

KECK-51

ROSE BRECI

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SICILY, 1911

AGE 9

PASSAGE ON "THE ST. ANNE"

APPEL: This is Willa Appel, and I'm talking with Mrs. Rose BreCI, BreCI or BreCI?

BRECI: BreCI.

APPEL: BreCI. Sorry. And it's October 21st, uh, and the interview is about to begin at 4:00. Can you tell me a little bit about where you were born and your hometown?

BRECI: Well, it was a small town.

APPEL: It was Carletini?

BRECI: Carletini, Italy.

APPEL: In Sicily.

BRECI: In Sicily. That's right.

APPEL: And you were over nine year old when you left, so you, you must remember what the town was like and . . .

BRECI: I remember everything distinctly. That, uh, that the streets where I lived. See, I, i went there, uh, a few, let's see, three, four times, back. And I know exactly the house that I was living in. One room house, honey. (?) I can't mention, change it. You know, those days that's all there was in Sicily. It was a one-room house.

APPEL: Was it a rural area? This was farm country?

BRECI: No, well, yeah, it was orange groves and lemons and, and they raised a few cows and, uh, a few stores. It wasn't a big town. It was a small town.

APPEL: And what was your family involved in, what was their occupation?

BRECI: Well, I don't know what my Dad used to do because I was small when he left. See, and I, I know he had a

horse. And, in fact, he sold his horse to come here, to get the money. At that time, they say it only cost about twenty-five dollars to, to come.

APPEL: Did he come before the rest of the family?

BRECI: Five years before me.

APPEL: So he came in 1906.

BRECI: 1906. Correct.

APPEL: And do you remember why, the rest, he decided that the rest of the family should come to America?

BRECI: Oh, because he, he made a cross when he turned out corner he said, "Carletini, no more, I'm not coming back any more." So he sent for us.

APPEL: Was it basically for reasons of work and opportunity that he left?

BRECI: Work and opportunity and, uh, and everybody said that the, America was a rich country and at that time everybody wanted to come if they could afford it. But even twenty-five dollars a person seemed an awful lot of money there, those days.

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APPEL: Do you know how he raised that money to come over?

BRECI: He worked at the packing house.

APPEL: A meat packing house?

BRECI: Yes. It was Morris at the time, but they tore it down. Morris Packing Company.

APPEL: This is in Omaha.

BRECI: In Omaha.

APPEL: So he was raising the money for the rest of the family.

BRECI: Right.

APPEL: And it cost twenty-five dollars for the rest of the family to come over.

BRECI: That's correct.

APPEL: So it took him . . .

BRECI: Quite a long, well, five years he was here.

APPEL: Took him a little while to raise the money.

BRECI: Sure. Well, by the time he sent us money to live and

then when he accumulated then my mother sold whatever furniture we had and we come. It was my mother, my sister, and my brother.

APPEL: Do you remember how you felt about leaving?

BRECI: Oh, I felt . Everybody was saying, says, "America is rich." And in my mind, uh, I thought, "God, I'm gonna find money on the street. It's a rich country."
(she laughs)

APPEL: And you didn't have feelings about being sad about leaving your friends?

BRECI: Oh, no, no, no, no, honey, no. The only thing is, see, when I, when we got to Palermo, see we had, uh, representative in, you have to have a representative, you know, to leave the town. Because we didn't know how to talk American. Not, not a word. So we had a representative, you know, to leave the town. Because we didn't know how to talk American. Not, not a word. So we had a representative. And, of course, I don't know what, what was the charge of the representative. But when he took us to Palermo, well, they gave us a vaccination. So when I was vaccinated why, uh, I got sick. And I got the fever and when we embarked on the

ship they put me in the hospital for about two, three days. My eyes got bloodshot. And my mother was, oh, God, she was mad. She says, "We're not going to pass." See, when you get to New York and Ellis Island, they check your eyes, honey. And, and if you don't have good eyes and good characters they sent you back. See, a lot of people, uh, they were sent back, on account of their eyes. Now the rest of it, I seen people sitting down on the benches, rejected. So I, I don't know what, uh, what happened to them.

APPEL: Let me go back for a second about this representative. Was it a representative of the American government?

BRECI: No, no, no. In Italy.

APPEL: It was an Italian representative.

BRECI: That's right. Representing the group that he was taking on the ship. Once you was on the ship you was on your own.

APPEL: And was it a large group from Carlentini that was going?

BRECI: Yes, we was quite a, quite a few. I don't know how many. I can't tell you that, but we was quite a few.

Because some of the ladies are still living in Omaha.
That's where I got how much we paid for the trip.

APPEL: One of the ladies remembered?

BRECI: Yeah.

APPEL: Uh, so you went, you went to Palermo where you were
going to get the ship.

BRECI: That's right.

APPEL: And the ship was the S.S. Anne.

BRECI: Anne. St. Anne. That I remember. See that, how far
back I can remember?

APPEL: It is a long way.

BRECI: Sure.

APPEL: To remember. And you were vaccinated probably for
smallpox or diphtheria?

BRECI: I suppose. Whatever was necessary, because you
couldn't come to the United States. Even now if you
go to Europe you got to have a vaccination. Because I
been there four times.

APPEL: Well, you were sick during part of the voyage. But did you get better after the first two days?

BRECI: Yes, I was better, yeah. They gave us all these, all the little children they were giving us alphabet soup. That I remember.

APPEL: Do you remember what class you were traveling on the ship?

BRECI: Oh, sure. Third class. At that price you, that's it.

APPEL: So you were down in steerage.

BRECI: Downstairs, yeah.

APPEL: What was that like?

BRECI: Well, they had bunk beds. See, I was in the hospital two, three days. Maybe more, I don't remember. But I know I was there that many times. That long. But, uh, a lot of people were sick. And I, they were eating lemons. They say that the lemon kept their food down. See, but it was terrible. It was just like a herd of, of people, you know. They just, sitting around, you know, that's it, wherever they found a little spot. Because you didn't have very

many benches. Wherever they found.

APPEL: During the day, do you recall, did you stay down in steerage or did you go up?

BRECI: Oh, no, you go up. You can't stay downstairs, honey, uh-uh. Not where the bunk beds were. You have to go up to get fresh air.

APPEL: And do you remember where you were served food on board ship?

BRECI: On the, on the same deck, yeah. Everybody with their little, whatever they had, they went up there and they put 'em on their little dish and wherever they found a place you eat. Was no tables, just . . .

APPEL: There weren't tables.

BRECI: Nothing, nothing.

APPEL: What was the food like?

BRECI: Well, as I say, the only thing I can remember that I was eating, soup.

APPEL: Soup.

BRECI: Soup.

APPEL: The alphabet soup.

BRECI: Alphabet soup. That I remember. But they were getting spaghetti and sauce. I don't know what other variety of food they had.

APPEL: How long was the passage?

BRECI: Eleven days.

APPEL: And do you remember anything else about that trip? The people you were with, how you passed the time?

BRECI: You couldn't even talk to the people. They were sick half of the time. They were taking care of themselves. They didn't have time to, to, uh. But in the first class they were playing cordine and dancing.

APPEL: Cordine?

BRECI: Accordion.

APPEL: Accordion.

BRECI: Accordion, yeah. I didn't say the word right. Accordion. And they were dancing and, of course, the, the third class, we looked up. "Oh, boy, they're having a good time." (she laughs) Yeah. Poor

people, when you're poor, you're poor, honey.

(she laughs)

APPEL: Ah, on board ship, uh, if people were sick, was it because it was a stormy time, was? What month did you come in?

BRECI: May. In May. Because I didn't get to, the schools were closing and, uh, I had to wait till September. In May. I don't know the date. I can only remember the date.

APPEL: And there were, there was a group that came together?

BRECI: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

APPEL: Do you recall whether it was mostly women and children with husbands already in America?

BRECI: Some came with their husbands. Some their husbands was here. Some had, uh, they were grown up girls, you know, that they're coming to their family. Different type.

APPEL: Was there any anxiety, as you mentioned before, about being rejected once you arrived in America?

BRECI: Oh, my, my mother, me I didn't know nothing, you know.

Nine years old, I just sit where she put me and that was it. But my mother, she asked her doctor on the boat, he said, "Don't worry, Mrs. Puglicci [ph]." He says, "Your daughter is going to pass. Because she's got good eyes. That bloodshot, that don't mean nothing." So we all passed, the whole family passed.

APPEL: And do you remember when you actually arrived? Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

BRECI: Oh, that was, that was something. I never seen a big statute in my hometown. And, you know, a little girl, you just open your eyes as big as a saucer. And, uh, and we saw, it was a great joy when we seen that statue. Everybody say, "We're in America. We're in a." (she laughs)

APPEL: I know you were very young, but, uh, you were beginning to say that you had certain expectations of what life would be like in America. That there would be money that you could find right in the street.

BRECI: Yeah. A little girl, a rich country. But that's why everybody, uh, came. To get out of those small towns, you know. That they were getting, I don't know if they were getting, uh, twenty cents a day, that's how

they, it was bad living. You come to a rich country.

Then you hear that you get a, a dollar a day. From twenty cents a day, you know, you're gonna try your very best to come to America. Those days that's all everybody talked about. America. America.

APPEL: And what happened when you got off the boat?

BRECI: Well, they took us to Ellis Island and when we got to the ground, that was the joy. You know, that you walk on, walk on United States ground. And, of course, where we were, we were just like cattle. Everybody, one after another. And then when you got inside of the building, Ellis Island, we were in like troughs, you know, that one in after another. And everybody followed that line. And at the end of the line was a doctor. And he examined your eyes. If your eyes was good, pass. And then I read in the book that they put a mark on your back. And I didn't know that. Maybe they did and I don't remember. If your eyes was passed, you put "P." If you're rejected you put, uh, "G", "J," whatever. Rejected. Or "R," rejected, yeah. So, uh, I read the story about, you know, Ellis Island, how you pass and everything.

APPEL: Did you go through other medical inspections apart from the eyes?

BRECI: No, no. We was all good and healthy.

APPEL: So it was just the eye inspection.

BRECI: Yeah.

APPEL: What about other kinds of inspections where they asked you questions?

BRECI: Where they ask you who you're going to see, where you're going. How much you have and who's gonna take care of you. We all know that my Dad was here. We had to tell them that we're going to see, well, they didn't ask me. They asked my mother. Says, "Who are you going to see?" "My husband, of course."

APPEL: Did you have much money with you?

BRECI: I don't know how much money my mother had. I know she didn't have much.

APPEL: And do you recall whether she was nervous during these examinations?

BRECI: Extremely nervous. Extremely nervous. You, everybody

is nervous when you go through that doctor. Because it's the fear that you don't know what you have in your eyes. You know what I mean? What they could find. And, uh, it was fear. But after you pass, you're, it's a great joy and a great relief in your mind and heart.

APPEL: How long did you stay on Ellis Island?

BRECI: Oh, we didn't stay at all. From there, you see, I guess, I don't remember, I don't want, we must have had a name of where we're going. Omaha. And we didn't say Omaha. Omaka, Omaka. (she laughs) Everybody in our bunch, "Where are you going?" "Omaka, Omaka." So they put us, uh, where we got in to get the train. See, you buy the fare right there and, uh . . .

APPEL: On Ellis Island.

BRECI: ON Ellis Island. And they were, took us to, because we had Omaha, and, uh, you had somebody to look after you or you gotta go.

APPEL: Do you remember whether the inspections that occurred on Ellis Island were in English or Italian? Do you

remember what language you spoke?

BRECI: Oh, they, English. English. We didn't know how to talk Italian, I mean, America. None of us.

APPEL: So they were in Italian.

BRECI: Italian. Yeah. Maybe that, whoever directed us spoke Italian to us. I don't remember that, honey.

APPEL: So you think that you were probably on Ellis Island for less than a day?

BRECI: Oh, yeah, that's all, yeah. There was nothing for us to do. We just took us to the railroad station and off we went.

APPEL: And from Ellis Island you must have gone into New York City to get the train to Omaha.

BRECI: That's right.

APPEL: Ah, do you have any impressions, your first impressions of seeing your first American city?

BRECI: Well, we didn't see much on the train, honey.

APPEL: No, I'm saying from Ellis Island when you were coming to New York City to get the train, do you recall what

New York looked like?

BRECI: Well, it was, it was a wonderful thing to see. Uh, we knew that we was in America because I don't think that they had these big buildings those days, see, in, didn't make too much of an impression, the impression was that we landed. (she laughs) That was the biggest joy.

APPEL: And how large a group was going on to Omaha?

BRECI: Oh, I would say around, about fifteen of us. Take or, I don't know just exactly, but not too many from my hometown. But there's, there's from Milan and different places, I don't know. Because we didn't talk to each other, you know. We didn't, we were strangers to those other people.

APPEL: Yeah, but from Carletini there was probably around fifteen.

BRECI: Yeah, uh-huh.

APPEL: Were there children your own age? Did you have friends going?

BRECI: No, I didn't see any small children, no, of our group.

There were around fifteen or sixteen. In fact, my mother took care of these here young girls. That they had to behave themselves. (she laughs) Nobody kept, any of the fellows talked to them, no way.
(she laughs)

APPEL: So your mother was a kind of chaperon to these young girls who were traveling alone.

BRECI: That's right. And they always remember.

APPEL: And how long was that train trip to Omaha?

BRECI: That I couldn't tell you. How long it takes to get to, no recollection. I don't know.

APPEL: Do you have any recollections about that train trip?>

BRECI: Oh, it was fun. Fun. Because I didn't get to have much, uh, train trips. No.

APPEL: Was it the first time you had been on a big train trip?

BRECI: Well, I, we used to go to Catania, that's the big city, with the train. So I knew what was a train.

APPEL: This trip, though, must have taken several day.

BRECI: Oh, sure, sure. Those day, I don't know. Sure, from New York to Omaha it takes a good three days. That's right, because I know when I used to go with my husband to Cal--, Los Angeles it takes three days. That's right.

APPEL: What did you do on the train? What did you do for those three days?

BRECI: Oh, I'll tell you a little story. There was a man coming around with a banana basket. And they wanted to sell bananas. But we didn't know what they were talking about, you know. One of the fellows, he says, well, he asked me, "You want a banana?" He nodded his head and he left a banana. He started eating. When he came back to get the money he didn't understand. He said, "I no got the . . ." He put it back. "I ain't got no money." (she laughs) That was a, you know, that was funny to me. Little girl, I said, "Got to eat the banana and didn't get to pay it."
(she laughs)

APPEL: What did you eat on the train?

BRECI: Nothing, nothing. We didn't eat nothing.

APPEL: For three days?

BRECI: No. Well, I don't know if my mother had anything along. I don't remember. We must have ate a few things, you know, they always carry little sacks and stuff in it.

APPEL: And do you remember if you had bunks in which to sleep?

BRECI: Oh, on the train?

APPEL: Or were you just sitting up all the time?

BRECI: Oh, no, just sitting. All the time. It ain't like now you get a Pullaman. (she laughs) No, not those days, 1911.

APPEL: It must have been then a very tiring trip.

BRECI: Oh, it was tiring, yeah. We got to Omaha right around two o'clock. I remember because the streetcars was not running. And friends of ours that lived about I would say about three blocks, they were all there to meet us. Good friends of ours. And they put, uh, her children and us, my brother and I, in the same bed till the, the buses, the streetcar, uh, started in the

morning. So we went home then.

APPEL: Your father was there?

BRECI: Oh, sure, sure. They were, they were good friends together, she and the whole family came down to meet us. It's always that way, honey.

APPEL: And what was your new home like?

BRECI: Well, my dad had provided the beds and got, not very much, a bed for us, for them, and a table, a stove. Not these type of a stove. (she laughs)

APPEL: A wood burning stove.

BRECI: That's right. A lamp. I remember when I used to go to school and put the lamp on.

APPEL: A kerosene lamp?

BRECI: That's right. And then they started putting in gas.

APPEL: And how was your adjustment to this new country?

BRECI: Oh, I, I loved to be an American. And I'll tell the world that this is the best country in the world. And I've been all over, all over, honey.

APPEL: A lot of people say that when they first came over and they first met American children, because so many people we've been interviewing were children when they came over, sometimes they were teased for looking different. That in fact they didn't speak English so quickly.

APPEL: Well, I didn't speak a word. And I'll tell you a little story what happened to me. I was going to school and the first grade teacher, well, my brother and I, we didn't know one word American. So she told me, she just made, uh, she says, "Put your hand this way." So I did. I didn't know what. As long as she pointed out, put your hands, well, I did, you know. Bang with the ruler. And I, I didn't know what, what, what she hit me for. And I got so scared and crying and went to my mother. My mother says, "Why did she give you, what did she whip you for?" I said, "I don't know. She told me to put my hands there and she hit me." So she got an interpreter and went up to school. And I guess the teacher told her, he says, uh, "What's wrong?" You know. Because I didn't understand. He says, he says, "What did you hit my daughter for?" And so he told her. She says, and the

interpreter says, "They just come from Italy." He says, "The girl don't know how to talk. And, uh, you hit her. She didn't know what you're talking about."

You know, she was really sad that she hit me, because I guess she didn't have no patience or something. You gotta have patience with somebody who don't know a word of English. But after that she just loved me. I'll never even forget my first grade teacher, Mrs. Weiss. She was so nice to me after that.

APPEL: Did you dress the way the other children dressed? Was there anything different about your clothing?

BRECI: Well, we had to, we didn't change clothes right away. But later on, you know, we went to big stores and dressed a little better. At first you don't because there's no money.

APPEL: Right.

BRECI: That's right.

APPEL: Did that cause you any kind of problems?

BRECI: No, no, uh-uh. The children there in my grade, they were nice kids. They knew that I couldn't talk. My brother couldn't talk. But I passed every grade. I

passed every grade. I didn't, it didn't, well, I went up to the first grade school in Italy. But that wasn't very much, just one grade.

APPEL: By the time you arrived with your mother, your sister, and your brother, uh, that meant that most of your immediate family was here. Had you left any relatives back home?

BRECI: Yeah, I had cousins and, uh, just cousins. Because my family was here then.

APPEL: Your grandparents?

BRECI: I never seen them, uh, when I was born. Neither side. My dad, he was left at three, three years old. My mother, my grandparents were dead. So I never had no grandparents.

APPEL: Did you miss Italy? Were you homesick?

BRECI: No. No, I wasn't. I wasn't. I was glad to be here. Sure. No, I was glad. But we were all glad to be here.

APPEL: Well, it sounds like you had a pretty smooth transition from coming from Italy to America. Was

that partly because there was a whole group of people from your hometown who stayed together and were living in Omaha together?

BRECI: No, no. See, when we arrived we, my dad was working at the packing house. We went to South Omaha.

APPEL: At the packing house.

BRECI: At the packing house district see. And the other group, they went to Little Italy. What they call a little colony. And they didn't miss nobody because everybody talk Italian. We didn't talk Italian. I mean American. So we did the best we could.

APPEL: Sorry, I didn't understand. Are you saying that most of the group from Carletini went to one part of Omaha and settled . . .

BRECI: That's right, and we were the only family that went to South Omaha because my dad had a job there at the packing plant.

APPEL: So you had to learn English

BRECI: Everything. We had to learn from scratch. And it was good because, you see, when you, when I was amongst

other children, well, you had to learn, see. You had to learn. But they, they're the ones, it took a little time to translate because they were talking Italian all the time, see.

APPEL: And what about your brother and your sister? Did they have as easy a time as you did in adjusting?

BRECI: Oh, yeah, we all adjusted real nice. Real nice we adjusted. We liked America. When you, when you like a thing and you're, you're, you step to it. Your, your mind is "I'm gonna learn. I'm gonna learn." Sure.

APPEL: And you said you went back to Italy a number of times. And back to your hometown. How did that feel?

BRECI: Well, it felt fine. I knew exactly the house where we used to live and I went back after thirty-eight years. And I still knew where my home was. And some of the neighbors, well, I remembered most of them, see. But, of course, other, other streets I wouldn't know. But my little territory i knew just who lived there and who lived there. My aunt, lived, you know, close to us. And, uh, my mother's brother. So it's a, we adjusted here very nice.

APPEL: One questions is what of your customs from Carlentini, from Sicily? Did your family continue to practice in America?

BRECI: Customs. What do you mean, customs?

APPEL: What I mean by customs are what did you do that was still done the way you do used to do it in the old country? Uh, apart from dress, you say with dress after a little while you . . .

BRECI: Well, the food was the same because we always cooked the same no matter if we were there or even now. Food is the same. We do our own cooking. We know what we want. And, uh, and then you, uh, we joined clubs and we had a nice time. The club had dances. We'd go there. We got along just fine.

APPEL: Is there any way that you feel that you still remained Italian in some way?

BRECI: No way. No way. I have, I'm proud that I came, that my heritage is Italian, let me tell you. Because I, if I told you something else it'd be lying. But I still, I'm glad I'm an Italian. But this is my country. I took naturalization papers and love every

bit of it. I raised my four children here. And they're all in good positions. All respectable people. And, uh, I'm enjoying life.

APPEL: Well, that's wonderful.

BRECI: I can't say anything more. Of course, I enjoy life. I enjoy being with people. I had a little grocery store in south Omaha and, uh, I have seven grandsons, eleven great grandsons and one, one great-granddaughter. Five generations I am.

APPEL: So you have a nice big family in Omaha.

BRECI: That's correct. That's correct. Every Thanksgiving and Christmas they're all in my home.

APPEL: You make Thanksgiving dinners.

BRECI: That's right.

APPEL: You still have a lot of energy.

BRECI: We stick together. We stick together. We own a, this here summer my daughter came from Las Vegas, they live here, and uh, then Mr. Curran [ph] and Mr. Hamer [ph] interviewed me in my home. I said, "Well, now we're going to have a Christmas, uh, a picnic, not

Christmas, we're gonna have a picnic at Elmwood Park."

I said, "You and Mr. Kerr [ph] could come and Mr. Hamer [ph]." And we had a picnic. He took pictures over there of my whole family. And they interviewed me like you're doing. And, uh, we just had a nice time. See, I belong to a St. Lucia Club. And I, I march in the parade. He was taking pictures. And he's gonna have a lot of interviewing.

APPEL: Well, I think the interview now is ended and it is time for us to take some photographs. This is the end of the interview with Rose BreCI.