

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Immigrants of Ellis Island Project

Personal Experiences

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ISABELLA DECATO

Interviewed

by

Cheryl Bugnone

on

June 11, 1977

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: ISABELLA DECATO

INTERVIEWER: Cheryl Bugnone

SUBJECT: immigration, Ellis Island, voyage to New York
from Italy, adjustment, accommodations, processing

DATE: June 11, 1977

B: This is an interview with Isabella DeCato for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Immigrants of Ellis Island, by Cheryl Bugnone, at 330 Trumbull Avenue, Warren, Ohio, on June 11, 1977, at 1:00 p.m.

Mrs. DeCato, tell us about your childhood years and your family life in Italy.

D: I'll start with my family life in Italy so that you will know why we came to this country. I was eight years old when my father died. In the meantime, he had sent his son to America to avoid the draft; that was his oldest son. So when he died on October 18, 1918, my mother was left with a business that she knew nothing about. She wrote to her son asking him to come back and take over--since he was the oldest son. My brother wrote back and said that he didn't want to come back to Italy; he wanted to stay in America. He had gotten married and his wife was expecting, so he did not want to come back. He told my mother to sell everything and come to America to him, which she did. From there we had to wait almost two years for the papers. In 1920 in the early part of November, we went to Naples and waited for the boat to come in. We were on the boat William Pierce. It was really old and they didn't even know then if it was going to make it. But, what did they have to lose? Just us.

I remember a hotel room when we got the orders to leave. My mother locked us up in the room and went to get the papers signed. My brothers and I tied the sheets together and got out because we heard some fellow who was selling pears and fruits. They were calling pears, "ladies legs." My brother

wanted to know what they were selling that was "ladies legs," so I went out to buy these "ladies legs" and they were pears. It was the biggest disappointment you ever saw. We climbed back in the room so my mother didn't know we had gone and done all of that.

We finally got on this boat and there was an inspection. We had papers already signed from a doctor that everything was in order, so they let us pass through. Most of the people had their heads shaved, actually shaved. There was a lot of crying and upset people which when you are a child, you can't forget.

We started out in the early part of December, finally. We landed in New York Christmas Day so they could let us get out because it was a holiday and they couldn't bring the ship in. They served dinner on the ship. First class was having a regular Christmas dinner, but for third class it was just another day. We were going to have Christmas whether they liked it or not. We had a Christmas dinner, music, and everything. We were having so much fun that we even drew the first class downstairs.

For myself and my brothers, it wasn't bad. We enjoyed it. It was bad for my mother and my older sister, though. When we landed, it was after New Year's; we stayed one whole week on that ship. After New Year's we got to Ellis Island and everybody got in line and we went through some routine checkups. We passed through and everything was fine. When we went to land, she had to show how she was going to support these children, six of which were underage; one was sixteen and had her own passport. The rest were with her; we were all six on one passport. Somebody in Italy told her to hide her money, so all the jewelry she had was on us. It was just so that she didn't show how much money she had, I guess. My brother couldn't show them where he could support his mother and six children, so they wouldn't take us over.

It was in the newspaper that this Salvato family was going to be sent back. My father was in business in Italy and he was a happy-go-lucky man; he was a jack-of-all-trades; he did everything. At the same time, he financed somebody to come to this country, which my mother knew nothing about. This fellow came to this country; he was an educated man. He made money in New York; he had a branch of theaters. He was reading in the paper and he read in the news that the Salvato family was going to be sent back. He didn't think it was the same one who helped him get in this country, but he came to Ellis Island. He saw my mother and he started crying. He called my father his teacher because he taught all these young fellows the shoemaker business. He said that he had just come for the heck of it and never thought that it would be us and asked us what happened to Santa--that was my father's name. She

told him that he died during the influenza epidemic. When he heard that my older brother was here, then he understood why we came and he said, "You are not going back. I have plenty of money. I didn't send him the fare back and the money that he gave me because I wanted to come and give it to him personally." He wanted to show off what he did, but he didn't get a chance because the war came up and he couldn't come back. So he bonded everyone of us. This took over a month. We were on Ellis Island for about five weeks.

The adjustment was really terrific; we couldn't get adjusted. There was every nationality there. We had to go to school. They had a school in Ellis Island. They had a German teacher, a French teacher, and an Italian teacher. The Italian teacher was one that you could just learn in school, dialect was as far as . . . She could have been English for as much as we understood her. We went to school all of us; they had beautiful schools. For the girls they taught us embroidery which we already knew.

My life in Italy was like I was trained for a movie actress. You went to nursery school; you went to Catholic school; you went to embroidery school, knitting school. Every item was accounted for for me. When I was a child, I had to go to all these different schools every hour. I used to make stockings when I was eight years old. I could knit a whole stocking, heel, and everything. That helped a lot because your time was all taken up. The boys had their hunting and fishing and everything. My father and the five boys each had an instrument. He was going to have his own band. He had all these plans for his family, but the dear Lord took him before anything came of it.

Getting back to Ellis Island, when we got in, we stayed ten days before this fellow found us. He bonded each one of us to show that we had to go to school until we were sixteen. He was the one that was going to take over.

The first day we landed, some French woman came up and slapped my brother for taking her seat; he didn't know that it was her seat. They stole everything we had. All my underclothes were all embroidered with my name on it and so were my brothers. We had our names on all of our clothes and we could see them on other people, but we were scared to death to take them on because some of them were vicious. My brother had a print of five fingers on his face when that woman slapped him. When my other brother tried to defend him, they took him away. He was fourteen years old and they took him to go with the men. Some ladies would tell my mother that she would never see him again, and she cried the whole time that we were there.

At night, they had theaters, beautiful theaters. I can remember a stage with opera stars. They had good entertainment. Their entertainment was first class; today I think that, but at that time I didn't know any better because I was only ten years old. They had "La Donne Mobila." I don't know whether you ever heard of that opera, but it was beautiful. I was ten and I enjoyed it.

One of my brothers--the one who got slapped--lost the use of his right leg. I don't know whether it was nerves or something. I was the one who was drafted to take care of him; nobody was to see that this boy had this leg or they might take him away from us. He was older than I was, but I was big for my age. We went to the theater after everyone was seated; I almost carried him.

They used to clean up when we left, disinfect everything, blankets and everything. Every night we had to get in line and they would give us graham crackers and milk with Ex-Lax, but we caught on to that. So we only took the crackers and threw away the milk. They had Jewish tables and our tables, and they were different; we noticed that the food was different. I could get away and go to the Jewish table because I had real curly hair and I looked like a Jewish girl. Even here in this country they took me for a Jewish girl. So we got in line, my brother and I, and they asked me, "Jewish?" And we would say, "Yes." We got in line and took all the food that we thought our mother would eat--she wasn't eating at all--like pickled herring, onions, and hot dogs. We had never seen a hot dog; it was really something. We would look at each other as we were going to taste it. They were all beef, I guess. For us it was pleasant; the ones who suffered were my mother and my oldest sister.

Then this man got us out and took us to his house. I remember they had maids. They had a big home in New York. They threw us all in tubs and whether we hollered or not, our hair was washed and combed. By that time, I had lice in my hair. My mother wouldn't hear of us being shaved, so they bought stuff to put in our head. I remember they combed my hair with a fine comb--my hair was curly--until I thought I was going to bleed.

We came to Ravenna, Ohio from there. We went with my brother, which I think today must have been a big adjustment for my sister-in-law. At the time we thought she was kind of mean, but imagine having somebody come in with seven children to your house when you're a newlywed with one child and one on the way. I can sympathize with her today.

That's what I can remember of Ellis Island. The adjustment was great.

B: Let's back up just a little bit to before you went to Ellis.

What stories had you heard back in Italy about America?

D: Well, my father had been in this country to see if he could make a fortune like everybody else. At the time, he only had one child. I don't know if he went to work for a shoemaker or if he went on the railroad track, but it seemed like that was all that he could get. He boarded with some woman; this woman must have had seven or eight boarders and she worked hard. He didn't like the impression that he got so he came back home. He worked long enough to make the fare to come home. He said that he didn't like it because the women worked too hard. That's the impression he got. My grandfather had also been in the country and he didn't like it, well, maybe because they had a business that they could go back to, whereas the other men who came didn't. So they adjusted themselves to Italy. My grandfather taught us a few words in English and to count to seven, which he called "sec:" One, two, three, four, five, six, "sec." That's all we knew, and a few words that are unmentionable. The only reason that we were in this country was because my father died; otherwise, we would not be here.

I remember a time just before he died when we lived on a peninsula in Italy. The town was bombed and we had to seek refuge to the homes that had the signs on them.

I had a really happy childhood. It was beautiful. My mother had a lot of help. My father was well-to-do. He worked hard; he didn't come by it, he worked at it. He had six or seven tables of apprentice shoemakers--boys who wanted to learn to make shoes. He was a good-hearted man; he helped everybody. It paid in the long run because this man came to his family's rescue. Otherwise, we would have been back in Italy where my mother had sold everything. In fact, she had given her dowry to a couple of brides there in good faith which she never got a penny for. They were supposed to send the money, but they never did. That's how we happened to be in this country.

B: Going back to what preparations you needed for the trip, do you remember where you caught the boat?

D: At Naples.

B: Do you remember how much the fare was?

D: No. I wasn't the one to be taken in confidence. It was my oldest sister and my mother; they planned everything together. But whatever it was, she must have had the money or we wouldn't have been here. They told her to hide whatever money she had. She was forty years old, had just lost her husband, and had seven children on her hand; the woman was confused. Everything they told her she took literally. She hid her money; she

hid her gold. She let us wear most of it. I think today, if she would have shown the money that she had-- because we lived on it a long time--she might not have had to be sent back. My brother couldn't afford to feed us.

The boat life was very bad.

B: Tell us about a typical day on the boat.

D: They served wine with their meals which wasn't even fit for a dog. It was terrible. It was from the end of the barrel where it was all settled. They were paid to serve wine on these boats, but they didn't do it; they did just what they felt like. They had separate foods for the first, second, and third class. We got third class, but my mother paid and got us a lot of things that she could afford. You could buy things just like on any other ship. At night, they were so congested, so packed, that we had to get out so that they could put the disinfectant all over. I remember I couldn't stand the smell; it used to make all of us . . . So we used to go on deck as late as we could stay, and then we were thrown back in there because you couldn't stay on deck all night. They had dances because my sister got invited to these dances, but she was in mourning.

Over there you mourn. All I remember as a child was that when a man died, they should make all of the rest die, make another grave. If we needed groceries--my mother wasn't allowed to go buy her own food--it had to be brought to her. So I would have to go with my aunt to get them. Their ways were so different. I don't think it is today. I went back in 1968. It has changed just as much as it has here. They have no more wells in the middle of the town where we used to go and fetch water. Now they have running water and everything just like over here. They have washers. It made a big impression on me because I thought I was going to find it like it was. When I came here, some of the places didn't have any running water or bathrooms. We had electricity when I was there. We were one of the first to have electricity and a toilet. It made an impression the other way when I came here.

My brothers and I had a ball on the boat because we were too young to know what my mother was going through. I remember we found a bin with onions and took a whole bunch of onions, climbed the mast, and threw them at all the passengers and the captain. The captain bribed us to come down so that he could have things running right. He said he was going to let us have different things.

I remember standing in line at Ellis Island for hours until they let us come through. There was an awful lot of people.

We had a beautiful Christmas in Ellis Island itself. They had people come in just like they do here with the welfare. Some volunteers from churches or something came and brought gifts. I remember I got a doll which I was going to bring to my new niece, but they stole it before I got here. My brothers got paint boxes. And we were thrilled with all of these gifts, but we didn't get to bring anything here because they stole them from us.

We had to go to school. That's where we started school because we had almost a month. These girls were marvelous. They were outgoing people who liked what they were doing and liked us. They were doing it because they liked the people; they weren't doing it because it was a job. You could tell the difference. A lot of time I think it is wonderful to like what you are doing and that you are not doing it just for the money. They were wonderful to us. One lady wanted to take me home with her so bad. I told her that she couldn't, my mother would break her arm.

There was a checkup every morning. There was a nurse and a doctor who came every morning to where we stayed. They had seats like a theater, benches. We sat there while my mother crotcheted or something; different women were doing different things, some would read. Everytime they came, I took my brother in the restroom with me. He didn't want to go in the ladies restroom. He was twelve and I was ten. But he had to drag that one leg. It was just a nervous condition, I think, because as soon as we landed, he was all right. I used to take him in there so that the doctors and nurses wouldn't see him. When we went to the theater, we were the last ones because I let him drag his leg. It was just so that they wouldn't take him away. They took the one son away because he pulled a knife on this woman and my mother didn't want to lose another one. If we were sick . . . one lady said that they took her daughter to the hospital but she never saw her again. So my mother was scared that if they took my brother to see what was wrong with him, she wouldn't see him anymore.

My brother had to buy us shoes because we wore out all of our shoes. My mother couldn't believe that we had to buy shoes which my father had always custom-made for us.

- B: When your boat came into the harbor, into Ellis Island, do you remember how you felt when you first saw the Statue of Liberty?
- D: It was beautiful. It had all of those lights and they looked like fireworks. See, every holiday in Italy, we have fireworks, and I remember my brother saying that they were going to have fireworks. The lights, the New York Harbor, the statue was beautiful. But I didn't get the meaning of the statue that

I have today. It was a beautiful statue and I said that it looked like our lighthouse. Being that we were on a peninsula, we had a lighthouse that my brothers and I used to swim to. We had relatives at the lighthouse so we would get some refreshments and swim back. It was quite a ways and I wonder today how I ever did it. I thought that they had their lighthouse with a statue on it. That was the impression that I got. The lights were just beautiful late at night.

B: When you were at Ellis, I think you have told me mostly about the process that you had to go through to enter, but do you remember specifically any shots or anything like that that they did?

D: No, we had all of our shots before we came.

B: How about medical examinations?

D: Every day there was a doctor and nurse who came through.

B: Was it an extensive examination or just very quick?

D: Just hold your tongue out and feel you and that kind of thing.

B: How would you rate your treatment at Ellis Island?

D: I think it was beautiful. The only thing was that we got lice out of it. But, they tried. It was clean; it was what you did with yourself.

For us it was a ball, but my mother was crying all of the time. She wasn't crying about Ellis Island, she was crying of her loss and the predicament she was in--that they stuck her in. She thought about what she was going to do, and then about coming to this country.

B: What type of sleeping facilities did they provide?

D: They had bunk beds. The blankets were what was infested. My brother was one of these finicky types. He was so clean and my mother washed his clothes more than ours. Every night she soaked his clothes in real hot water there in the bowl, but the edges of his clothes would get lice. We used to go see him; they had him with the boys. He was allowed to come and see us and we were allowed to go and see him, but we were altogether separated. I remember my older sister and my mom were up half of the night trying to keep us clean. But there was no way that they could have kept us from getting lice. I know that they were using disinfectant because I could smell it.

B: Do you recall any instances where you were cheated or somebody tried to gyp you out of money, other than stealing?

D: No.

B: I mean con men.

D: No. They sold apples and they were beautiful. We had all kinds of fruits where I came from, but apples were one of the minorities. We had maybe one or two. We had beautiful oranges and lemon trees in my old town in the southern part of Italy. They sold apples and I guess the prices were outrageous for those days. My brother said not to buy anymore and he would bring us a bag. So when he came, he would bring us apples or chewing gum. I had never seen chewing gum. I guess they overcharged for these things with our money. We thought we were paying a lot. A lira wasn't worth anything in those days, you know.

It was mostly summer and we had no overcoats. My mother had coats made for us because she heard it was cold here, but we weren't equipped for the New York weather in December and the early part of January. We didn't have those kinds of coats. When we came to Ravenna, I remember my aunt taking me to the store and buying me a velvet coat. I'll never forget that.

B: Mrs. DeCato, you told us that you finally ended up in Ravenna with your brother, correct?

D: Yes.

B: How did you get from Ravenna to Warren?

D: My sister got a job in the mills in Ravenna and my mother had quite a bit of money which she had changed over. We stayed with my brother for awhile and then we went on our own. My brother then decided that he wasn't making enough money there, so he moved to Warren and started a dry cleaning shop--the original dry cleaner in Warren, Ohio. He took one of my brothers with him to work. In the meantime, he kept telling us to move to Warren, so we did. We moved to Warren and my brothers went to work here; that's how we got to Warren. Where he settled, my mother went, let's put it that way.

B: Looking back, how would you improve the processing of immigrants if Ellis island was still open?

D: When we came in, there was no one to talk to us. If they had a translator . . . Unless we did have a translator, I didn't know about it because I was only ten years old. Like this woman slapping my brother and not being able to tell him that he had her seat, there should have been someone there to tell him that this seat was taken by this woman or to tell him not to sit there. We didn't know.

B: Did you meet any people on Ellis Island from Italy?

D: Not that we knew. There were people from Italy but none . . .

B: None that you struck up a conversation with?

D: My mother brought somebody with her as a ward, but she only went through the process and was picked up. We had to stay because we had no means of support in this country.

B: Have your feelings about America changed in the years that you have lived here?

D: Yes. At first, I missed my hometown. I missed it as a child because I went swimming every day; it was warm. The winters here were cold and bitter. The first snow was beautiful; we had a ball. But after that wore off, walking to school in cold zero degree weather and walking back . . . This is in 1920, 1921, 1922, 1923, we had no ride or anyone to pick us up like they do today. I think everyone else was in the same boat; it wasn't just us. I remember running home from school and helping to can or helping to wash clothes at that age, which today isn't done. I like America.

I went back to Europe in 1968 and I loved every minute of it because I still have family there. My father's two sisters were still living. We stayed and reminisced about different points that have changed. There was something to learn that they grew up just like I did. I would never want to stay there again; this is my home now and I love it.

B: Is there anything else that you think is important that we didn't cover in this interview?

D: I don't think so. I think I have said enough.

B: Okay, thank you, Mrs. DeCato.

END OF INTERVIEW