**Janet:** Today is September 22nd 1995. I’m here with Marie.

**Marie:** Right.

**Janet:** Debela.

**Marie:** Correct.

**Janet:** Who came from what was Croatia at that time.

**Marie:** Exactly.

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

**Marie:** That’s right. That’s correct.

**Janet:** Today, we are in Ellis Island however not in the studio. We have with us Rosemary Schmidt.

**Marie:** Schmidt.

**Janet:** Who is Mrs. Debela’s daughter.

**Marie:** Daughter, right.

**Janet:** I’m delighted to talk with you and anything you can remember …

**Marie:** You make it delightful to speak to.

**Janet:** Thank you. Okay, let’s start at the beginning Mrs. Debela. Could you say your birth date for the tape?

**Marie:** January 30th.

**Janet:** 19?

**Marie:** 1907, ‘07.

**Janet:** Where in Croatia were you born?

**Marie:** Where? In the principal city. It has really two names. The Croatian name Rijeka and the Italian name Fiume which means river. It translated. It’s at the very top of the Adriatic if you look on the map. At the very top to the right in a large gulf. You know?

**Janet:** Uh-huh (affirmative).

**Marie:** That is the principal city of Croatia. It wasn’t Yugoslavia at that time yet.

**Janet:** The Croatian word is R-I-J-E-K-A?

**Marie:** R-I-J, Rijeka.

**Janet:** Rijeka?

**Marie:** Correct.

**Janet:** Rijeka, okay. Did you live in Fiume or Rijeka?

**Marie:** I was born there.

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

**Marie:** Until I was six years old with … My mother had died after I was born. My aunt took me. My mother’s, not my mother’s, how was the connection? My father’s sister took me because their family was already in New York. They had plans to come here and they took me. Of course, because I would have been left there. She was very loving. I don't think she would have been able to do it, which she decided on the right thing, make an American out of her too.

**Janet:** What was your father’s name?

**Marie:** Anthony.

**Janet:** Let me take this.

**Marie:** I affected?

**Janet:** Yeah.

**Marie:** I didn’t know.

**Janet:** That’s okay.

**Marie:**  Anthon. A-N-T-O-N, Kovach, K-O-V-A-C-H.

**Janet:** Your mother, do you remember her maiden name as well as her first name?

**Marie:** Yeah, Bibiana, oh dear me. I had the name.

**Janet:** Okay, perhaps your daughter can say.

**Marie:** Bibiana Grbac G-R-B-A-C, it’s a soft C at the end. Grbac.

**Janet:** Your aunt’s name, your father’s sister.

**Marie:** She was, let’s see. What was her name?

**Janet:** It’s filed here.

**Marie:** My father’s …

**Janet:** Here, you have it on this form. It’s Theresa Sucher?

**Marie:** That’s it. Sucher.

**Janet:** Sucher.

**Marie:** Yeah, it’s a German. He was German, Austrian, more Austrian. That’s correct then. S-U-C-H-E-R.

**Janet:** Did you know your aunt and uncle while you were growing up before you came here?

**Marie:** They raised me.

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

**Marie:** They took me immediately. After my mother’s death, I was an infant. How old I was, I don't know. I must have been maybe a year or some maybe almost two. That I don't know. I never heard that brought up so I wouldn’t remember just how old. I was their baby because they took me in and they became my parents.

**Janet:** Do you remember the house you lived in when you were in Fiume?

**Marie:** Where she lived? It was right off the main street. I took a trip back years ago now back. I visited the place and all that but I don’t have the address.

**Janet:** Oh no. I mean can you describe it? What was it like where you lived in Fiume?

**Marie:** Very nice. There’s great big rooms. I don't know. They had an apartment. I remember sometimes I think of my past and I think once I had a five or six room apartment. Very nice on the second floor. What I remember is it was so far back that we didn’t have a stove but a built-in fireplace to cook on, a full size in the kitchen. That kept you also warmer in the winter I suppose.

**Janet:** Can you remember any things that your aunt cooked? That she made on that fireplace?

**Marie:** Naturally she cooked for a baby and then a child later. I always remember enjoying my food. What it was, I can’t tell you exactly now.

**Janet:** Do you remember any experiences with your aunt when you were in Fiume, places you went with her or activities?

**Marie:** Oh yes. See, her daughter Rezzy, she since I was growing, she sewed for me, made me dresses, wanted me to look as cute as she could make me I suppose. It was nothing but love really all the way through. I was very fortunate.

**Janet:** How about your uncle? What was he like?

**Marie:** My uncle, you see at that point that I recall, the main folk were already in New York, in America. I didn’t see much of them when they would come in for visits. They went back because they were employed which was difficult in Europe when it came to employment. That’s why the men left.

**Janet:** Did your father leave too for America?

**Marie:** Yes. In fact, I don’t remember him. Maybe once that I was old enough to recall his visit, the day he came. That was it. Then when I was brought here, we took a trip to see my father, to show him his daughter.

**Janet:** What were the men doing here in the United-?

**Marie:** Pardon?

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

**Marie:** He was a baker on shipboard, a baker. He plied back and forth and then finally decided, that’s what he continued doing. He was a baker. That’s all I can remember. Then, I remember he ended up in Cleveland and that’s where I was taken every summer to see him. That’s the story of my infancy.

**Janet:** Can you remember anything else about the town? Any celebrations that occurred when you were small?

**Marie:** You mean in Europe?

**Janet:** Uh-huh (affirmative).

**Marie:** Oh yes. Yes. Because we had as I said an apartment upstairs and that was, when we heard music, everybody was flowing to the front windows to see, to enjoy the music. There is plenty of that in Europe. Their associations love music. I do recall that which was very nice.

**Janet:** Were you a religious family? Were you brought up religious?

**Marie:** Yes. Yes. Yes. Not strict I must say, but instill goodness by showing, by speaking of it. We all have to behave as teaching a child more or less the same thing there as they do here.

**Janet:** What particular church did you go to?

**Marie:** The one that was … It’s funny. When I went back, I couldn’t find it, because I didn’t remember its name. I really didn’t. I was disappointed that time.

**Janet:** Was it a Catholic church?

**Marie:** Oh yes. Oh absolutely. Everybody was Catholic there.

**Janet:** Do you remember any kind of social life that the grownups had? Do you remember?

**Marie:** Yes. There was company. It depended on the associations and the schools that my cousin attended. Her brother was already in America. Then, they led a very nice life. Of course the money came mostly from America because there it was getting worse and worse. That’s why half of Europe has left through the years. That far back which is in the early 1900s, it couldn’t have been very good.

**Janet:** It was mostly the men who had gone to America?

**Marie:** Pardon?

**Janet:** A lot of men had already gone to America and the women and children were?

**Marie:** Yes. That’s truth. That’s the way it’s … It may be different now but it wasn’t then. The men went where they could win the bread.

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

**Marie:** No. I was too young. What was I? Five, barely six.

**Janet:** You didn’t start school either in Europe?

**Marie:** It was more of a kindergarten. That’s what I recall. We played. That was my first choice to go and see that when I came. We had a large wall, a very pleasant wall all around two sides. We played outdoors all the time. It was more of a kindergarten than a first grade.

**Janet:** You spent a year there and you enjoyed that?

**Marie:** Pardon?

**Janet:** You enjoyed a year? A whole year there?

**Marie:** No, no, this is when I was still living there. Then of course, when I visited, when I grew up and I took a trip. I’ve been there twice. Once I flew once by ship. I would go to, I think it’s natural, your earliest memories are most interest to one when you’re repeating that same place.

**Janet:** Were there any other early memories that we haven’t talked about? Anything else that you remember about that early time?

**Marie:** Nothing outstanding. Nothing that, no. I had a very quiet, happy life.

**Janet:** Do you know what kind of a child you were?

**Marie:** I suppose I remember being scolded once in a while. On the whole, I didn’t. I think with boys it’s different. With a little girl, they’re more obedient maybe. I know I can’t say that I was chastised ever badly, never.

**Janet:** Did you have grandparents?

**Marie:** No.

**Janet:** No?

**Marie:** No.

**Janet:** How about other extended family members? Any other family members?

**Marie:** I couldn’t find anyone. See, many years had gone by before I returned there. Of course, I looked because I remembered their name. It got nowhere unfortunately.

**Janet:** Do you remember what you thought about America before you came to this country?

**Marie:** What could I think?

**Janet:** Did you have any ideas?

**Marie:** How can a child that age think if she hasn’t seen something? Think of it. I hadn’t seen it yet. Then I remember that I was very happy. I was taken immediately. We landed of course, where are we now?

**Janet:** Ellis Island.

**Marie:** In Ellis Island. That’s right.

**Janet:** Before we talk about Ellis Island, do you remember leaving Fiume and going to get the ship to take you to America?

**Marie:** Oh yes. Oh yes, I remember that trip very well. It was the first time that we, I had sailed on smaller boats but this was a ship for the Atlantic. We went to New York. I remember one place, interlude. I was of course dancing up and down the deck once. A gentleman, an American, he was so nice. He must have said something but I didn’t understand him. He gave me two American Indian pennies. Have you ever seen any? I don't think there are many around anymore.

**Janet:** Yes. I’ve seen it.

**Marie:** The penny was usually the American Indian design. That was very … It remained, I was only what? Six years old. I remember then how gracious he was. I must have been passing around and he gave me two American pennies. I thought that was wonderful American. Anything American was tops.

**Janet:** Do you remember the name of the ship?

**Marie:** Yeah. I’ve been trying to remember. I think I did at one point. Ivernia, I-V-E-R-N-I-A, Ivernia.

**Janet:** Do you remember anything about it? About the passage?

**Marie:** About the passage? It was very pleasant. It was very pleasant. We had a beautiful dining room and beautiful staircase going down to the dining room and lots of servers. It was very nice.

**Janet:** It sounds as though you were not traveling steerage or third class.

**Marie:** No, no. No, no. No, I was with my aunt and cousin. It was a bedroom with two beds. One bunk higher than the other.

**Janet:** Bunk bed.

**Marie:** Of course my aunt had the lower one and my cousin who was younger, she was there. I was tucked in on a velvet couch on the other wall. It was cozy.

**Janet:** Do you remember when the Ivernia came into the New York harbor?

**Marie:** I should remember. I do remember but what I’m trying to say is I don’t remember any particular details. You know?

**Janet:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Marie:** It was evening. Then of course we didn’t leave until the morning. That was exciting. America, the word alone, New York. There isn’t much to tell about that part. I have nothing I can recount.

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

**Marie:** No. See, in speaking I forgot that I’m in Ellis Island at this moment. Yes. We were together, yes. We were together my aunt, my cousin and I. It was very nice, decent, the people that were present. Ellis Island is a big word to Europeans. It used to be in Europe many years ago when they reach there they know they’re safe in New York.

**Janet:** Do you recall? The ship came in in the evening and then did you stay overnight at Ellis Island? Or did you stay overnight on the ship?

**Marie:** We had to. Oh yes. Yes, at Ellis Island, we got off because I suppose they had other plans. I suppose you know the story about the … I went up some place to sleep. I went up high, high, high. There were different layers.

**Rosemary:** Bunks.

**Marie:**  I was put there. Children, the children, the smaller ones, they were able to take care of them in that manner at that time.

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

**Marie:** It wasn’t a room exactly. I may not remember correctly. At that point, a sleepy child at six, you don’t know what you see or don’t see. Oh yes, did you tell the lady about what happened to me? No? I don’t want to say [inaudible 00:21:30].

**Rosemary:** Should I? No. I think it’s an anecdote.

**Janet:** Exactly. Do you want to tell it?

**Marie:** Pardon?

**Janet:** Would you like to tell it?

**Marie:** That is the shame of a little boy. That I was on up high and the little boy was up higher. He had to do something so I got wet. This is a personal memory.

**Janet:** I know.

**Marie:** It’s funny.

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

**Marie:** That was special. That was nice. As I said, we had a nice staircase, the dining room was a lower level I suppose and beautifully served and a nice table setting.

**Janet:** This was on the Ivernia?

**Marie:** Ivernia.

**Janet:** Now, how about when you got to Ellis Island? Was that very different?

**Marie:** In Ellis Island, let’s see, about the eating. It was adequate. After all, it was in a hotel. I don’t think I gave that a matter of thought at that age.

**Janet:** No.

**Marie:** Excuse me.

**Janet:** Do you remember if someone met you at Ellis Island?

**Marie:** What do you mean?

**Janet:** Did your uncle or your father come and meet you?

**Marie:** No, they couldn’t. The family lived way out in Ohio. I know the first I saw them was there. I didn’t see them on the shipboard.

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

**Marie:** Yes, exactly.

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

**Marie:** This is it. Then we got on a train and we went to Ohio.

**Janet:** Do you remember any first impressions getting on the train or traveling to Ohio?

**Marie:** I had been on trains before in Europe. That was nothing unusual. It was very nice of course. My impressions were all pleasant. There was nothing that I remember with an ugly recollection.

**Janet:** Do you remember arriving in Ohio?

**Marie:** Oh yes. Yes. We traveled all night. Then later I saw that we had to back up somewhere in Pennsylvania to get out of the way of another train or something. We were delayed. It was winter when we arrived. There we were, met with pounds of snow. I had never seen snow in my life before. Anyhow, the family was there. I was picked up then and somebody rather would carry me, the males, on their back. There I was in Youngstown then in Ohio. I went all the way over to Ohio to see the United States.

**Janet:** Do you remember any things that struck you as different when you first got there? Different from anything you had known?

**Marie:** No, not really. No. The children were pleasant. They were my first attention that I paid attention to more than … The playmates that I happen to have, they were very pleasant. How I spoke with them, I don't remember that. How? I must have just played and then you hear a child hearing words and phrases picks them up quicker. I suppose that’s what I had to do to understand what they were telling me.

**Janet:** Did you start school soon after you arrived?

**Marie:** Oh yes. The first semester. Oh surely. I was just the right age so there was no time to fool around. I was pleased. I was pleased because I was used to going to school over there anyhow.

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

**Marie:** It wasn’t immediate. I don't remember any great difficulty because I didn’t expect them myself. I was dubious of what it was that was said. I strove to remember what I did learn to help me. Then of course if I imagine now this, I don't even remember. Did I ever ask what was being said? I don't remember that part to be explained. I don't remember that.

Of course, I think I learned immediately because there were other children. Next door, there was a family of five children with whom I came to know quickly and playing with them. The child immediately you pick it up. You pick it up. I had no trouble with English. When I started in school, I don't remember any problem.

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

**Marie:** No, they were all American born. They spoke only American English I mean.

**Janet:** How were you received?

**Marie:** Pardon?

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

**Marie:** They welcome me. They asked me to play with them because they saw that I was interested. With a group of children, they always want more, one more. I was welcome I guess. I don't know.

**Janet:** Did you stay in Youngstown?

**Marie:** Stay?

**Janet:** Until you grew up?

**Marie:** Oh yes. Yes, I did. I started school. Then after that, high school and so on. I was there until … What broke me away? To go and study.

**Janet:** Do you remember how you met your husband?

**Rosemary:** You moved to New Jersey.

**Marie:** Yeah.

**Rosemary:** What is it?

**Marie:** No, no. I went to …

**Rosemary:** New York.

**Marie:** From Youngstown, I had my cousin from Fiume, lived in, where did they live?

**Rosemary:** New York.

**Marie:** Huh?

**Rosemary:** New York.

**Janet:** In New York?

**Marie:** No. At the beginning they did but later on, when I was staying still with my aunt, then Rezzy wrote, “Why don’t I come and visit?” Because I was in my teens already there. I came, I left Ohio and of course I spoke English by then correctly.

**Janet:** You visited your cousin?

**Marie:** Rezzy was my first cousin. She had married a Debela. Then later I did the same thing. Her brother-in-law. It was family because she had me when I was, she remembered me as just a baby. That’s why she, when she said, “Why don’t you come to New Jersey?” When a young person, that’s all they need to hear, if they can go someplace different.

**Janet:** Do you remember meeting your husband?

**Marie:** Meeting? Yes, oh yes. See, my cousin married a Debela. What was his name? Sam.

**Rosemary:** Sam.

**Marie:** Yeah. My future mother-in-law, she was such a wonderful person. I, in New York a job, in New York. She wanted me to stay with them. Yeah, you’ve been holding it long enough. Thanks dear.

**Rosemary:** You’re welcome.

**Janet:** You found a job in New York?

**Marie:** Yes.

**Janet:** What kind of a job was it?

**Marie:** Typing, the usual, beginner, because I had that knowledge from school so I put it to use. Then my mother-in-law didn’t wanted me to travel all the way to Jersey. “Come and stay with us.” They had a beautiful big apartment up on the 110th Street right by the park. They had space because it was a big one. I agreed for the weekends. That’s how I met my future husband. He was still unmarried. The name Debela became double in our family.

**Janet:** What was your husband’s first name?

**Marie:** My husband? Pepi, Joseph. Joseph but Pepi is what do you call a name?

**Rosemary:** It’s a nickname [inaudible 00:32:55].

**Marie:** Yeah, a favorite. What’s the other word for it? I can’t think of it now.

**Janet:** It’s an affectionate term.

**Marie:** Yeah, Pepi. Joseph. Then it’s shortened by the Italians, Pepi. Pepi here, Pepi there, instead of saying all of Joseph. You know?

**Janet:** I see, uh-huh (affirmative). How many children did you have?

**Marie:** I had one child. Here she is. I had one.

**Janet:** Do you have grandchildren?

**Marie:** I have a grandson, a very nice grandson, Eric. I think he’s good. How old is he now?

**Rosemary:** He’s 30 and a half. Lots of time has gone by.

**Marie:** Huh?

**Rosemary:** 30 and a half.

**Marie:** Eric?

**Rosemary:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Marie:** I don’t believe it. [inaudible 00:33:49] I feel older right away.

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

**Marie:** I was very happy to be an American. I was happy with the family, with the friends that I had. I would think of my place of birth and which as I said I went back twice just to pick up the memories as a youngster. I’ve been a rather happy person, I can’t complain. Thank God.

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

**Marie:** I haven’t accomplished much. I haven’t accomplished much. I would have liked to have written a little book. Just my own experiences but I never got to it. It takes courage because you don’t want to feel as if you feel important enough to have to tell the world what happened to you. Yet, on the other hand, I regret because I had a full life. Although some years went by me, I was exactly the same like everybody else’s. Sometimes I think now, I’m experienced, maybe because you find these little books. Everybody feels the same way sometime or other to put down what they have gone through. In a way to preserve that memory, also wants to write it. I never got to that point. I don't think I’m good enough for that.

**Janet:** You speak very well.

**Marie:** Thank you.

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

**Marie:** Pardon?

**Janet:** Were there high points in your life? What you consider some of the best times of your life?

**Marie:** Bad times?

**Janet:** Good or bad?

**Marie:** No. When there were these, what do you call it when everybody is out of work?

**Janet:** The depression.

**Marie:** Depression. I think my memory is failing me. Depression, of course I think everyone’s affected by that. I too felt when one’s husband isn’t working, it’s bound to happen. Then slowly, you pick up the threads. Even when you lose a husband, you can’t go on crying all the time. You’ve got to get back to normal and things like that. You have to, of course and I think it has a certain amount of love and pleasure. Then there are times when it’s just the reverse. You have to accept that. I tried to. Here I am, I’m a widow how many years now that daddy is gone?

**Rosemary:** 24 maybe. I think 24.

**Marie:** It is. 24, a quarter of a century that I’m alone.

**Janet:** How would you describe this phase of your life? Your old age phase?

**Marie:** My old age is very good. It’s very good. Basically, I’m not ill. That’s the most important. Isn’t it? Then I have a lovely daughter, a very nice son-in-law and a grandson as family. That’s quite full too and happy. I can’t complain even though I am a widow, those things happen.

Why is it that the husbands always go first? They worry a lot. They work hard and they give up then. They got more responsibility anyway than a mother does. Who’s going to bring home the bacon? It’s daddy. I think I haven’t left anything unsaid.

**Janet:** I was just going to ask you if there was anything else you could think of relevant to your life before you came to this country. Then since that time.

**Marie:** Yeah. You know what it was? When I came to this country and I made it my business when I felt the courage enough to do it alone, I went back to Europe and I went to the spots that I remember with pleasure. The parks, where in the evening we would hear music play in Dalmatia. I wanted to replenish my memories with the saying, “Life is what you make it.” I could cry all the time I’m alone but it’s only going to make me sick. When I’m sick, I’m a worry to my daughter. It doesn’t pay.

**Janet:** Right. I think maybe we’ll close here. I want to thank you very much for a very interesting recounting.

**Marie:** You’re very welcome. I hope I haven’t taken your time.

**Janet:** Not at all. It’s a pleasure. I’ve been speaking with Maria Debela who came in 1913.

**Marie:** That’s correct.

**Janet:** From Croatia.

**Marie:** Yes, at that time.

**Janet:** From Fiume.

**Marie:** Yes.

**Janet:** Today is September 22nd 1995. That makes you 88?

**Rosemary:** She’s 88 now.

**Janet:** 88? You’re 88 years old now at this time?

**Marie:** That’s correct. Yeah, that’s correct, 88. Yeah, it’s close to 90. I don’t feel that close and you help me.

**Janet:** [inaudible 00:41:29].

**Marie:** No, by bringing everything forth with your questions.

**Janet:** I have the feeling that you do very well on your own speaking. Thank you very much.

**Marie:** You’re very welcome.

**Janet:** I want to say thank you. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I’m signing off.

**Marie:** All right.

**Janet:** Okay, we’re going to continue here with some songs that Mrs. Debela remembers from Croatia. Here, would you like to sit or stand?

**Marie:** Yeah. This, I see. Like this?

**Janet:** I’m sorry.

**Marie:** (Singing). Is it on?

**Janet:** Yes. However you can remember to begin and whatever you can remember.

**Marie:** Yeah. (Singing) See, I get it mixed up. I never sing this.

**Janet:** Yeah.

**Marie:** (Singing).

**Janet:** Wonderful.

**Marie:** Picking flowers and giving to my lover. They were [inaudible 00:43:04].

**Janet:** That’s beautiful. Thank you so much.

**Marie:** Oh please. I’m sorry that I really can’t contribute the right away. You know remembering because …

**Janet:** This is wonderful, thanks.