America. It's much better than here. Over there you don't do any work. You look like, why don't you?" (to her sister) So he come first?

BERTOMEU: Yeah.

SELLES: He came.

BERTOMEU: He came first.

SELLES: With the intention to later try to get us here, you know. So that's what happened.

SIGRIST: So how long were you in Cuba?

SELLES: Four years.

BERTOMEU: Four years.

SIGRIST: Four years, that's a long time. Did you eventually get your own house or apartment?

SELLES: No.

BERTOMEU: No.

SELLES: No, because domestic work there, you sleep there, you everything.

BERTOMEU: You sleep there and eat in there.

SELLES: Your own house. In Cuba is no, not like here.

SIGRIST: Did your mother dislike Cuba as much as you seem to dislike Cuba?

BERTOMEU: I don't know.

SELLES: She like here after she came here.

SIGRIST: Was your mother a person who expressed how she felt about things, or was she kind of a quiet . . .

SELLES: Yeah, quiet. Here was quiet.

SIGRIST: So even if she were unhappy you might not necessarily know that.

SELLES: No.

SIGRIST: What, let me ask Sally, because this is a whole different side to this story, you're a kid in Cuba. Basically you're just that much younger. What did you do all the time? I mean, what did a kid do in Cuba?

SELLES: Well, she didn't send me to school. I was in the house with her and with the other, you know, I was in the house.

SIGRIST: Were people from Spain looked at as sort of second class citizens in Cuba? Because you were immigrants, to a certain extent.

SELLES: Yeah. Oh, you got to, a maid, that's all, a maid, you know.

BERTOMEU: Yeah. She don't send them over there. And over there they don't make you to go to school como [like] over here.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of wealthy people in Cuba at that time? Were you working for a wealthy person?

SELLES: For wealthy people, yeah. For wealthy people.

SIGRIST: So you were there for four years.

SELLES: Four years.

SIGRIST: You hated it.

BERTOMEU: Hated it.

SELLES: Well . . .

SIGRIST: Your brother came to America first.

SELLES: He come first.

SIGRIST: What did he do when he got to America?

SELLES: Oh, (she laughs). He was, he paint. Not at that time.

BERTOMEU: Not in Cuba.

SELLES: He was working in a factory. I don't know.

SIGRIST: Did he come to New York first?

SELLES: Yeah. And then in Newark. That's where he . . .

SIGRIST: To Newark, New Jersey. And what kind of a job did he get in Newark when he came?

BERTOMEU: Painter, he paint.

SELLES: Oh, yeah?

BERTOMEU: Yeah. He painted houses and things like that. But then he went to, what is the name of that place? He make a lot of money. (to her sister) Help me now, come on.

SELLES: No, I panic now. I dno't know.

BERTOMEU: What did he make?

SIGRIST: He got another job.

BERTOMEU: When Alex got sick, he got married.

SELLES: Oh, but that's later.

BERTOMEU: That was much later.

SELLES: He died, too.

SIGRIST: We haven't gotten to that yet. (he laughs) Let's get you to America first. So is your brother writing to you while you're in Cuba, and telling you . . .

BOTH: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you guys know about America?

SELLES: We know what we hear about America.

SIGRIST: What did you hear about America?

SELLES: We thought that over here was . . .

BERTOMEU: There's a lot of difference after we see it.

SELLES: Over here you come and you get money all around. (she gestures) (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Just scoop it right up. (they laugh) Did you believe that?

BERTOMEU: I find a job, Broadway, over here, you know, sewing ladies' suits and clothes, and even talk Spanish or don't talk Italian and mixed. And it was much more for jobs. It's not so good now, anyway.

SIGRIST: Did your brother send you money to leave Cuba with?

SELLES: No.

BERTOMEU: No.

SELLES: No, because, see, in 1921 was a crisis here, and there was no money. (she laughs) No, my mother had it.

SIGRIST: Of course, you two are working, right, (to Ms. Bertomeu) you and your mother, so you do have some money.

BERTOMEU: Yeah, yeah. And she send the money to Spain to the kids.

SELLES: They were making, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Oh, so your mother's sending money back to whoever was taking care of the . . .

SELLES: Money back to the kids, yeah, yeah.

BERTOMEU: To go to take care of the kids. She suffered so much for the kids. So all my money, twenty-five dollars a month.

SELLES: That was a lot of money.

SIGRIST: That was a lot of money.

SELLES: Twenty-five, thirty.

BERTOMEU: I never got a penny. She take right away. I say, "Ma, don't send so much, because they got all the properties we got, you know, to take a lot of food there, and the house." But . . .

SIGRIST: They were living better than you were, and you were sending the money to them.

BERTOMEU: So after we got them over here . . .

SELLES: That's later.

SIGRIST: When did you leave Cuba? It was 1923?

SELLES: 1923.

SIGRIST: What month? Do you remember?

SELLES: September.

SIGRIST: September 1923. Do you know what boat you took from Cuba to New York?

SELLES: Esperanza.

BERTOMEU: Esperanza.

SIGRIST: The Esperanza.

SELLES: Esperanza. I remember, too. You remember that girl? She say, "You saw Sally?" Her name is Esperanza. That means, in Spanish, "hope." And my name was Salvadora.

BERTOMEU: And over here she change her name, Sally, Sally. And (?). And she say, "You save me?" I don't know. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: How long was that boat trip from Cuba to New York?

SELLES: Uh, let me see, seven days.

SIGRIST: Were you glad to get out of Cuba? Do you remember . . .

SELLES: Oh, yeah. We wanted something different.

SIGRIST: You'd had enough of Cuba.

SELLES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you packed with you when you left Cuba? Do you remember what your luggage was, what you took with you, either of you?

SELLES: Clothes.

BERTOMEU: Clothes. That's all. Because the Cuba, the clothes we took from Spain to Cuba, my mother, she got a trunk and she put them all together and sent them to Spain for the kids because over there we don't use that clothes because it was so warm. And a lot of clothes she sent, money, money, money.

SIGRIST: I see. So you're just basically not taking very much with you. Your mother sent a lot back to Spain.

SELLES: The clothes, you know. And my brother, we have a house, you know, for us, when we come.

SIGRIST: Now, were there a lot of Cubans coming to America at that time? I mean, who was on the Esperanza with you? Were they . . .

SELLES: Not Cubans, though, people from Spain and other places.

SIGRIST: Other people who had gone to Cuba and became very disenchanted

with it.

SELLES: Right, right. Not many Cubans.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. Well, tell me, how long is it? That was seven days. What do you remember about that boat trip?

SELLES: Oh, that was nice.

BERTOMEU: We were in the second class.

SELLES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Oh. Well, describe your cabin. What was your cabin like?

SELLES: Well, we have a room with one on top of the other, bunk beds, you know.

BERTOMEU: And my mother was on the bottom. And a lot of people talking. Coming a lot of people, they're coming back from other places and they change back, remember? That girl, she went so many times, and she got to come back. I don't know.

SIGRIST: (to Ms. Selles) You're younger, you're more of a girl. What do you remember about the boat? Did you play on the boat?

SELLES: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Was there any organized activities for you to do on the boat?

SELLES: All I know, I go to where the officers were, you know. And they say, "Look at the pretty." (she laughs) Some day, they all like me there, you know, because I'm always around there. (she laughs) And I would, you know, almost fourteen, but I was little. I grew here eating good. (she laughs) I was short, little.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a dining room on that boat?

SELLES: Yeah. We have a dining room.

BERTOMEU: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What did it look like?

SELLES: Oh, yeah, a lot of people. If you . . .

BERTOMEU: They take the . . .

SELLES: No, that was here, in the Island.

BERTOMEU: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. You go and take your place. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: We'll talk about that when we get to Ellis Island.

SELLES: It was nice there.

SIGRIST: It was much better than coming from Spain to Cuba.

BOTH: Oh, yeah, yeah. Much better.

SIGRIST: A much nicer boat.

SIGRIST: Do you remember arriving in New York Harbor on the Esperanza.

SELLES: Yeah. We stayed there, because that's where they say it arrives ten minutes before time. So we stayed there overnight, and the next day, about in the afternoon, we came here.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time?

SELLES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what that experience was like?

SELLES: Everybody say, "Look at that." I didn't even know that was there.

BERTOMEU: Nice. Something very important.

SELLES: You know, what I more, the big buildings.

BERTOMEU: Oh! What a difference from Cuba. (she laughs)

SELLES: The big buildings, you know. And the subway.

SIGRIST: (to Ms. Bertomeu) Of course, you're a young lady at this time. Did you understand that now you might have better opportunities than where you came from.

BERTOMEU: Oh, yes!

SIGRIST: You knew anything couldn't be worse than where you were from.

BERTOMEU: Oh, sure. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: So you had to sleep overnight on the boat just one night?

SELLES: One night, ain't it?

BERTOMEU: Yeah. I think one night.

SIGRIST: There were three of you, right? There's your mother and you, too.

SELLES: That lady was so good.

SIGRIST: What lady was that?

SELLES: That was here after, Mary. We met her. That was here.

SIGRIST: Oh, good. So you stayed overnight, and then what happened? How did you get to Ellis Island?

SELLES: Well, on a boat.

BERTOMEU: A little boat. They took us out.

SIGRIST: They took you to here, and then what happened when you got here?

SELLES: Well, my brother came to the island. And, so I didn't know that we were going to, we weren't going to stay here. So I remember that, well, I was almost fourteen. I started to cry when he left. I want to go with him. And then they all pepped up a little.

SIGRIST: That's right. Because you hadn't seen your brother for a while. And they wouldn't let you go. How did your mother react to this?

SELLES: Oh, she react good.

BERTOMEU: Good, she have patience.

SELLES: Maybe they send us back to Cuba, you know. That's what we thought.

SIGRIST: What did Ellis Island look like at that time?

BERTOMEU: Oh, it looks better now. I think it's better.

SELLES: Oh, I mean, but it was nice when we came here.

BERTOMEU: It was good.

SIGRIST: Was it crowded at that time?

BERTOMEU: Oh, yeah.

SELLES: Crowded, but there was a lot of room anyway, a lot of room.

SIGRIST: So when they told you you couldn't leave, where did they take you? Where did they bring you on the island when they said you couldn't leave?

SELLES: Well, we have a, I don't know. We went there to make forms, I don't know. And then we went to a room, you know, a recreation room where, let me see, we were eight people there.

SIGRIST: So some strangers were there with you.

SELLES: Yeah. Our friends, we all got there in that room, they put us in that room. In the daytime, you know, nice, very nice.

SIGRIST: What did you do? What was there to do?

SELLES: Some people, they meet, others meet, others talk. They played, too, games.

BERTOMEU: Take a little walk.

SELLES: Play games, too. They give you games to play.

SIGRIST: How long were you detained here for?

SELLES: How long?

SIGRIST: How long were you detained at Ellis Island for?

BERTOMEU: Ten days, ten.

SELLES: Yeah, about ten days.

SIGRIST: Ten. And do you know why?

SELLES: That's why we're here, because arrive ten minutes before time.

SIGRIST: And they kept you ten days for ten minutes.

SELLES: Nine or ten. Yeah, right.

SIGRIST: Let me ask Pilar. What do you remember of being at Ellis Island? What sticks out in your mind about your stay here?

BERTOMEU: It was good. We eat.

SIGRIST: Tell me about eating at Ellis Island. What was that like?

BERTOMEU: It was good.

SIGRIST: Where did they feed you?

SELLES: In the big dining room.

BERTOMEU: The big dining room.

SELLES: With a lot of people. And if you, one minute they grab everything.

BERTOMEU: You got to be careful because they take everything.

SELLES: And you don't eat nothing.

BERTOMEU: They hog.

SELLES: They treat us, at ten o'clock they give us a snack. In our room, you know. They come with the milk and cookies, milk and cookies. And in the afternoon, ten o'clock, a glass of milk and cookies. The men don't, but the ladies and the kids, you know.
(she laughs)

SIGRIST: Were the men with the women, or were you separated?

BERTOMEU: No, no.

SELLES: They all were in a different place.

BERTOMEU: Different place.

SIGRIST: Did they ever let you outside the building? Could you go outside?

BERTOMEU: No, no. Walk around . . .

SELLES: Around there, no. You, it was strict restrictions, you know. You can't go there.

SIGRIST: Did your brother come to visit you while you were here.

BERTOMEU: He come inside.

SELLES: Who?

SIGRIST: Your brother.

BERTOMEU: Henry.

SELLES: No. Only that day. Only when we arrived here.

SIGRIST: So no one's coming to see you.

SELLES: No.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit, were there other Spanish-speaking people here?

BERTOMEU: Nobody.

SELLES: Yeah. You mean with us?

BERTOMEU: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Was there someone, some other person detained here, or maybe an employee who spoke Spanish?

SELLES: Yeah. We all Spanish in that room, only Spanish.
(she laughs)

SIGRIST: Were they all from Spain, or were they from other places that spoke Spanish?

BERTOMEU: From Spain, from Spain was a few.

SELLES: From the Esperanza, and the sister, they all Spanish.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the employees that were here? You mentioned a woman by the name of Mary Rivera?

SELLES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me about Mary.

BERTOMEU: Oh. Every time she see my mother give a good impression, a very good talking to her, you're going to be all right, want us to know we're not going to stay too long in here, and she talk very nice to us.

SELLES: She used to come to the room to visit us, you know. How are you doing, and this and that. Don't worry about it, you're going to . . .

SIGRIST: And was she like a social worker of some sort.

SELLES: She says she was a missionary.

SIGRIST: A missionary.

SELLES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And did she speak Spanish?

BOTH: Yeah.

SIGRIST: That must have been very comforting to you.

BOTH: Oh, yeah!

SELLES: She was God. (they laugh)

BERTOMEU: And then when we come out we got a big sign over here.

SIGRIST: Like an inspection tag on you?

SELLES: Yeah, yeah.

BERTOMEU: And I don't know if she come in and she say, "Tomorrow you're going to go out." She gave you all the news. She was very nice.

SIGRIST: Did, she came once a day to see you?

BERTOMEU: She come every day.

SELLES: Not really every day, you know.

BERTOMEU: Coming once in a while.

SIGRIST: Just to kind of reassure you that everything was all right.

BOTH: Right, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember undergoing any kind of medical exams while you

were at Ellis Island.

BERTOMEU: Oh, yeah.

SELLES: She got a cold and sore throat.

SIGRIST: Pilar got a cold. Oh, well, what did they do when you got a cold?

BERTOMEU: I make believe I'm healthy. I go like this. (she gestures)
"Anybody sick?" I say, "Nobody." Then I start to cough.
(she laughs)

SELLES: She was okay after.

BERTOMEU: I was okay. It was not too bad.

SIGRIST: But they didn't, you didn't have to go through any kind of rigorous . . .

BOTH: No.

SIGRIST: . . . medical exams.

SELLES: And then we got, when we're going to go home we got a number over here. (she gestures) And when my brother coming for us, yeah. We were out already, and . . .

BERTOMEU: He go and take this off. "We don't have to do that." (voices

garbled) "Don't take it off." And he say, "Come on, this is no good no more."

SIGRIST: But you wanted to keep it on. I'm just curious. Do you have any idea what your mother might have been thinking other than, "They might send me back to Cuba." And she wants to get to see her son.

SELLES: Sure.

SIGRIST: I mean, did she cry, did she just . . .

SELLES: She didn't cry. She was, and then I hear her saying, "If they send us back, you know, maybe we try again."

BERTOMEU: My mother, quando [when] my other brother's coming, brother here, she was a little sick, coming from Spain after how long? How long they . . .

SELLES: Before in Cuba, and they here, twelve years they were there.

BERTOMEU: Twelve years, and she get children, and she was so sick in bed. And I live a block from her, and I got two children. I had a boy and a girl, and six grandchildren and six great-grandchildren I got myself from my two kids. I got a boy and a girl. So anyway, and she don't feel good. And she was how, I don't know where. And so I say, "Oh, let me go." And the

telegram, the day they get, my brothers coming from Spain, the telegram coming to my house until the day arrived. So I got my daughter from my hands, she's a little baby, and I say, "Come on, let's go there." And said to knock, I knock on the door, she was in bed. She was alone. And I knock on the door. I'm supposed to tell some things like this. Okay. So she say, she get up and she say, "Oh, why you don't come from the back?" I say, "Well, I don't know if it was open, the door in there." I was afraid to show the thing, in case something going to happen to her, because she was so sick. I stay a little while. I say, "Well," after a little while I say, "I got something, Ma. The kids arriving tomorrow." She started like a crazy. Fix things, buy things for them, for having the food for the kids. So happy, oh, my God. I say oh, my God. She was so sick, and look at that.

SIGRIST: How long had you been here before the rest of the family was brought over? What year did they all come over?

SELLES: Well, four years in Cuba and eight over here, twelve years without seeing them.

SIGRIST: So it was a long time.

BERTOMEU: Sure.

SELLES: The kids, they were twenty and eighteen and sixteen.

SIGRIST: You know, your mother kind of had a hard time, didn't she?

BERTOMEU: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: You know, from the time your father died her life was a real struggle.

SELLES: Real struggle, yeah.

BERTOMEU: She suffered a lot to put the kids in there. Pero [but] I'm telling you that time, my God, she make food, she make some kind of. And then we coming together over here. My brother got the truck, and they were together.

SIGRIST: Her children were strangers to her, really. Except, you know, not you guys.

SELLES: They were little kids and then grownups.

BERTOMEU: She went through a lot.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause now and Kevin's going to pop in another tape, and then we're going to talk about what it was like getting used to America when you got here.

SELLES: Yes.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

SIGRIST: We're now beginning Tape Two with Pilar Bertomeu and Sally Selles who came from Spain via Cuba in 1923. Your brother came to Ellis Island to meet you. You didn't want to take your little tags off. (they laugh) Where did he take you?

BERTOMEU: When we went home?

SIGRIST: When you went home where did he take you?

BERTOMEU: Oh, to a . . .

SELLES: To a boarding house.

BERTOMEU: A boarding house.

SIGRIST: Is this in Newark?

BERTOMEU: In Newark.

SELLES: In Newark, yeah, on Madison Street.

SIGRIST: And tell me what, what was America like? What were some of your first impressions about America.

BERTOMEU: Well, America, I don't know. The houses, so high and different than Cuba, so different. And, I don't know.

SIGRIST: What was different for you, Sally?

SELLES: For me, I like it. It looks like a, to me like freedom, I was free, you know . . .

BERTOMEU: Freedom, yeah.

SELLES: Because over there you stay in the house and you can't do what you want, you know. And I feel so free. (they laugh)

BERTOMEU: Not like it is today, I'm telling you.

SIGRIST: How did you get from, how did you get to Newark? How did he take you to Newark.

BOTH: Subway.

SIGRIST: All the way to Newark.

SELLES: To Newark, yeah.

SIGRIST: And was this the first time you'd ever been on a subway?

SELLES: The first time. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, what did that feel like?

BERTOMEU: No subways in other countries.

SELLES: I say, "Gee."

BERTOMEU: No subways in Cuba.

SELLES: We hear about America, you know. We hear about America, about things. And we knew that the subway was under the ocean, you know.

BERTOMEU: Education in this country.

SELLES: I said, "My God."

BERTOMEU: They want everybody be, you know. In other countries they don't care if you go to school or don't go to school. But over here, we got children. They all, very nice. Go to school.

SIGRIST: So your brother's in a boarding house.

SELLES: Yes.

SIGRIST: Is that where you stayed that first night.

SELLES: We stayed there for a week or more until we, he had a house already, you know, rented house, two bedrooms, and the kitchen, dining room, that was everything. And, you know, they were fixing, painting. So we stay one week without the family, a boarding house.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about the boarding house. What did it look like, and who were the other boarders in there, if you remember?

BERTOMEU: Oh, people go to eat, men sleeping.

SELLES: See, my brother was there, and a couple of men, you know.

BERTOMEU: Then we rented a house, a little cottage, a house, and got electric.

SELLES: We got the gas, the shade on the gas.

BERTOMEU: And a toilet and two rooms, and a sink in the kitchen.

SELLES: It was hard here, too, at that time, 1923.

BERTOMEU: You know, but, listen, for us, coming here . . .

SELLES: It was like a . . .

SIGRIST: Had you seen gaslight and indoor toilets before? Did you see, you didn't have that in Spain probably.

SELLES: Oh, not in Spain.

SIGRIST: In Cuba you might have seen that stuff.

SELLES: Oh, yeah, the rich people yeah.

BERTOMEU: Oh, yeah, my God.

SELLES: But in Spain we went outside. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: No toilets there.

BERTOMEU: Well, we had a chance to have it, but because my father, when he don't want to do that job any more, he didn't fix the house.

SIGRIST: When he was going to fix the house.

BERTOMEU: Put a bath.

SIGRIST: Modernize it.

BERTOMEU: But, like my mother say, that was not for me.

SIGRIST: Did, when you first got to Newark, was there a big Spanish population in Newark at that time?

BERTOMEU: Yeah.

SELLES: Oh, yeah. You hear Spanish people. But a lot speaking in Polish, in German. You hear every language, a lot of languages, yeah.

SIGRIST: Was this unusual for you, or surprising to you to see all these different kinds of people that you had never seen before? Because really you're going from Spain to Cuba, which is also Spanish-speaking.

SELLES: We had already, you know, knew that, because they taught us over here is immigrants, you know, a lot of people talked a whole lot of languages.

SIGRIST: So you sort of expected that.

SELLES: Yeah, we expected it.

SIGRIST: Well, let me ask Pilar, what was the first job you got in America?

BERTOMEU: The first?

SELLES: Edison, no?

BERTOMEU: Edison.

SIGRIST: Edison.

BERTOMEU: Edison. And a machine around, and got a little holes, and used to put the holes in there all around, you know, in there. It's for lights, for the bulb. And I'm telling you. I can't see good. And I never like to go to the movies. I never liked it because I can't see the, and I tell my mother, I say, "How come you see the cars so far and I can't see?" And she say, "Because you don't look right." She never told me take me to the doctor. And you know I needed glasses so bad and I hated movies. I hated movies. And I went to, took me to the doctor, "I can't see the movies. I can't see anything." Even the people from across the street, I don't recognize. And a lot of people say, "Oh, she's so stuck, she don't even want to talk." When I got

the glasses I said, "Oh, my God."

SIGRIST: Did that happen soon after you go to Newark?

BERTOMEU: You know, after I got married and I went to the movies with my children, I even say to him, to them, "What does that man got in the nose?" He say, "A moustache?" (?) to have the same trouble like me.

SIGRIST: So this job that you got, your first job, it really bothered your eyes to do this?

BERTOMEU: Yes, it bothered my eyes.

SIGRIST: Was that typical of the people of your mother's generation, to not go to the doctor for things, or was it just something she didn't . . .

BERTOMEU: I don't know. Even in Cuba. I told her. That happened to me in Cuba, too. When I come over here, and when I put the glasses, "Oh, my God." I said, "What I lose, so much."

SIGRIST: Kind of your Welcome To America present. You can see.
(he laughs)

BERTOMEU: America is the best place to go to, believe me.

SIGRIST: Sally, talk to me a little bit about your mother. Tell me what

she did when she first got to this country.

SELLES: Oh, she, uh, I stay home with her. She went to work, you know. I stayed home. They didn't send me to school. I got shopping, she goes shopping, you know, for food, and I go with her, all that.

SIGRIST: So your mother didn't get a job right off the bat.

SELLES: No, no, she didn't get a job.

SIGRIST: Was your mother kind of frightened by it all?

BOTH: No.

SELLES: No.

BERTOMEU: I got a job because there were a lot of people from Spain, girls, and they make me go to there and I got a job right away, and then in sewing . . .

SIGRIST: So you were kind of, kind of the breadwinner of the family. You were bringing home the paychecks.

BERTOMEU: Oh, yeah. I never take a penny from there.

SIGRIST: And your brother, too. He went with you?

SELLES: Yeah. But then after, you know, passed three months, maybe four

months, maybe, and I was home. And one day two detectives came home. (voices garbled) And they told me, you know. If Monday she's not in school, two hundred fifty dollars fine. And, you know, in those times, two hundred fifty dollars was a lot of money. So that's how I went over here to school.

SIGRIST: Sort of forced to, in a way.

SELLES: I don't even know how to put my name, how to write my name.

BERTOMEU: Even me. I'm older than her. They told me, one time they come into the house and my mother say, "A man was just over here." She say, "You got to go to school in the night." They want you to learn, you know. And you know what my brother say? I don't have to block myself from nothing. He say, "In the night only go the bad girls to school."

SIGRIST: So this is the mentality that we're dealing with. This is how they felt about women getting an education.

SELLES: Right, right.

SIGRIST: Even when he came to this country your brother is still thinking in these Old World sort of ways.

BERTOMEU: And in Spain he went to school while my father was alive, and he goes in the day to the school, and then I go to learn French in

Spain, my brother.

SIGRIST: Well, so did you eventually go to night class?

BERTOMEU: This don't go on the record.

SIGRIST: Did you go to night classes in Newark? Did you finally?

BERTOMEU: No, because he told me don't go. Only bad girls go to school in the night.

SIGRIST: That's terrible. Well, Sally, tell me about going to school for those two years.

BERTOMEU: So I'm the dope in the family.

SELLES: Monday came, my brother took me to school.

SIGRIST: Did he feel differently about you going to school because you were younger?

SELLES: Well, he feel different because they really forced them to send to school. And . . .

BERTOMEU: It's more fair in this country.

SELLES: So I went. I didn't know what they were talking about.

BERTOMEU: Education is best.

SIGRIST: Tell me how you learned English, Sally.

BERTOMEU: Well, she went . . .

SELLES: I went only two years to school, you know, and I didn't know nothing in Spanish because no numbers, and nothing, almost. And it took me a lot, because they put me in a class with little kids, ABC. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: How did you feel about that?

SELLES: It was hard. And I didn't feel like staying there, you know, with the little kids. But then I went to the third grade, you know, third or fourth, which I improve a little, you know. They told me, I used to write my name like that, you know. Like this. (she gestures) I write like this, the way I learn.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when it all made sense to you? Do you remember that moment when suddenly you understood English?

SELLES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I mean, was there a moment where it just kind of clicked on inside of you?

SELLES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember that? Did you help teach your mother English?

How did your mother learn, or did she learn?

SELLES: Well, I help her to get the American citizen. That's how she brought the other kids from Spain, see, the American citizen. So I tried to, you know, teach them, teach her.

SIGRIST: Teach your mother.

SELLES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was that hard?

SELLES: Oh, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did you have to teach her for her to get her citizenship papers?

SELLES: Everything. If they ask, "What's your name?", you know, say, and how they, you know, how many kids you have, when did your husband die, and when you left Spain. Things that they are supposed to ask, you know, all those things.

SIGRIST: Did you have to teach her American history, too? Did she have to answer questions about . . .

SELLES: Yeah, the American flag, about the senators, representatives.

BERTOMEU: Sometimes they, and she goes (she demonstrates mumbling) and she doesn't open her mouth.

SELLES: I remember when she got the immigrant citizens papers.

SIGRIST: Was it hard for her to learn because, I mean, she's so much older, of course.

SELLES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was it hard for her to understand and . . .

SELLES: Very hard, very hard.

SIGRIST: Did she go outside a lot? Did she have friends outside the home?

SELLES: No, she wasn't that kind to. Only in Spanish, you know.

SIGRIST: Pilar, let me ask you, how did you learn English?

BERTOMEU: By talking with friends. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Because you were in, you were in a work situation where other languages are being spoken, right? You probably didn't have to speak English at your job.

BERTOMEU: And, like I say, where I work there's a lot of Spanish people and talk only Spanish in the house. If it weren't for my mother, when I got in my grandchild, she talk Spanish to her. And I said, "If I'm today, I don't talk Spanish to my

grandchildren for nothing." Because, you know, I got a little granddaughter, she's a doctor, and her husband is a doctor. She's Germany, I mean, national. There was a little Jewish boy, and they played together in the yard next door. That's in Irvington, in Newark. And she talk, and she knows, because my mother, we got to talk Spanish with her, even if we don't want to, we got to talk Spanish with her. She talk Spanish with all the grandchildren, too. And that two boys, that little boy and my granddaughter, she's so cute. They both was Jewish, and the parents, they got a store next door my house, couple of blocks. A nice couple, a young couple. And they was talking. He talk in Jewish, and my daughter talk to my in Spanish.

(she laughs) Because my mother, everybody got to talk Spanish.

SIGRIST: Well, that sounds kind of like being in Newark in 1923. Everyone is talking different languages.

BERTOMEU: And I hear sometimes in the yard, and I see those two kids. And she say, "I'm going to mi casa [my house]. Yo me voy a mi casa. [I'm going to my house.]" My granddaughter. And he say in Jewish, he say in Jewish. I'm laughing with those two kids, I'm telling you.

SELLES: He talking Spanish, my son.

SIGRIST: It's good to know different languages.

SELLES: Oh, yeah.

BERTOMEU: Oh, sure.

SIGRIST: What about your brother? Did he learn English?

SELLES: Who?

SIGRIST: Your brother.

SELLES: Oh, yeah. He died, he died.

SIGRIST: Soon after you got here?

SELLES: No. He died, let me see, about nine years ago.

SIGRIST: Oh, oh. Okay. But he learned English.

BOTH: Oh, yeah.

BERTOMEU: When you know, and he knows in Spanish, he, I mean, he went to school in Spain when my father was alive.

SIGRIST: He was well-educated.

SELLES: It's easy to learn the other languages. And when you don't know, it's hard.

SIGRIST: And neither of you had the advantage of being in a school

situation and having to learn when you were young, so it must have been just that much harder once you got here.

SELLES: Sure, sure.

BERTOMEU: Sure.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about, you said your mother was not terribly religious, but . . .

SELLES: No.

SIGRIST: Did she become more religious here, because I imagine most of the Spanish people would have been around the church, probably.

SELLES: No, she didn't go to church, no.

SIGRIST: So that really wasn't part of your life.

BERTOMEU: No. You never hear of Jehovah's Witness, about Jehovah's Witness?

SIGRIST: Excuse me? Jehovah's Witnesses.

SELLES: Jehovah's Witnesses. She became that.

SIGRIST: Later on.

SELLES: Later, yeah. Oh, yeah, she was.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, that's interesting. Well, let me see. When, (to Ms. Bertomeu) did you get married soon after you got to America?

BERTOMEU: I think a couple of years.

SIGRIST: What year did you get married?

SELLES: 1925.

SIGRIST: Pilar got married in 1925.

SELLES: 1925, yeah.

SIGRIST: And what was your husband's name?

BOTH: Vincent.

SIGRIST: Bertomeu.

SELLES: Yeah, Bertomeu.

SIGRIST: And was he an immigrant, or had he been born in this country.

SELLES: Oh, no. He was an immigrant, too.

BERTOMEU: And immigrant, too.

SIGRIST: Where did he come from?

SELLES: From Valencia.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. How did you meet your husband?

BERTOMEU: Well, I meet him one time in the dance. We was going to the dance, and I meet him. He's nice. And her husband is from Valencia, too, Valencia.

SIGRIST: And when did you marry your husband?

SELLES: 1933, I think.

SIGRIST: And what was his name?

SELLES: John.

SIGRIST: John Selles.

SELLES: John Selles.

SIGRIST: So your son is a junior. And he was also from Valencia.

SELLES: From Valencia, yes.

SIGRIST: How did you meet your husband?

SELLES: In the dances. We used to go to Spanish dances a lot.

SIGRIST: Was this, were you still in Newark when this happened.

SELLES: Yeah, we were in Newark.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about the Spanish community in Newark? It seems like . . .

SELLES: Oh, a lot of Spanish in Newark.

BERTOMEU: My daughter, she belonged to a club, the Spanish, in America, too. And the other day they went to, her and her husband, they call . . .

SIGRIST: I mean then, in the 1920's, was Newark, the Spanish community very active in Newark and very large?

BERTOMEU: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you talk to me about the dances you used to go to?

BERTOMEU: They belonged, the Spanish dances, to this club, they call, uh, Young, uh, La Joventud, como se dice [The Youth, how do you say it?], the Youth Club.

SELLES: The Youth Club.

BERTOMEU: The Youth Club.

SIGRIST: Direct translation.

BERTOMEU: So now they all, you know. Not old yet, and they went, I no longer go. They went to the dance. And they, they put some money. And every year they make the reunion. So the other day

they went. Her husband's name is Mike, and they sit all together. There's a lot of Americans there, too. And they went to the dancing, and she say, "You know, Ma, Mike, he look better than everybody. Young." (she laughs) You know, still they're young. The forties, seventies, something like that. And they enjoy.

SIGRIST: But when you were girls. Let's get us back into the 1920's, when you were girls who sponsored these Spanish dances?
Who . . .

SELLES: The club. It was, they have a club that they call Center Espanol, the Spanish club, so they even got a, so that's, you know, everybody, you pay every month some.

SIGRIST: And that's how it worked back then.

SELLES: Yeah. Another club, they call it. The Spanish people go there.

SIGRIST: And would adults and young people go to these dances, or did they just have young people dances?

SELLES: No, everybody. And the old ladies go with the young daughter, you know. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: That's right, chaperons. Did your mother go to these dances with you?

SELLES: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BERTOMEU: She used to go.

SIGRIST: It was, I suppose, a change for her.

BOTH: They make a show, too.

SIGRIST: You mean like a performance.

SELLES: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you ever have to perform?

SELLES: I did.

BERTOMEU: She danced. (they laugh) And my brother, too. They was good. He was good, too.

SELLES: I was the maid.

SIGRIST: You were the maid?

SELLES: Maid, yeah. And the, uh, the first, you know . . .

BERTOMEU: Actress.

SIGRIST: And these were all in Spanish?

BERTOMEU: In Spanish, yeah.

SIGRIST: So this is really a major way of meeting other Spanish people.

BOTH: Yeah.

BERTOMEU: Oh, they got a lot, and good actors from New York, too. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: So what year was it that the rest of your brothers and sisters came over? Do you remember exactly what year it was?

BERTOMEU: 1933.

SIGRIST: '33 they came over. And tell me a little bit about your mother's life after the whole family was together.

SELLES: She was happy, though. Oh, she was happy.

BERTOMEU: She was very happy. We all was very happy. My brother took the truck to the boat, to . . .

SELLES: Yeah.

BERTOMEU: And we see three together. I had my little girl, too. I had my little girl. She was four years old. And she went, my brother with the truck, a couple of friends.

SELLES: And even the truck, they got it Mendez, you know, so they recognize it because were small when we . . .

BERTOMEU: Maybe they don't recognize them, and three together. And we started calling, my brother started calling. And they looking, and they know, because they got to wait. You know, you can't, you got to wait when you're going to get out. Oh, I was really. My mother, she make so much food. I can't believe it. She was so sick.

SIGRIST: But maybe this was kind of your mother's reward for all those years of hardship.

SELLES: Yeah, she suffered.

SIGRIST: And finally her whole family is together.

SELLES: She suffered.

SIGRIST: Well, I have a couple final questions to ask you, and one is, your mother never wanted to go back to Spain, did she?

BOTH: No.

SIGRIST: Did either of you, in your adult life, ever want to go back to Spain?

SELLES: She did.

SIGRIST: Did you go back?

BERTOMEU: Oh, I went three times.

SIGRIST: But only to visit.

BERTOMEU: I went one time to my place and another time to my husband's, my husband's place.

SIGRIST: Did it look different than how you had remembered it?

BERTOMEU: Oh, yeah, much different, much better.

SIGRIST: Things had gotten better.

BERTOMEU: Yeah.

SELLES: Oh, she was in Madrid and all these places.

SIGRIST: Madrid is nice.

SELLES: Not in, where we used to be. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: With the goats.

SELLES: With the goats and the pigs.

BERTOMEU: I went with my husband around two times to see his family, and then, well, after he died I didn't go any more. I went with my daughter and her husband, too, to my place.

SIGRIST: How did you feel when you saw, when you saw your old house?

BERTOMEU: They all look better, and they still live in one house.

SIGRIST: But emotionally how did you feel? When you saw the house you grew up in, how did you feel inside?

BERTOMEU: Oh, I don't feel anything. I feel happy over here.

SIGRIST: Just kind of forget about it.

SELLES: She didn't even know where she was.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) Maybe it's better that way. So are you glad you came to this country?

BOTH: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would have been different if you hadn't come here.

BERTOMEU: I love America better than any country.

SELLES: I send the kids to school, to college and everything. Over there we couldn't. We got a good family. Big difference. Our kids, they got a better education.

SIGRIST: So the education is a really important thing.

BOTH: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, before we close can I entice either or both of you into singing a little Spanish song?

SELLES: (they laugh) I don't have no voice.

SIGRIST: It's okay. Please, just something little into the microphone in Spanish, something your mother sang to you as a child, or something like that.

SELLES: Rock-a-bye baby. (she laughs) Como le cantado [how did she sing it?].

BERTOMEU: I'm sorry. I have no voice.

SELLES: I used to sing.

SIGRIST: Just a little something.

BOTH: (they sings) "Munequita linda, de cabellos de oro, de diente de perla, labios de ruby. Di me si le quieres, como yo te quiero, tanto como entonces, siempre hasta morir." [Pretty doll with hair of gold, teeth like pearls, lips like rubies. Tell me if you love me like I love you always, until we die.] A little bit. (they laugh)

SELLES: It was our pleasure.

SIGRIST: That was really nice, thank you. I want to thank you both for coming out here. This has been a real treat, and you're both delightful. I told you it would be fun. (they laugh)

BERTOMEU: To my nephew, I say, "I want to kill you." Why you go through this trouble?

SELLES: Oh, come on. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Pilar Bertomeu and Sally Selles on Wednesday, May 19, 1993.