

PEI-9

BETTY (BIANCA) DORNBAUM SCHUBERT

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ROMANIA, 1911

AGE 7

PORT: LE HAVRE:

RESIDENCES:

- **ROMANIA: JASI**
- **THE US: NEW YORK CITY, AVE C**

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. It is Wednesday, November 7, 1990. We are here in the home of Bianca Dornbaum Schubert, who came from Romania in 1911 when she was seven and a half. Mrs. Schubert, could you please list your full name and date of birth for us.

SCHUBERT: I was born February 12, 1903 in Jasi, Romania.

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SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit about your parents. Describe you father for us, please.

SCHUBERT: I have never seen or known my father. He died before I was a year old and I was brought up by my grandmother and grandfather.

SIGRIST: I see. How did your father die?

SCHUBERT: I honestly don't remember but I think it was either pneumonia or he had something, but he was in the service at the time because I have a picture of him in a uniform.

SIGRIST: And what year did he die?

SCHUBERT: Well, evidently, if I was born in 1903, he must have died around that time because when I was a year old...

SIGRIST: He was already dead.

SCHUBERT: He was already dead.

SIGRIST: All right, let's talk about growing up a little bit. You said that you were raised by your grandparents.

SCHUBERT: My mother's...

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about, for instance, the house that you lived in when you were a girl.

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SCHUBERT: Oh, I remember a few, but this in particular. You came into a yard and there were apartments on the ground floor and there was a balcony with apartments overhead. That was it. On the right side as you came in from the gate was supposed to have been the toilet, I guess, because it had two foot marks in like ceramic and a hole. And that was it.

SIGRIST: And that was when you just came into the gate?

SCHUBERT: When you, it was quite a yard and maybe once a month or once a couple of weeks gypsies used to come and if you had copper pots they used to shine them for you.

SIGRIST: I see. So this building actually had lots of different families living in it.

SCHUBERT: Yes, quite a few.

SIGRIST: Now how many, how many were there in your family?

SCHUBERT: Just my grandfather. He was, oh, you would call him like a sexton.

SIGRIST: For a church?

SCHUBERT: In a big temple. The biggest temple in Jasi.

SIGRIST: I see. What was his name?

SCHUBERT: Well, in American you would call him "Gerald" but his Jewish name

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was "Gedalia." You can have various names made from that. "Jesse," and so on. Anything beginning with "Gedalia."

SIGRIST: And his last name was "Dornbaum?"

SCHUBERT: No. My grandfather's name was not "Dorn..."

SIGRIST: Oh, is this, these weren't your paternal grandparent's.

SCHUBERT: My mother's parents.

SIGRIST: Your mother's parents.

SCHUBERT: And the name was "Markowitz."

SIGRIST: I see.

SCHUBERT: And they brought us up. My sister and myself. My sister is two years older than I am.

SIGRIST: Just the two kids.

SCHUBERT: Just the two of us.

SIGRIST: Yes.

SCHUBERT: And I remember that we lived sort of like in the middle of the block and the end of the block was like an avenue where a lot of stores were. I remember there was like a hayloft across the street. There

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was a store where they had a big window but I saw them make what they call "matzos." And on the corner where we lived there was a bar and opposite that was a big, a very big fruit store. I got in trouble at the bar.

SIGRIST: How did you get in trouble?

SCHUBERT: Well, it was a very high holy day, Jewish holiday, and what they, Passover, and my grandmother and grandfather were at Temple and my sister and I were supposed to be very nice young ladies. And somehow or the other I found a gold piece and I went into the bar and grill and I said it belonged to Grandpa and he asked him if he can change it. And then I took all my friends on a binge. Of course, we were only supposed to eat certain foods at that time. And I don't know how many blocks away was a square and around the square they had a movie, they had like a two tier merry-go-round, ice cream soda, they had a side show and all, so I took my friends. We went, we went on the merry-go-round and we went on the, the show was a snake that sleeps in a bed that is almost human. And we were screaming because we had, we thought the snake wouldn't go where it was supposed to. But the snake went up on the bed and with the head pulled the cover over. And we bought a lot of candy, which we were, I wasn't allowed to eat. And while we were on the merry-go-round I saw my sister and her friends. And I called them over and I told them they could have a ride, too. But when I got home she snitched on me and I got a beating. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: I see. Did your grandparents run a strict household?

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SCHUBERT: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes.

SCHUBERT: Yes, they did.

SIGRIST: Was the synagogue nearby that your father, your grandfather...

SCHUBERT: No, it wasn't nearby but he was also, I don't know how he was affiliated with the schools because when we went to school, nine times out of ten, he caught me because he used to be in the principal's office talking about it. In our schools in one period the Christian children had one period of their time and at the time, the same time, the Jewish children had a period to learn Hebrew. But I got in trouble all the time because I used to love sugar. And at that time they used to eat those square lumps sugars. So I used to take a bunch of them to school and it would crunch and the teacher would always punish me for that because it was crunching, it would disturb the class. So, in order to punish you, they took a paper and they cut out, folded it and they cut out the center a little, left like two horns and then they, with a string, they tied it on your head and you had to walk through all the classes. (Paul laughs) So you ended up in the principal's office. If my grandfather didn't catch me there, then my sister would tell him.

SIGRIST: And she's older, you said, than you are?

SCHUBERT: Two years older, yeah. She was a goody-goody. I was the bad one.

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SIGRIST: I see. Now, was your mother working at this time?

SCHUBERT: I don't even remember my mother because when I was one year old my aunt was supposed to go to America to marry the man that went to America to get a job that he couldn't get in Europe, in Romania, and he sent her a ticket. So when she couldn't go, she had trouble with her eyes, my mother went in her place, so I don't even remember my mother.

SIGRIST: I see. Tell me a little more about that story, about your mother going instead.

SCHUBERT: Well, being that she was a widow and being that it was so hard for a man to get a job, let alone a woman, and she couldn't just put herself, she had no way of making a living, no way of paying my grandmother and grandfather for her staying home and doing nothing and taking care of the children. But when my aunt was supposed to go to America to marry and she was re..., sent back, my mother figured maybe she can get a job in America. So she came to America and she got a job in a factory and she worked for seven years and saved up money that my grandmother should bring my sister and myself to America.

SIGRIST: I see. I see. So she was sending money periodically.

SCHUBERT: No, she saved it.

SIGRIST: She saved it.

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SCHUBERT: She saved it here and bought the tickets and sent it to us but my grandmother made up with my grandfather that she'll stay in America for a year and then go back to him, not to leave him alone for too long.

SIGRIST: Just to bring you guys over.

SCHUBERT: Just to bring us over. So she was in America, uh, we came to Avenue C between 7th and 8th Streets and then I was enrolled in Seventh Street School. I forget the number.

SIGRIST: Let's not get ahead here.

SCHUBERT: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Let's go back.

SCHUBERT: But she went back after a year to Grandpa.

SIGRIST: And, growing up with your grandparents, you knew you had a mother in America?

SCHUBERT: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: They didn't...

SCHUBERT: Oh, she was a queen sitting on a throne. Oh, yes. Definitely.

SIGRIST: Were you excited about going to America?

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SCHUBERT: Very, very.

SIGRIST: Was this something your grandparents talked to you and your sister about?

SCHUBERT: Yes. But they didn't tell me, they didn't tell my sister and I that my mother worked in a factory and things like that, but that she was very well off and the streets were paved with gold and they tried to paint a beautiful picture for us.

SIGRIST: Right.

SCHUBERT: And I remember that we were worried about going because my sister got sick. Typhus.

SIGRIST: Yes.

SCHUBERT: At that time we lived in another, in a different house. It took up like a block. It was a private home that was divided in four and made like four apartments. And there was a cellar at the other side where they kept barrels where the people that lived in the house made sour pickles, sauerkraut that I stole a lot of and all that sort of thing. The other half of the block was like an orchard. So I remember that my sister got typhus and they had to take her away in a wagon to the hospital. And I missed her very much and I remember running after the wagon that they were taking my sister away. And when it got too far away I ran back in the house and got into her bed and covered myself with her covers and eventually landed in the hospital with her.

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And they didn't have enough room so they put me at the foot of the bed and she was at the head of the bed.

SIGRIST: Huh. Was there a big typhus epidemic at that time? A lot of people getting it?

SCHUBERT: Not that I heard of or, uh, I was too young to know.

SIGRIST: How old are you at this time?

SCHUBERT: Maybe about five.

SIGRIST: Five or so. Did your grandparents come down with typhus at all?

SCHUBERT: No.

SIGRIST: No, they were O.K.

SCHUBERT: No, they were O.K. They were O.K. but eventually we got out.

SIGRIST: I see. Was your grandmother a good cook?

SCHUBERT: She was a very, very good cook.

SIGRIST: What did she cook that you liked?

SCHUBERT: Everything because, and my aunt and my mother. I had an idea when I grew up that I would have liked to have them open a restaurant because their baking was fabulous. It was like pastry

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everything that they made.

SIGRIST: Did your grandmother teach you and your sister how to cook?

SCHUBERT: Well, once in a while we watched but as children we had things that were more important. As a matter of fact my sister took care of my aunt's children and she became the babysitter and I was left to myself.

SIGRIST: Right.

SCHUBERT: So I didn't like the idea that children called me "greenhorn."

SIGRIST: This is in America, though.

SCHUBERT: In America. Things go to your mind, you know, they float from one place to another.

SIGRIST: Sure, sure. Well, let's get you to America.

SCHUBERT: Well, I remember from Europe, from Jasi we took a train I think it was, a wagon, first we took a wagon with all our possessions and that took us to a train, and I don't remember too much about the train. But I remember that in Le Havre, that name particularly, we were on a train there. And then we transferred from there. But while the train was in the station I remember a man putting his hand through the window and handing me a box of cookies. Whether they knew that these people were going to America or not, waiting to board the boat, I don't know. But that I remember very vividly.

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SIGRIST: Now you, you and your sister were traveling with your grandmother.

SCHUBERT: Yes.

SIGRIST: Grandfather stayed.

SCHUBERT: My grandfather stayed.

SIGRIST: He did not...

SCHUBERT: No. They made up that she would be in America only one year and then come back to him.

SIGRIST: Right.

SCHUBERT: On the boat I remember being very seasick. And I remember eating delicatessen salami and upchucking a lot. And bread.

SIGRIST: You were in steerage?

SCHUBERT: In steerage.

SIGRIST: Yes.

SCHUBERT: We went steerage. Well, it was very difficult. I found out later when I got to America, to save anything so, that was really something we, in those...

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SIGRIST: Your mother had saved up the money.

SCHUBERT: Yes, she must have sacrificed an awful lot.

SIGRIST: Sure.

SCHUBERT: But in those days there were a lot of things that you got from the Butcher free that you pay for today. You got bones with meat on for free where you could make a soup. You got liver free. People used to get like for the dogs or the cats. We did an awful lot, if you wanted soup greens, I remember in my day, even when I was older, that you got a bunch, they made a bunch, a little bit of everything. Now each thing is waged. \$1.19 where I used to pay two cents.

SIGRIST: Well, now, the bologna and the salami you were eating on the boat, is this something that your grandmother brought with you?

SCHUBERT: They brought with them quite a bit but they must have had something on the boat but I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, did you take a lot of baggage? Do you remember packing at all or what you took?

SCHUBERT: No, I don't remember packing anything but my grand..., I know that we didn't go to stores to, to get a dress or a coat or anything. It was always, always made by hand. I have a picture of that, everything was made by hand.

SIGRIST: Yes. And your grandmother made this stuff for you?

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SCHUBERT: Quite a bit because she didn't work at all. And in Europe I remember the floors were not like linoleum or anything but they were, like, you put cement on but maybe once a year or twice a year we had to go out and get manure and it was mixed with something. And then my grandmother would...

SIGRIST: Put it on the floor?

SCHUBERT: Yeah. Remember, like, the kitchen floor, you came into the kitchen.

SCHUBERT: The stove was like an igloo, like they have, like a bakery would have, you know, with a half oval and on the side were doors for baking. And there was a space from the igloo to the ceiling. And then there was a large room. That was the living room and, like, the bedroom. And we used to sleep over the stove because there were steps against the wall. And we used to climb up and they had a featherbed and in the winter it was terrific.

SIGRIST: Yeah, sure. It was warm.

SCHUBERT: It was very warm.

SIGRIST: Did, um, when you came to America, did you take your bedding with you? Or did you take pillows or anything like that?

SCHUBERT: I honestly don't remember. I know we did have some things. We had, like a, from Castle, we went to Castle Garden, that everybody calls Ellis Island. I don't know if it's the same or if it was a part of it,

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an annex or something. But it was Castle Garden. That I distinctly remember. And we were there for quite a while. I think it was a matter of overnight.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty at all when, when the boat was coming into the harbor?

SCHUBERT: Yes, and I remember saying to my grandmother, "That is not my mother." And then, of course, I looked at it all ways and started wondering, from the time I got off the boat to the time I got on land, what did my mother look like?

SIGRIST: Yes, that's right, because, you know...

SCHUBERT: Because I see, I knew a statue because I knew in Europe I saw a statue. But I thought, well, I wanted to probably think good thoughts, so I thought, "Well, maybe that's her, in honor of her," because they told me she was like a queen. So naturally that's the attitude I took. Then, when I came into the Garden and I saw all these other people that came to pick up the immigrants, they didn't look like rich people to me. So I started, it was very difficult rethinking everything. But I saw my mother.

SIGRIST: She came.

SCHUBERT: My mother.

SIGRIST: So this was the first time you had really seen her.

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SCHUBERT: Yes, in the seven and a half years that's the first time, but she was a very beautiful lady. And she had a very fancy big hat on with a feather. And, of course, long dresses. I remember going on a train that was up in the air, so I was told it was an elevator.

SIGRIST: You said, now you said that you were at Castle Garden, Ellis Island, whatever...

SCHUBERT: Yes.

SIGRIST: For overnight.

SCHUBERT: Overnight, I think it was.

SIGRIST: Do you remember being examined at all or anything like that? Checking your eyes or your pulse or...?

SCHUBERT: No. I remember that they, I think they looked at my eyes and somebody put something to my chest, so I gathered it was the doctor.

SIGRIST: What was your grandmother thinking during all of this? Was she, was she nervous?

SCHUBERT: Well, she was too, she was...no, she was trying to keep us, not to get too excited. Not to be too disappointed, to explain things to us.

SIGRIST: This was the first time she had ever been to America?

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SCHUBERT: The first time she had ever been to America. But she tried to calm us down, that our expectations shouldn't be more than we see. Evidently when she was younger she might have gone to large cities and see things, so she knew.

SIGRIST: Did she, for instance, do you remember what you wore when you got off, or anything like that?

SCHUBERT: Oh, she had beautiful blouses, like see through with lace and a skirt and she was always immaculate. And my grandfather was very strict. He was worse than a general in the army. Everything had to be just so. We couldn't do anything wrong. But he liked to tease us. That was all right. Like putting hot pepper in our soup. We weren't allowed to pick up our spoon before him so it was, it was safe, you know, when he picked up his spoon and then he just got a kick out of seeing us running around with cold water and what not.

SIGRIST: Well, so you passed your examinations...

SCHUBERT: Yes, we passed our examinations, which was the next day and...

SIGRIST: And your, and your mother was there to meet you.

SCHUBERT: And my mother was there and I don't know whether the, the baggage was sent to the house or what because I'm sure my mother couldn't have, and we couldn't have taken it onto the train either.

SIGRIST: Had you seen photographs of your mother? Were there photographs when you were a girl in Romania? I mean, did you have

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an image of what she looked like other than sitting on a throne?

SCHUBERT: I think my grandmother had a picture of...no. I don't think so, no. They had quite a number of children, like seven children, and because my grandfather was so strict two boys ran away from home, never heard of them and the others eventually turned up in America. But I don't remember seeing my mother's picture.

SIGRIST: So this was really the very first time.

SCHUBERT: This was it. The very, very first time.

SIGRIST: Well, you must have been very excited.

SCHUBERT: But I thought, well, first of all, she did look like a queen to me.

SIGRIST: Yes, all dressed up.

SCHUBERT: Because I haven't seen a woman with a big hat and big feather in the hat. It was, it was so different from the things that they wore in Europe that it, uh, it may be my mind exaggerated it more. But I thought she was very beautiful.

SIGRIST: Yes. Well, then what happened? Where did you go? You met your mother and then what happened?

SCHUBERT: Well, I met my mother and then she took us to this apartment.

SIGRIST: You said you rode on an elevated train.

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SCHUBERT: Ah! Yes.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me about that.

SCHUBERT: Well, I was sitting by the window and my mother met us with a box of chocolate-covered cherries, which I had never tasted before and ate like a pig.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) And after all that bologna! (they laugh)

SCHUBERT: And I remember putting my head out the window and my mother said, "You don't do that! People walk down in the street." But I had to go. I was afraid to get up so she took me between the cars and it seemed like in the center was better than sitting on the outside and hitting someone on the sidewalk. The train seemed to be so close to the house that at times it scared me that if I put my hand out I can touch the house. But then I was afraid my hand would fall, my arm would fall off because the train seemed to go so fast. But then it stopped and I looked and everything looked so dingy, so dark. And then we had to walk, it must have been 1st Avenue Elevator at that time that they, they did away with, or the 3rd Avenue. I, that I don't remember. And then we walked to the house. It was rough.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the address?

SCHUBERT: 117, I remember, Avenue C.

SIGRIST: Can you describe, was it an apartment or was it a house?

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SCHUBERT: It was a tenement.

SIGRIST: Tenement.

SCHUBERT: And the rooms, you came into a large kitchen and to the right was the front, a living room, and the left was a bedroom, no windows.

SIGRIST: Did she live there by herself or did she live there with other people?

SCHUBERT: She got that when we came, before we came. It was in the same building that my aunt lived in. And I remember that there was what we used to call a "couch." It was contoured, uh, that you could sleep on, sit on or relax on. And my mother had two boarders besides us.

SIGRIST: In that tenement?

SCHUBERT: Yes. My mother, it was a brother and sister, my mother and this girl, this woman, slept in one bed.

SIGRIST: Were they Romanian, the brother and sister, also?

SCHUBERT: I think so. I think they came...

SIGRIST: They were immigrants of some sort.

SCHUBERT: No, they did come from Romania but I don't know if they came from the same town. Uh, we didn't live in a little village. It was a town but we lived on the edge of the town where it was not as crowded as the

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center of town. Um, the apartment. Oh, the young girl slept with my mother. And then there was a folding bed besides. My sister slept on that. The brother slept on a folding bed in the living room, my grandmother slept on the couch and in the kitchen was a coal stove, two chairs were put together in front of the coal stove and feather pillows and things were put on there. That's where I slept.

SIGRIST: Now was there a bathroom in this tenement? Or running water?

SCHUBERT: Well, it was better than that, what I described in Europe. There were two toilets on each floor. There were four tenants on each floor, so two tenants used each toilet. Oh, the telephone book came in handy. It was new. It was, after all, very clean because...

SIGRIST: Did you have gaslight?

SCHUBERT: We had gaslight. And the bathtub was next to the sink but it had a cover on it, enamelled cover on it.

SIGRIST: Yes, this was in the kitchen.

SCHUBERT: It covered the whole thing, in the kitchen. And every Friday my mother, the house was cleaned and what laughingly some people call, say or call "Jewish rugs," because Saturday would be the Sabbath so they would put paper on the floor on Friday so it should be clean for Saturday. It's a strange expression. They've used it many times in the theatre, too. We had no telephone but we managed, we, me. I got it from some place. The hands sort of saw of the book and the book came to my hands and that's how we got

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toilet paper.

SIGRIST: Now, what was your mother doing at this time?

SCHUBERT: My mother worked in a factory and she worked sometimes nine hours, sometimes ten hours, sometimes eleven hours. \$3.50 a week.

SIGRIST: How did she, we have just a few minutes left, how did she learn English? Or had she learned English?

SCHUBERT: She did but it was broken English because she only worked with immigrants. And she didn't go out very much so it was very little that she did learn. Grandma would, she said it didn't pay for her to try at her age. She was quite old, to try to learn the new language.

SIGRIST: How about you? How did you learn English?

SCHUBERT: Oh! Being I was left by myself I wanted to be an American.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

SCHUBERT: Very fast. So I went with a, a bad bunch of cliques in the street. So I joined the cliques. If they stole a banana or they just did something I did the same thing. If they shimmied up the pole I did the same thing. And we had the horses drew the trolley cars, so if they go up the lamp posts and throw a bag of water at them, or flour, I had to be, do the same thing to be an American.

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END OF INTERVIEW