

NPS-50/DRITA IVANAJ

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ITALY (ALSO LIVED SEVERAL YEARS IN ALBANIA), 1952

AGE 17

PASSAGE ON "THE GENERAL HARRY TAYLOR"

NASH: Today is February 20, 1974, and I am speaking with Miss Drita Ivanaj, who came to the United States with her mother at the age of seventeen. She came in the year 1952. Miss Ivanaj was born in Novara, Italy. And now she is going to tell us the story of how it was that she came to this country. Miss Ivanaj, tell us something about the first five years of your life. (they laugh)

IVANAJ: Well, as I, as you said, I was born in Italy, and three months after I was born I moved with my mother and father to the Tirane, the capitol of Albania, where my father held a high position in government at the time. And my first five years, I can't recollect much of my first five years of life, but I began to go to school, to the first course of elementary school, and naturally, at home we would speak both languages, the

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Italian and Albanian. But my stay was cut off in 1939 because of the occupation of Albania, um, during World War II. My family lost everything, um, and a few months after that my father also died. So mother and I moved, we were practically forced out of our country, and moved to Italy where I had relatives, my grandparents on my mother's side, and Italy became our host for the next thirteen years.

NASH: How did, in what sense were you forced out of Albania?

IVANAJ: Well, ah, everything we had, house, land, property, was confiscated by the military authority at the time so that we were left with nothing and we had no possible way of living there. So the logical thing to do at the time was to just move out. And, as a matter of fact, mother and I, during the occupation, were the only people practically left in the entire city of Tirane after the occupation. Military personnel came in. There were only a couple of men, I think, at the legation, or whatever, in government, and that was it.

NASH: When you speak of the occupation, who was the occupying army?

IVANAJ: The Italian government at the time occupied Albania. It was under the, uh, then after that, I think it, was, the uh, Victor Emanuel

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III, king of Italy, became Emperor of etcetera and included Albania in their territories that Italy had occupied. So we moved back to Italy where, as a matter of fact, not only I was born, but I used to spend summers with my mother at my grandparent's home near where I was born, in Piedmont.

NASH: How did you survive in Italy?

IVANAJ: I survived fine in Italy. Italy saw me grow up since I was five until I was about seventeen or eighteen years of age, and there I went to school. I had to start all over again because the Italian authorities would not accept my first year in an Albanian school. So I started with all my elementary schooling there, I went to high school, I went to college there. And um, well.

NASH: Did your mother have to work?

IVANAJ: My mother, yes, did some work, she was a teacher, so she did that on a private basis because not being of Italian nationality anymore, which she lost at the time of the marriage with my father, um, she was not allowed to teach in public schools so she did that privately, and I went to school.

NASH: Well, how did it happen that you decided to come to the

United States?

IVANAJ: Well, at the time, around 1951 when I was in Italy, both mother and I learned that under the auspices of United Nations there was an organization in Italy, the name of the organization was IRO, the International Refugee Organization, and they were operating in Italy at the time, so we registered with them, and in no time we were offered a choice of five different countries where we could immigrate to. It was my choice to come to the United States.

NASH: What were the other countries that were offered to you?

IVANAJ: Well, one was Australia, other countries in South America, also Northern Europe, Scandinavian country, and France. And I chose U.S.A.

NASH: Why?

IVANAJ: Well, mainly for one reason. I was the only child. I had lost by that time my father. I was a woman, and I thought that was the country that would give me the best of

choices.

NASH: Why did you think being a woman that the United States would offer more opportunities to a woman?

IVANAJ: Because since that time, I mean, ah, the States were known as the country that would give opportunity to a lot of people, and therefore also to a young girl, I suppose. That's why. It took about one month to process the paperwork to come to the United States, medical examinations, interviews, and um, documents, preparation of documents. All of this took place in a camp that IRO had at the time near Naples, just outside of Naples in a beautiful little gay town. It's a resort town in Italy. It is called Bagnoli, and this IRO camp was beautifully set up. It had different buildings, it had dormitories, it had offices, it had mess halls, canteens, theater. Everything was enclosed in this little village by itself, where people came from all over. They came from different parts of Italy, they came from Yugoslavia, and all of the personnel there were American. And it took a good month. We stayed, actually lived in that camp for a month in order to process all of the documents and the papers. And um, my mother and I were given a visa to the United States at the end of the month by the American Consul and we were among the last three hundred people to receive such a visa because the camp was closing up at the end of that year, and the, from what I understood at the time, the IRO was closing its activities

in Italy. So we were very lucky in that respect.

NASH: Did you have many belongings to take with you?

IVANAJ: Um, we did. Unfortunately, when you live in a place for thirteen years, you are bound to have a bit of belongings, but we were given about five days to pack, and as I mentioned before, we were living north, in the northern part of Italy, so we had to receive the visa, we had to go back north, pack, and come back within five days, and we were just allowed so much luggage, so that we didn't pack very much. (she laughs)

NASH: At this time did you feel like an Italian or did you feel that you really had no nationality?

IVANAJ: I never felt that I had no nationality because I was born as an Albanian, even though I lived in Italy, and whatever the traditions of my family were, were always taught to me by mother so as such, so I never felt without a country. As a matter of fact, today I feel I have three countries, Albania, Italy, and the United States. It is a triangle which has played a great part in my life and I don't regret any, any part of it, whatever the three countries I have been.

NASH: Could you perhaps describe some, some ah, Albanian

tradition or some sense of values that remained.

IVANAJ: Um, well, um, it's difficult for me because I was very young at the time, but Albania, we are talking now about over thirty-five years ago, it's probably not what it is today. But um, women, you could still find in the capitol at the time, women, veil women. That was the tradition at the time. The natives would go around that way. Other traditions per se, are mostly in pride at my father and my uncle, who was my father's brother, not married and living with us, did a great deal for their country, and they contributed a lot and they were very proud of their country, and I still am. I know that they have contributed a lot to it. Whatever happened ever since, I don't know.

NASH: Could you discuss anything about the role your father played?

IVANAJ: Well, I can tell you that my father was a lawyer to begin with and he held the position, when I was born of uh, he was the president of the supreme court of the country at the time. I would say an equivalent to the chief justice here in United States. And my uncle, who had started as a professor and as a teacher, held the position of minister of education. Therefore, I know they had written books. We had a library of twelve thousand volumes in our home at the time. That's among the things that we

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have lost. Some of these volumes were written by both my father and my uncle. By the way, my uncle spoke seven languages fluently. And they both dreamt of following me in my studies one day. They never got around to it.

NASH: And so you got ready to come to the United States. And what was it like the day you left?

IVANAJ: Well, as I said before, we were among very few lucky ones to be able to start a new life in another country, and since we were the last ones to be processed by IRO at the time, so it's at that point that I really began to realize the big step that I was going to take and in leaving Italy where I had practically grown up. By that time I had spent two-thirds of my life in Italy versus one-third in Albania. And, as I mentioned before, we had to go back to the camp near Naples to leave. The boat, we were told, the ship that we had to take to come to the United States was not leaving from Italy. It was leaving from Germany. So um, when that famous day arrived, December 20, 1951, we left by a special train, a long, long train. The special train crossed Italy, from Naples all the way up north passed through the Brenner Pass, all the way across Germany, and it took three days. It had a kitchen on board, meals were served in the different compartments, children were taken care of in the afternoon for snacks, special snacks, and we arrived in this huge and very intricate railroad station of Bremen the day before Christmas of 1951. And from there we were

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brought to another camp, and this one was just outside Bremen. The name of the town was Grone [PH]. It was a terribly big one, very well organized, clean, and it was a big embarkation camp. It held six thousand people, people that came from every country you can think of, Russia, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Hungary. You could hear every language under the sun in that place. And we spent Christmas day there, and the day after we were already scheduled to be put on board of a ship. The ship was leaving from the port of Bremerhaven, so it took about two hours from the camp at Grone [PH] to Bremerhaven itself. We went through the customs, the German customs, and we were handed slips of paper with the number of the cabin where we were assigned on board. And this was toward the evening of the day after Christmas. Naturally, it was wintertime, was bad weather, grayish, you know, that kind of day, and we boarded around seven o'clock at night. We boarded the ship, was the SS General Harry Taylor of the Military Sea Transportation Service. It was a military ship of the U.S. government. And fourteen hundred people were embarked that evening. One of the first experiences I had was of being separated from my mother. As I mentioned, we were assigned a cabin number and these numbers were handwritten, scribbled on pieces of paper. So we didn't realize that we were assigned to two different cabins on board of the ship, and we were separated. When soon as we got on deck, we were said you go this way and my mother went the other way, but realizing that we were on the same ship, it didn't matter. So I found my way to my cabin, which happened to be way below. One of the lowest

decks where they had something like one hundred cots. It was a military ship. It was a ship that was used for military transportation of military personnel, so they had to do this. With fourteen hundred people from different parts of the world, men, women, children, they had to separate the women from, and the children from the men. There were smaller cabins, cabins that would hold twenty people. My mother was lucky enough to be assigned to one of these. So, to make a long story short, it took me three hours to find my mother, and one of my first experience was the language problem. Naturally, I couldn't find anybody who was speaking Italian. And it took me a long time finally to make myself understood by an MP on board who spoke only German, that I needed an interpreter, and I was brought up to the radio cabin and they broadcast that I was looking for my mother. But the system hadn't been used yet that for that trip, I suppose. Nobody could hear anything, especially due to the confusion that was going on board. Everybody was busy looking for somebody else, you know. So it was not until way into the night that the boat began to roll and I began to realize that we had left the pier. And, in fact, I told my mother, I remember as if it was today, I said, "I want to go up on deck and give the last goodbye to Europe." And I was disillusioned because the only thing I saw was one light and that was it. So that was very first experience on board. I have had others. That was the first time, for instance, that I came in contact with the first black person in my life. I never had the chance before, whether in Albania or in Italy, to meet a black person. Another was the fact that I

tasted different type of food that I never had before. Today you can find Italy grapefruits galore. They are imported from all over. At that time they didn't. So I never tasted a grapefruit before. I had it on board the ship. I never forgot the first time I tasted bacon and eggs, which are quite used today, excuse me, quite used today, in Italy, but not at the time. The first time I tasted salted butter. I thought I'd never liked it, and that is all I can use today. Another interesting thing on board the ship was that, due to the large amount of people they were transporting, they, everybody had to chip in and help somehow. It was a military ship. It was not a cruiser. We learned very soon after we left the piers that the weather was terrible. The English Channel was awful, and as we got into the Atlantic it was worse. There was a tremendous storm which caused a lot of seasickness in most of the people, and the ship had to actually change its course and go about five hundred miles south than it was supposed to so that the trip all in all took about five days longer than was expected.

NASH: Were you seasick?

IVANAJ: I had been, you know, between Albania and Italy, I had been, we had been in using the boat overnight, it was an overnight trip. However, I never suffered seasickness before. My mistake was that the night that we left, and I spent three hours looking for my mother, I skipped the

dinner, and that was very fatal because on an empty stomach I began to feel that the next morning and I was sick for three days. And the less I ate, the less I felt like eating until the third day, I was so weak I couldn't even get up from bed. My mother practically dragged me to the dining room, which was, by the way, a cafeteria style.

So if you felt bad at the time or you were sick and you couldn't help yourself, forget it. You had to rely on your next neighbor, next door neighbor, to bring you something, and this was really not allowed for obvious hygienic reasons on board. So no food was allowed outside of the dining rooms. And so after the third day and my mother dragged me to a full meal, I had no problems whatsoever.

NASH: How was life in the dormitories?

IVANAJ: It was very interesting. Everybody cooperated. People that shared the same language would sit together on deck, trade stories, experiences. Naturally, everybody had a big, big question mark in front of them because they didn't know what they were coming to even though most of the fourteen hundred people on board were already, they knew exactly where they were going at least. They had a particular city or job already waiting

for them or an apartment or a friend or a relative. Mother and I didn't have anybody at all. And being among the last three hundred people who got the visa so late in that year, we were not assigned any specific city or any specific job or nothing. So we didn't know where we were going to end up. So we spent New Year's Eve on board of that ship and it was very interesting. It was at that time that my first three words of English came out from my mouth, and they were, "Happy New Year," to an American, a forlorn looking American officer on board. And, as I mentioned before, we didn't approach land until the beginning of January. One day, all of a sudden, the ship was surrounded by sea gulls and everybody began to go on deck and look, and far, far away there was a profile of land. You can imagine the commotion.

NASH: Did you see the Statue of Liberty?

IVANAJ: Interestingly enough, no. And I don't know how I missed it. When the skyline began to be more clarified, you could see it better. It was toward evening. It was a Sunday and during the wintertime, I mean even if it was early evening, the day, in other words, was dark already, so, and it was very, very cold day. So we learned that we were not going to dock until the next morning so that the ship dropped anchor smack in the middle of New York Bay, and I don't know why I didn't see the Statue of Liberty. All I know, that everybody was just looking at Manhattan. And I

must admit, that sight I don't think I'll ever forget. New York was lit up like a Christmas tree. Millions of colors. From the middle of the bay all you could see was movement, movement of cars, not of people because naturally, from that distance you couldn't see any people. But the cars on the Westside Highway were producing a continuous line, red or white, according if they were uptown or downtown, along the river, and all the buildings were lit up and it was an absolutely clear night so that sight beats any cards, any postcards that you can buy today. (voice in background)

Oh yeah, everyone on board was astounded by the sight of New York, naturally, and everyone was getting anxious to get off that boat after such a hectic trip. And quite a few, as I said before, were expected by relatives or friends, and everyone that was sick felt better, felt gay, and the brisk air of that evening really put some pink on everybody's cheeks. So the last night on board was really a relief for many, I would say all of them, after such a stormy trip. And it was on January 7th, Monday morning, that there were lots of comings and goings on board of the ship. Everybody was ready to get off, but we received a visit of the immigration authorities. They came on board to check our papers. But everything was so well organized that by 10:30 we actually set foot on American soil. And we, mother and I, were, as I said before, not having a particular destination, were asked to just wait in the waiting room, large waiting rooms at the pier. We were served coffee, donuts, and lunch after that, and all the other people that had a destination were processed. They were rerouted to

airports, railroad stations, and that process took most of the day. They were very few of us left in that waiting room and toward the evening we were put on board of a bus, and that is how we got the first look at New York. Naturally, it was late at night. You know, it was dark, but I didn't realize at that time where I was going, but we went from the pier to Park Avenue South in a small hotel. And that comes my first experience in this country, on American soil, was the first meal, that night. The hotel was small, so it didn't have restaurants facilities, but there was a big, beautiful cafeteria which is still there today on 28th Street and Park Avenue South, and we were directed there by motions, by the doorman of the hotel. And we ordered our first meal by pointing with our fingers. But it was nice because I suppose, as today, I may recognize somebody who is a foreigner on the street. At that time somebody, an old man, was kind enough to tap me on the shoulder and showed me the ticket, where you would get the ticket in the middle of the cafeteria so that you could have, when you ordered your food you would have your ticket punched for the price. So the few people that were put in the hotel, some of them, there were a couple of girls from Yugoslavia who spoke Italian and their relatives, I mean their parents, so we were a small group of people that would speak the same language. We had our first meal in that cafeteria and we were happy to be finally to have arrived. And we didn't stay long at that hotel, a couple of days.

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NASH: How did New York feel to you when you first walked the street?

IVANAJ: Well, as I said, it was a cold day when we arrived, and the next day was a grayish day, snow was on the ground in New York. Skyscrapers didn't make a hit on me. I don't know why, I couldn't explain why, but that was not what impressed me of New York. What impressed my mother mostly was the fact that there were more cars than people practically. But this was the sight actually from the waiting room at the piers. And we really didn't have the time to tour the city because the next day we had to report to an office, in order, you know, they had personnel looking for people or jobs or places where they could put us. So that was not long for us at all. In a couple of days we were found a job, for my mother was found, and was just the county and I could join her there. So we were just whisked out of New York via the Eastside Drive and landed in Westchester County, and from there we took the train back to the city on a Sunday or a Saturday or something so that we could look at the city. And I remember one of the first things I did was to go and look for a school, and I went to Columbia University, I guess to gather information where I could attend some schools to learn the language or where to continue my studies eventually in the future. So these are my first experiences in this country and much has happened since. Many other experiences have followed and I might add the land of opportunity has come true for me. I am happy, if I

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may say, to have contributed my experience as an immigrant for the archives of the American Museum of Immigration, which I recently, very recently visited, only but the island, and during such visit, I have naturally relived mentally most of these experiences and I have reminisced about lots of these details as those that I have just mentioned, which tell my story of how I felt to be an immigrant in a new and initially alien land.

NASH: You've put everything so nicely. I don't know, we should just end it there. I just thought I would ask you. Did you have funds or did this organization give you funds?

IVANAJ: We were, the hotel was paid for us and we were allowed a certain amount of money per meal. We were given this on a daily basis, so that we actually didn't take advantage of it. Two days, that was it. Then we were on our own.

NASH: So you had funds, in other words, that carried you until your mother got paid.

IVANAJ: Yes.

END SIDE ONE

BEGINNING SIDE TWO

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NASH: Well, would you like to discuss a little bit about what you do now?

IVANAJ: If you wish. I have been working now. What I just described happened twenty-two years ago, and since then I have been a working gal, on my second career. I had one, I've struggled, I have learned the language, I have tried anyway. I attended college in evening as a matriculating student, I graduated in economics and my major was business management, and I have applied this to the job. Therefore, I have grown from an initial clerk, first as bilingual clerk, then I got some accounting experience and so on and so forth until I held the top position in a representative office of a very large European firm. And about four years ago I decided to take up some data processing courses just for fun, and I enjoy them so much. I was offered, I received about six offers and I chose one, the one that I am still in now. So, in other words, four years ago I started as trainee again in the data processing field and I have now come up that ladder and I hold today the title of Project Leaders in electronic data processing.

NASH: How does you mother, how did your mother adjust to the new life?

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IVANAJ: It was interesting. My mother has adjusted, but she was that kind of person. She had gone through a lot in life since she had been married. And she adapted very well even though at times she used to tell me, translated from Italian, "I'm an old tree, and old trees are not easily transplanted." However, she did a marvelous job at it. She learned, I won't say very fluently, but she learned what it was necessary for her to get around, in the English language, but because she held jobs, she wrote, she wrote for Italian magazines, she wrote biographies of Italians in United States, and she used to take care of the apartment, myself, the job, and herself, so she did very well. Unfortunately, I lost her thirteen years ago, and I have been alone ever since.

NASH: I have enjoyed speaking to you very much Miss Ivanaj.
Thank you.

IVANAJ: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW