

KECK – 32

DOLORES MARTIN

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INTERVIEWER: DR. WILLA APPEL

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SPAIN, 1920

AGE: 5

NO SHIP NAME RECORDED

PORT: VIGO, SPAIN

RESIDENCES: SPAIN: TUY

US: NEW JERSEY

APPEL: This is Will Appel. It's September 26, 1985 and I'm about to begin an interview with Dolores Martin who came through Ellis Island in 1920 from Spain. And its interview number 032. Uh, Dolores, you came from Spain, you were saying, in 1920.

MARTIN: Yes, June 1920. And I was five years old.

APPEL: And you came from Vigo?

MARTIN: From Vigo, Spain.

APPEL: That's the port city?

MARTIN: Yeah, a port, yeah, there's a port there, Vigo, Spain.

APPEL: Was that your home town?

MARTIN: No. I was born in Tuy. T-U-Y. A little town right close to Vigo. And, uh, my grandfather, my mother and father came to this country first and they moved to West Orange and they were working for Edison, in Edison factory. And, uh, two years later when they saved enough money they sent for, sent for my brother and myself and my grandmother. So we went to Vigo. We took the, uh, boat there. We were twenty-nine days on the boat.

APPEL: If we can just go back a moment. Do you remember anything about your hometown?

MARTIN: Yes, a little small town. A very, very, very small town. I remember the station there where there was a train station. And there was very, very few little houses. There was a very, very little town there. And it was a very, very poor town. People were very, very poor. So that's why my father and mother came to this country, to make a living, like everyone else that left their small town. Very few people left there. And that's when, after two years, my father and mother sent for my brother and I and my grandmother.

APPEL: So you took a train to Vigo or you just traveled to Vigo?

MARTIN: Um, I guess it was the train. The train station was right there in that little town. And then the next town was Vigo. And that's when we took the boat. And we had a few, quite a few people, friends that were also on that boat.

APPEL: What was the name of the boat? Do you recall?

MARTIN: I can't remember right now. I might have it written down somewhere.

APPEL: Do you have any memories of what the boat itself was like?

MARTIN: Oh, yes, I remember that when we got on the boat, my girlfriend and I were singing. We were all singing on the boat. As soon as the boat started going and rocking, we were all very seasick. All the way. We were there twenty-nine days. I remember that we were in these, the bottom of the boat. It was way, way, down in the bottom of the boat, where all these poor immigrants were. And I remember my grandmother, she didn't even have suitcase. She had one of these, I remember this old red tablecloth that she put all her belongings in. And she tied it in a knot. And that's how we came over. And I remember having a ribbon in my hair and that night I know someone took it off me, they stole it. Because everybody was sleeping almost one on top of the other. And, uh, then, uh, the food was terrible. It was terrible food. We brought some stuff over but it didn't last too long because we were twenty-nine days on that boat.

APPEL: Why were you so long?

MARTIN: Well, the boats took long then. Don't forget, that was sixty-five years ago. That's how long the boats used to, you know, there wasn't any planes or anything like that. That's how long a plane would take to come over. And, uh, then when we got to Ellis Island my father didn't come in time to pick us up or something like that happened. And they detained us. They kept us over night. And I remember these long, long tables where people were eating. And, uh, then they vaccinated us again so we couldn't, you know, they, a lot of people couldn't come off the boat unless they had four vaccinations, two on each arm. And the following day I was at the desk with my grandmother and they were asking all kinds of questions. She didn't know how to read or write. And, uh, she, I kept pulling on her skirt because I happened to look back and I seen my father at the doorway calling me. And the reason I knew my father was because at home my grandmother always showed me a pictured of my father and my mother and said, "This is your father, this I is your mother. Don't forget." So that's why I had that picture of my father. Then, of course, I was three years old when my father left, so I remembered a little bit/ And I called my grandmother, I tagged at her skirt, she had these long skirts then, and I said, "There's papa, there's pap." So she turned around, oh, she was so excited when she seen my father. She was relieved, you know. So finally then my father signed us out and we moved to West Orange. And we lived in West Orange for a couple of years. And we moved to Newark after that.

APPEL: If we can get back to the boat itself. You said there were other people from the town who...

MARTIN: Yes, I have a girlfriend that live in New York, in Ellis, in Long Island, and she's three years older than I, so I guess she's about sixty-seven, sixty-eight now and she was on the boat with me also.

APPEL: How did you spend your time those twenty-nine days?

MARTIN: Ah, well, that's hard to remember. I know that we were kids and we played a little bit, but, like I said, we were mostly seasick all the way through. That boat was really, really rocky, very rocky boat. It was one of those old, old boats, you know. I don't even know how we got here. (She laughs)

APPEL: And you were down in the hold?

MARTIN: Way down in the hold because I, I knew we were down in the hold but then I called my girlfriend up in New York and I asked her. I said. "Nita, do

you remember how far?" She said, "Oh, my god, we were way, way down in the bottom of that boat." And it was terrible. It was very terrible, very bad down there.

APPEL: Was it possible to wash or to get clean?

MARTIN: Mmm, not too, not too much. I know that most of the people had lice. A lot of people had lice then. Everybody had, most of the people had lice. There was no, uh, health, uh, there wasn't bathrooms like we have today. And I guess we had a basin to wash your face, or something like that. I don't remember that, that I don't remember.

APPEL: What time of year was it?

MARTIN: That was in June.

APPEL: In June.

MARTIN: In June, the 20th of June. I remember, I have it on my passport. That's why I remember it.

APPEL: And, when you ran out of your own food, what did you eat?

MARTIN: They gave, they gave us food there, but it was very bad, they said. We ate it because we were hungry. There was nothing else to eat. (She laughs)

APPEL: Do you have any recollections of when you actually pulled into New York Harbor?

MARTIN: Uh, I just remember my father grabbing me by the hand and my grandmother still had my brother in her arms because he was three and I was five. And we got on the train and we came into New Jersey and from New Jersey we took a bus to West Orange and then my mother was waiting for us and she already had another child. So she was watching for us. And it was a very happy occasion because we were quite a few people on that boat that we all came together from that small town.

APPEL: From that small town.

MARTIN: But most of them are gone. I just have this one girl that's left.

APPEL: Do you remember afterwards talking with the people or having people tell stories about what it was like to come over?

MARTIN: Yes, well, some of them used to have, they said they used to have a lot of fun because they brought bottles of wine with them and they were drinking wine and they were singing and they were happy. The ones that didn't get seasick. Most of the men that came over. But the women were pretty sick. Women had, there really was nothing to do. There was no recreation on those boats or anything like that.

APPEL: Was there any concern about possibly being sent back and not being accepted?

MARTIN: No, we, uh, the immigration was open then. Anyone could come over then. You didn't have to have a visa then. Anyone could come over. And at that time my father and mother were working so it was all right for us to come over. There was money there. It wasn't that much, but. And I learned how to speak English. In about six months I spoke English already.

APPEL: And in Ellis Island you said you remembered the bars on the windows.

MARTIN: Yeah, the room that we were detained over night. I remember that bar, a high window and there was bars so people couldn't get out. And then they had, like, um, what would you call, dividers, where people would walk through the little dividers. And I guess that was waiting in line to have something to eat or something like that. Because they had these long tables there. Very long tables there for people to eat. The ones that were detained.

APPEL: It was like a cafeteria? Or a restaurant?

MARTIN: No, it wasn't a restaurant. They just had these long, long tables. I remember these, I even asked my friend to make sure. And she said there were these long, long tables and they came with some kind of pot and served people, you know, like soup and things like that. It wasn't anything, there wasn't meats or anything like that. It was like more of a stew, like.

APPEL: Where did you sleep on Ellis Island?

MARTIN: My grandmother slept on a bunk bed and we slept on the floor next to her. She had a little, uh, like a little blanket. And we laid down next to her.

APPEL: Do you recall if it was in a dormitory? Was it in the Great Hall, or what room it was in?

MARTIN: No, there were no halls there. No great hall. Nothing like that, nothing. Every once in a while we came up for air but we were mostly downstairs there.

APPEL: What about when you were vaccinated? That's usually frightening to a child.

MARTIN: Oh, yes, and they were, at that time it wasn't like today that they just pinch you. They had a, like a, something like a pen, and they would make like a cross you know. Like a cross on your arm. And then after a couple of days that sort of got like infected and it left a scar when the scab came off. That was horrible then. Today it's nothing.

APPEL: Did you go through any other medical examination?

MARTIN: No, nothing else. Nothing else.

APPEL: And you were detained simply because your father hadn't gotten there on time?

MARTIN: He didn't get there on time and I had, didn't have two vaccinations on each arm. And then they, of course, everyone that had, people that had lice and stuff like that they disinfected them and let them go. That was it.

APPEL: Do you, did you have any memories of when you actually arrived in West Orange? I know you were very young, but did anything, does anything stand out in your memory that seemed different to you?

MARTIN: When I got to this country? Well, I remember when we got to, we moved to Lackside Avenue. Lackside Avenue. Lackside Avenue in West Orange, there. And, um, I had these high-buttoned shoes and I don't think the children were wearing them then here. So they were making fun of me. They were calling me the little immigrant, the little immigrant. And I had these long, mu hair, they would pull my hair. And make fun of me, I remember that. And I remember that after two or three months I spoke English just like them. I picked it up one, two, three. Because of the way they were making fun of me. I, I wanted to, I already knew how to read and write Spanish because I went to school there. And, ah, over there in Spain they don't fool around. They teach you there. There's not playing around like here, you know. (She laughs) So I, I got even with those kids. After a while I got even with them, because I learned to speak pretty soon. And then I had a lot of fun playing with the kids because I understood the language.

APPEL: Did you continue to dress differently or...

MARTIN: Oh, after a while, yes. After, they were making fun of my high-buttoned shoes. They were making fun of the dresses I had, and the way we had

boys in our hair and whatnot. But, uh, like I said, after a while, two or three months, I was in with them. The gang, they said.

APPEL: You had also mentioned that when you were on the ship, uh, coming over here that you'd had a ribbon in your hair and then it was stolen.

MARTIN: Yes, they used to steal things on the boat. Anybody that had anything worthwhile taking, people would take it, because there were so many people and it was so crowded. It was over-crowded. You were actually almost sleeping one on top of the other. Very overcrowded. So you don't know who would take anything. There was no valises and things at that time. People just had bundles and, like I said, they would take tablecloths and tie their belongings in the tablecloth.

APPEL: Did your grandmother hold onto that tablecloth?

MARTIN: Not too much, because she was watching the children. She was watching my brother and I. She was afraid something would happen because he was only three. And she was afraid something would happen to him.

APPEL: Did, did knowing that, and knowing that your ribbon had been stolen, did that make you frightened, or did it bother you in any way?

MARTIN: No. I just said to my grandmother, "They stole her ribbon." She said, "Oh." She just said, well, what could you do, you know. What could you do? You couldn't accuse anybody because you didn't see anybody taking it. As I said, we were all sleeping, almost on the floor. So it was very easy for someone to take anything.

APPEL: Were you in bunks on the ship?

MARTIN: There were bunks. There were bunks. Yes. And what do they call it, those hammocks?

APPEL: Hammocks.

MARTIN: Yes, some of those. They had some of those where there wasn't enough little bunk beds.

APPEL: How many people would be in an area sleeping?

MARTIN: Oh, I would say, I would say in that little area, maybe twenty, twenty-five people in a little, in a little room. It was a tiny little room. And whoever had a chance, whoever had a bunk bed slept. The others were on the floor, like I said.

APPEL: Would you go up to another deck during the day?

MARTIN: Oh, we, we went up for air, yes. We had to go pretty high up. We had to climb pretty high up. We were way, way down in the bottom of the boat. I guess that was the cheapest passage then. Yeah.

APPEL: Where did they serve food?

MARTIN: They had, uh, a dining room, like. Where people, long tables where people would sit. As I said, they would serve you. Not foods that we get today. More like, uh, watery stuff, you know. Uh, vegetables with a little piece of meat in between or something like that?

APPEL: This was on the ship?

MARTIN: On the ship and also on Ellis Island.

APPEL: Also on Ellis Island.

MARTIN: Cause I think at that time Ellis Island had something to do with the boats that docked there. I'm not sure of that, but I think so.

APPEL: And did your family ever go back to Spain?

MARTIN: Oh, yes, quite a few times. I went, too. I also went about six, seven times to Spain. I went back to the same old town to see if I could remember what I, but there is really nothing there. Just a few old cousins left there. And the house where we were born is nothing but a, it's like a piece of rock laying around there. It's all gone. Everything is gone now. It's all new homes. People are building and like any old town, they're remodeling it and putting new homes in and people that come to America and they made their money, they go back there and they build homes there and live there in the summertime and come back here in the winter.

APPEL: Did your parents do that?

MARTIN: No, they never did that. They never did that. Because after that my, my we were seven brothers and sisters. And we lived in this country since then.

APPEL: I think you were probably too young to have many expectations or ideas about what America was before you came...

MARTIN: No, but the people thought, like, they thought that the streets were paved with gold. (She laughs) That's what everybody thinks. Even today. You speak to anyone in Europe and they still think that America the streets are

paved with gold. They don't know that you have to work pretty hard to make a dollar. (She laughs)

APPEL: And, so your family came really for economic reasons.

MARTIN: Well, it was hard living there. So then over here my father worked himself up. And he had a little business. And my mother became a dressmaker and we all went to high school, graduated high school. All a pretty happy family. We were pretty lucky.

APPEL: I think that's all the questions I have. We have to look that up.

MARTIN: I'm, I'm going to look that up. I have my, I'm going to look that up.

APPEL: The one last question is do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

MARTIN: Yes, that was the most beautiful thing that everybody, everybody clapped and yelled and screamed when they seen the Statue because they knew that that was America. And they all, everybody was so happy, really, they "There, there, we're in America, America. We finally go to America." (She laughs) And even today when you go to Europe and you come back and you see the Statue of Liberty it's the most beautiful thing to see. Especially at night in a helicopter. We always say, "Well, there's no place like home."

APPEL: This is the end of the interview with Mrs. Dolores Martin.