

EI-668

MARIE DI BELLA

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RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is September 22nd, 1995, and I'm here with Marie DiBella.

DIBELLA: Correct.

LEVINE: Who came from what was Croatia at that time.

DIBELLA: Exactly.

LEVINE: In 1913, you think, and came through Ellis Island at the age of six years.

DIBELLA: That's right. That's correct.

LEVINE: And today we are in Ellis Island, however, not in the studio and we have with us Rosemary Schmitt, who is Mrs. DiBella's daughter. Okay. Well, I'm delighted to talk with you and anything you can remember.

DIBELLA: [Laughs] You make it delightful to speak, too.

LEVINE: Thank you. Okay, let's start at the beginning, Mrs. DiBella. Could you say your birth date for the tape?

DIBELLA: January 30th.

LEVINE: 19—

DIBELLA: Oh, 1907. '07.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and where in Croatia were you born?

DIBELLA: Where? In the principle city. It has really two names. The Croatian name Rijeka, and the Italian name, Fume, which means river, translated. It's at the very top of the Adriatic, if you look on the map. At the very top to the right in a large gulf, you know, and that was the principle city of the—well, of Croatia. It wasn't Yugoslavia at that time yet.

LEVINE: But the Croatian word is R-I-J-E-K-A?

DIBELLA: R-I-J, Rijeka.

LEVINE: Rijeka.

DIBELLA: Correct.

LEVINE: Rijeka, okay. And did you live in Fume, Rijeka?

DIBELLA: I was born there.

LEVINE: Did you live there up until you were six years old?

DIBELLA: Until I was six years old. My mother had died after I was born and so my aunt took me. My mother's—not my mother's. How was that connection? My father's sister took me because they had—their family was already in New York and they had plans to come here and they took me. Of course, because I would have been left there and she was very loving, you know. I don't think she would have been able to do it, which she decided on the right thing, make an American out of her. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What was your father's name?

DIBELLA: Antony. Anthony.

LEVINE: Oh.

DIBELLA: I affected. I didn't know that. Anton, A-N-T-O-N, Kovach, K-O-V-A-C-H.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and your mother, do you remember her maiden name, as well as her married name?

DIBELLA: Bibi Anna. Bibi Anna—oh, dear me. I had the name.

LEVINE: Okay, perhaps your daughter can say.

DIBELLA: Bibi Anna Grbac, G-R-B-A-C. Grbac, it's a soft C at the end, Grbac.

LEVINE: And your aunt's name? Your father's sister?

DIBELLA: Well, she was—let's see, what was their name? My father's—

LEVINE: Here, you have it on this form. It's Teresa—oh, Sucher.

DIBELLA: That's it. Sucher. It's a German. He was German or Austrian. More Austrian. So that's correct then, S-U-C-H-E-R.

LEVINE: And did you know—did you know your aunt and uncle while you were growing up, before you came here?

DIBELLA: Well, they—they raised me.

LEVINE: But I mean before, after your mother and up until you were six years old, they raised you, too?

DIBELLA: They took me immediately at my mother's death. I was an infant. How old I was, I don't know. Must have been maybe a year or maybe almost two. That I don't know. I never heard that brought up, so I wouldn't have remembered just how. But I was their baby because they took me in and I became—they became my parents.

LEVINE: Do you remember the house you lived in when you were in Fume?

DIBELLA: Where she lived? Oh, it was right off the main street, but I took years ago now back and I visited the place and all that, but I don't have the address.

LEVINE: Oh, no, but I mean can you describe it? What was it like where you lived in Fume?

DIBELLA: Very nice. Great big rooms, you know. I don't know, they had an apartment. I remember—sometimes I think of my past and I think once I had a five or six room apartment, very nice on the second floor. What I remember is, it was so far back that we didn't have a stove, but a built in

fireplace to cook in. You know, a full size in the kitchen. So that kept you also warmer in the winter, I suppose.

LEVINE: Can you remember any things that your aunt cooked, that she made on that fireplace?

DIBELLA: Well, naturally she cooked for a baby and then a child later. I always remember enjoying my food and what it was, I can't tell you exactly now.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh, and do you remember any experiences with your aunt when you were in Fume? Places you went with her or activities?

DIBELLA: Well, oh, yes. See, her daughter, Raisy, since I was growing, so she sewed for me, made me dresses. Oh, I was made to look as cute as she could make me, I suppose. You know, there was nothing but love really all the way through. I was very fortunate.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and how about your uncle? What was he like?

DIBELLA: Well, my uncle, you see, at that point that I recall, the men folk were already in New York, in America. So I didn't see much of him. They would come in for visits, you know, but they went back because they were employed, which was difficult in Europe, when it came to employment. That's why the men left.

LEVINE: Was your father—did your father leave, too?

DIBELLA: Yes.

LEVINE: For America?

DIBELLA: Yes, yes. In fact, I didn't—I don't remember him. Maybe once that I was old enough to recall his visits, the day he came and that was it. Then I was met—then when I was brought here, we took a trip to see my father, to show him his daughter. [Laughs]

LEVINE: What were the men doing here—

DIBELLA: Pardon?

LEVINE: What kind of work was your uncle and your father doing in the United States?

DIBELLA: He was—well, he was a baker on ship board. A baker, so he flied [sic] back and forth and then finally decided that's what he'd continue doing. He was a baker, and that's all I can remember. So then I remember he

ended up in Cleveland and that's where I was taken every summer to see him, you know. And that's the story of my infancy. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Okay. Well, can you remember anything else about the town? Any celebrations that [unclear]?

DIBELLA: You mean in Europe?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DIBELLA: Oh, yes. Yes, because we had, as I said, an apartment upstairs and that was—when we heard music, everybody was going to the front windows, you know, to see, to enjoy the music. There was plenty of that in Europe, you know. The associations, love music and so I do recall that, which was very nice.

LEVINE: Were a religious family? Were you brought up religious?

DIBELLA: Oh, yes. Yes. Yes, not strict, I must say, you know, but you know, instilled goodness by showing, by speaking of it. You know, we all have to behave, you know, as teaching a child. You know, more or less the same thing there as they do here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What particular church did you go to?

DIBELLA: Well, the one that was—it's funny, when I went back I couldn't find it because I didn't remember its name. I really didn't. I was disappointed that time.

LEVINE: Was it a Catholic church?

DIBELLA: Oh, yes. Oh, absolutely. Everybody was Catholic there, you know. [Giggles]

LEVINE: And do you remember any kind of social life that the grownups had? Do you remember—

DIBELLA: Well, yes. There were—there was company, you know. Well, it depended on the associations, you know, how—and the schools that my cousin attended. Her brother was already in America and that's—and then they led a very nice life, you know. Of course, the money came mostly from America because there it was getting worse and worse. That's why half of Europe has left through the years. [Laughs] That far back, which is in the early 1900s, it couldn't have been very good.

LEVINE: So it was mostly the men who had gone to America?

DIBELLA: Pardon?

LEVINE: A lot of men had already gone to America and the women and children—

DIBELLA: Oh, yes. That's true. That's the way—it may be different now, but it wasn't then. So the men went where they could win the bread.

LEVINE: Now, did you have friends? Do you remember any friends that you had as a little girl?

DIBELLA: Well, no. I was too young. I was—what was I? Five, barely six, you know.

LEVINE: So you didn't start school, either, in Europe?

DIBELLA: Well, it was more of a kindergarten, that's what I recall. We played. Oh, that was my first choice to go and see back when I came. We had a large wall, very pleasant wall all around us, two sides, and we played outdoors all the time. It was more of a kindergarten than a first grade.
[Laughs]

LEVINE: So you spent a year there and you enjoyed that?

DIBELLA: Pardon?

LEVINE: You enjoyed a year, a whole year there?

DIBELLA: Oh, well, no, no. This is when I was still living there, you know, and then of course I went when I visited when I grew up, and I took a trip. I've been there twice after. Once I flew and once by ship, and I would go to, I think it's natural, the earliest memories are of most interest to one when you're repeating that same place, you know.

LEVINE: Were there any other early memories that we haven't talked about? Anything else that you remember about that early time?

DIBELLA: Nothing outstanding. Nothing that—no. I had a very quiet, happy child life, you know.

LEVINE: Do you know what kind of a child you were?

DIBELLA: Well, I suppose I remember being scolded once in a while, you know, but on the whole, I didn't—I think with boys it's different. With a little girl, they're more obedient maybe. I know I can't say that I was chastised ever, you know, badly. Never.

LEVINE: Did you have grandparents?

DIBELLA: No.

LEVINE: That you recall?

DIBELLA: No, no.

LEVINE: How about other extended family members? Any other family members?

DIBELLA: I couldn't find anyone. You see, many years had gone by before I returned there, and of course I looked because I remember their name and I got nowhere, unfortunately.

LEVINE: Well, do you remember what you thought about America before you came to this country?

DIBELLA: Well, what could I think, you know?

LEVINE: Did you have any ideas?

DIBELLA: Well, how can a child of that age think, if she hasn't seen something to think of it. I hadn't seen it yet, but then I remember that I was very happy. I was taken immediately. We landed, of course—where are we now?

LEVINE: Ellis Island.

DIBELLA: Well, in Ellis Island, that's right.

LEVINE: Well, before we talk about Ellis Island, do you remember leaving Fume and going to get the ship to take you to America?

DIBELLA: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, I remember that trip very well. It was the first time that—I had sailed on smaller boats, but this was a ship for, you know, the Atlantic that we went to New York. I remember one pleasant interlude. I was, of course, dancing up and down the deck once, and a gentleman, an American, he was so nice. He must have said something, but I didn't understand him. But he gave me two American Indian pennies. [Laughs] Have you ever seen any? I don't think there are many around anymore. That was the penny was usually the American Indian design. [Laughs] That was very—it remained—I was only, what, six years old, and I remember that. How gracious he was, you know. I must have been prancing around he gives me two American

pennies, and I thought that was wonderful. American, you know. Anything American was tops! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Do you remember the name of the ship?

DIBELLA: I've been trying to remember and I think I did at one point. Ivernia. I-V-E-R-N-I-A. Ivernia.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about it? About the passage?

DIBELLA: About the passage? Well, it was very pleasant. It was very pleasant. We had a beautiful dining room and beautiful staircase going down to the dining room, you know, and lots of service. It was very nice.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds as though you were not traveling steerage or third class.

DIBELLA: No, no. No, no. No, we had our—I was with my aunt and cousin, so that it was a bedroom with two beds. You know, one bunk higher than the other.

LEVINE: Bunk beds.

DIBELLA: Of course, my aunt had the lower one and my cousin, who was younger, she was—and I was tucked in on a velvet couch. On the other wall, you know. So it was cozy. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Do you remember when the ship, when the Ivernia came into the New York Harbor?

DIBELLA: Well, I should remember. I do remember, but what I'm trying to say is I don't remember any particular details, you know. It was evening and then, of course, we didn't leave until the morning. That was exciting. America, you know. The [unclear], New York. [Laughs] Well, there isn't much to tell about that part. I have nothing I can recount.

LEVINE: Do you have any impressions of Ellis Island, of coming here?

DIBELLA: Well, now, see, in speaking I forgot I'm in Ellis Island at this moment. Yes. Well, we were together. Yes, we were together, my aunt, my cousin and I, and it was very nice. You know, decent. The people were pleasant. So Ellis Island is a big word to Europeans. It used to be in Europe many years ago when they reached there, they know they're safe. In New York. [Laughing]

LEVINE: Do you recall—the ship came in in the evening, and then did you stay over night at Ellis Island? Or did you stay over night on the ship?

DIBELLA: We had to. Oh, yes. Yes, on Ellis Island. We got off because I suppose they had other plans and, well, I suppose you know the story about the—I went up some place to sleep. I went up high, high, high. There were different layers.

LEVINE: Bunks.

DIBELLA: You know, but I was put there. Children. The children, the smaller ones, you know, were—they were able to take care of them in that manner at that time.

LEVINE: Was it like a big dormitory room with a lot of children in it?

DIBELLA: It wasn't a room exactly. I may not remember correctly. You know, at that point a sleepy child of six, you don't know what you see or don't see.

LEVINE: True.

DIBELLA: But it was—oh, yes. Oh, did you tell the lady what happened? No? I don't want to say myself.

SCHMITT: Should I? No, I think it's an anecdote.

LEVINE: Exactly. Do you want to tell it?

DIBELLA: Pardon?

LEVINE: Would you like to tell it?

DIBELLA: Well, that was the shame of a little boy. I was on—up high and the little boy was up higher and he had to do something, so I got wet. [Laughs] It isn't a pleasant memory.

LEVINE: No.

DIBELLA: But it's funny. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else? Anything else that happened in Ellis Island? Do you remember going to the dining room?

DIBELLA: Oh, that was special. That was nice. As I said, we had a nice staircase. The dining room was a lower level, I suppose, and beautifully served and a nice table, you know, setting.

LEVINE: This was on the Ivernia?

DIBELLA: Ivernia.

LEVINE: Now, how about when you got to Ellis Island, was that very different?

DIBELLA: Oh, in Ellis Island, let's see, about eating. Oh, it was adequate. You know, after it, it isn't a hotel. You know, but I don't think I gave that a matter of thought at that age.

LEVINE: No.

DIBELLA: [Coughs] Excuse me.

LEVINE: Do you remember if someone met you at Ellis Island? Did your uncle or your father come and meet you?

DIBELLA: Oh! Well, no, they couldn't. The family lived way out in Ohio, so I know the first I saw them was there. I didn't see them at the—on shipboard.

LEVINE: Now, you were traveling with your aunt and your cousin, right?

DIBELLA: Yes, exactly.

LEVINE: Do you remember when you left Ellis Island? What did you do then?

DIBELLA: Well, this is it. Then we got on a train and we went to Ohio.

LEVINE: Do you remember any first impressions, getting on the train and traveling to Ohio?

DIBELLA: Well, I had been on trains before in Europe. So that was, you know, nothing unusual. It was very nice, of course. My impressions were all pleasant. There was nothing that I remember was an ugly recollection.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember arriving in Ohio?

DIBELLA: Oh, yes. Yes. We traveled all night and then later I saw that we had to back up somewhere in Pennsylvania to get out of the way of another train or something, and so we were delayed and it was winter when we arrived. There we were, met with piles of snow and I had never seen snow in my life before. [Laughs] But anyhow, the family was there and I was picked up then and somebody or other would carry me, the males, on their back, you know. There I was in Youngstown then, in Ohio. I went all the way over to Ohio to see the United States. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Do you remember any things that struck you as different when you first got there, different from anything you had known?

DIBELLA: No, not really. No. The children were pleasant and they were first—you know, attention that I paid attention to more, the playmates that I happened to have. They were very pleasant and how I spoke with them, I don't remember that, how. I must have just played. Well, then, you know, you hear. A child hearing words and phrases picks them up quicker and I suppose that's what I had to do to understand what they were telling me.

LEVINE: Did you start school soon after you arrived?

DIBELLA: Oh, yes. Right the first semester. Oh, surely. Well, I was just the right age, so there was no time to fool around. I was pleased. I was pleased because I was used to that, going to school over there, anyhow, see.

LEVINE: Are there any things that you remember about learning the language?

DIBELLA: Well, it wasn't immediately, you know, but I don't remember any great difficulty because I didn't expect it of myself. I was, you know, kind of dubious of what it was that was said but I strove to remember what I did learn. You know, to help me, and then of course I imagine—this I don't even remember, did I ever ask what was being said? I don't remember that part, to be explained. I don't remember that, but I think I learned immediately because there were other children and next door there was a family of five children, whom I came to know quickly and playing with them. And a child, immediately, you pick it up. You pick it up and so I had no trouble with the English. When I started in school, I don't remember any problem.

[End of Tape One, Side A/Start of Tape One, Side B]

LEVINE: Were there many other children who had come from Europe around Youngstown that you knew about?

DIBELLA: No. No, they were all American born, so they spoke only American English, I mean.

LEVINE: Well, how were you received?

DIBELLA: pardon?

LEVINE: How were you received as a child coming from another country, another language?

DIBELLA: They welcomed me. They asked me to play with them because they saw that I was interested, and you know, with a group of children, they always want more, one more. So I was welcome, I guess. [Laughs] I don't know.

LEVINE: And did you stay in Youngstown?

DIBELLA: Stay?

LEVINE: Until you grew up?

DIBELLA: Oh, yes. Yes, I did. I started school and then after that high school and so on. So I was there until—what brought me away? To go in—daddy.

LEVINE: Do you remember how you met your husband?

DIBELLA: Daddy. Oh, yeah. Well, no. No, no, I went from Youngstown I had—my cousin from Fume lived in—where did they live?

SCHMITT: New York.

DIBELLA: Well, at the beginning they did, but later on when I was staying still with my aunt, then Raisy wrote, you know, why don't I come and visit because, well, I was in my teens already then. So I came. I left Ohio and of course I spoke English by then. Of course. So it—

LEVINE: So you visited your cousin?

DIBELLA: Well, Raisy was my first cousin and she had married a DiBella, and then later I did the same thing, her brother in-law. But it was family, you know, because she had me when I was a tine—you know, she remembered me as an older sister, a baby. So that's why when she said, "Why don't you come to New Jersey?" you know. When a young person, that's all they need to hear, you know, that they can go some place different?

LEVINE: Well, do you remember meeting your husband?

DIBELLA: Meeting? Yes. Oh, yes. Well, see, my cousin married a DiBella. What was his name? There were—my future mother in-law, she was such a wonderful person. I found myself a job in New York and she wanted me to stay with them. So—oh, yeah. Yeah, I've been holding it long enough. [Laughs] [Pause] Thanks, sweetheart.

LEVINE: Well, you found a job in New York.

DIBELLA: Yes.

LEVINE: What kind of a job was it?

DIBELLA: Typing. The usual, beginner, you know, because I had that knowledge from school to use. Then my mother-in-law didn't want to travel all the way from Jersey. "Come and stay with us." They lived then on a beautiful big apartment up on 110th Street right by the Park and they had space because it was a big one. So I agreed for the weekend, you know, and that's how I met my future husband. He was still unmarried. So the name DiBella became double in our family.

LEVINE: And what was your husband's first name?

DIBELLA: My husband? Peppe. Giuseppe. Joseph, but Peppe is the what do you call name?

SCHMITT: It's a nickname.

DIBELLA: Favorite. What's the other word for it. I can't think of it now.

LEVINE: It's an affection term.

DIBELLA: Yeah, Peppe. Giuseppe and then it's shortened by the Italians, Peppe. Peppe here, Peppe there, instead of saying all of Giuseppe, you know.

LEVINE: And how many children did you have?

DIBELLA: I had one child. Here she is. [Laughs] I had one.

LEVINE: And do you have grandchildren?

DIBELLA: And I have a grandson, a very nice grandson named Eric. I forget, how old is he now?

SCHMITT: He's thirty and a half. Lots of time has gone by.

DIBELLA: Huh?

SCHMITT: Thirty and a half.

DIBELLA: Eric. I don't believe it. [Laughter]

SCHMITT: Time flies.

DIBELLA: I feel older right away.

LEVINE: When you look back on your life, do you feel as though those early years and coming here to a new country, do you think that made a difference in the kind of person you became? Do you think it influenced you very much?

DIBELLA: Well, I was very happy to be an American. I was happy with the family, with the friends I had. I would think of my place of birth and as I said, I went back twice just to pick up the memories, you know, as a youngster. So I've been a rather happy person. I can't complain. Thank God.

LEVINE: What makes you feel very satisfied about having done in your lifetime?

DIBELLA: I haven't accomplished much. I haven't accomplished much. I would have liked to have written a little book. You know, just my own experiences, but I never got to it. It takes courage because you don't want to feel as if you feel important enough to have to tell the world what happened to you, you know? Yet, on the other hand, I regret because I had a sort of a full time, you know, although some years went by when it was exactly the same like everybody else's. But I sometimes I think now, I don't know how to explain it. Maybe because, you know, you find these little books, you know, and everybody feels the same way some time or other, to put down what they have gone through. In a way to preserve that memory, also, one wants to write it. But I never got to that point. I don't think I'm good enough for that.

LEVINE: Well, you speak very well.

DIBELLA: Well, thank you.

LEVINE: I would assume you would write well. Could you put your finger on what you consider high points?

DIBELLA: Pardon?

LEVINE: Were there high points in your life, what you consider some of the best times of your life?

DIBELLA: Oh, bad times?

LEVINE: Well, good or bad.

DIBELLA: No. When we had—when there was this—what do you call it when everybody's out of work?

LEVINE: The Depression.

DIBELLA: Depression. My memory is failing me. Depression. Of course, I think everyone's affected by that, and I, too, felt when one's husband isn't working, you know, it's bound to happen. Then slowly you pick up the threads and even when you lose a husband, you can't go on crying all the time. You've got to get back to normal. You have to—a person I think has a certain amount of love and pleasure and then there are times when it's just the reverse and you have to accept that and I tried to. And here I am, I'm a widow how many years now?

SCHMITT: Twenty-four.

DIBELLA: [unclear]. A quarter of a century that I'm alone.

LEVINE: Well, how would you describe this phase of your life, your old age phase?

DIBELLA: My old age is very good. It's very good. I mean basically I'm not ill and that's the most important, isn't it? Then I have a lovely daughter, a very nice son-in-law and a grandson as family, so that's quite full, too, and happy. So I can't complain, even though I'm a widow. Those things happen, but why is it that the husbands always go first? Well, they worry a lot. They work hard and they give out then. Yeah, and they have more responsibility in a way, you know, than a mother does. Who's going to bring home the bacon? It's daddy. Well, I think I haven't left anything unsaid.

LEVINE: I was just going to ask you if there was anything else you could think of relevant to your life before you came to this country, and then since the time?

DIBELLA: Well, you know what it was? When I came to this country and I made it my business when I felt the courage enough to do it alone, I went back to Europe and I went to the spots that I remember with pleasure. You know, the parks where in the evening we would hear music, you know, played in Del Massia and oh, it, you know, I wanted to replenish my memories with the same. [Laughs] Oh, life is what you make it. I suppose I could cry all the time of I'm alone, but it's only going to make me sick, and when I'm sick, I'm a worry to my daughter, you know. It doesn't pay.

LEVINE: Well, I think maybe we'll close here. I want to thank you very much for a very interesting—

DIBELLA: You're very welcome. I hope I haven't overtaken your time.

LEVINE: Oh, not at all. It's a pleasure. I've been speaking with Marie DiBella who came in 1913.

DIBELLA: That's correct.

LEVINE: From Croatia.

DIBELLA: Yes, at that time.

LEVINE: Fume.

DIBELLA: Fume, yes.

LEVINE: And today is September 22nd, 1995, so that makes you ninety—no, eighty-eight. Eighty eight?

SCHMITT: She's eighty-eight.

LEVINE: Eighty-eight. You're eighty-eight years old now, at this time.

DIBELLA: Yeah, that's correct. Eighty-eight. Yeah, close to ninety. I don't feel that old. [Laughs] You helped me.

LEVINE: Okay.

DIBELLA: By bringing everything forth with your questions.

LEVINE: I have the feeling that you do very well on your own speaking. Well, thank you very much.

DIBELLA: You're very welcome.

LEVINE: And I want to say thank you and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off. [tape off/on] Okay, we're going to continue here with some songs.

DIBELLA: [singing in background]

LEVINE: That Mrs. DiBella remembers from Croatia. Here, would you like to sit or stand?

DIBELLA: Oh, yes. Oh, this. I see. Like this? [singing] Is it on?

LEVINE: Yes.

DIBELLA: Oh.

LEVINE: So, however you can remember to begin and whatever you can remember.

DIBELLA: Yeah. [pause] See, I get it mixed up. I never sing this. [singing]
[Laughs]

LEVINE: Wonderful.

DIBELLA: Picking flowers and giving them to my lover, you know. [speaks in foreign language]

LEVINE: That's beautiful. Thank you so much.

DIBELLA: Oh, please, I'm sorry that I really can't contribute the right way, you know, remembering.

LEVINE: That's wonderful.

DIBELLA: Because—

[End of Interview]