

# NELLY RATNER MYERS

**Oral History: EDITED VERSION** Birth Date: March 2, 1929.  
Interview EI-117 by Carol Bonura (student intern, City-As-Schools Program), 1/16/92.

Immigrated from Austria at the age of 13  
Arrived in the U.S. on April 1, 1940 on the *Rex* departing from Genoa, Italy.



**Read the oral history. Jot down answers to the questions as you go along. Then discuss the answers in your group.**

*Your group's dramatic skit will focus on why Nelly Ratner Myers came to the United States. As you read, think about why the family chose to leave their home and what they needed to leave Ellis Island and enter the U.S.*

**PAUL SIGRIST:** This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. We are in the home of Nelly Myers, on the East side of New York, in her apartment. Carol Bonura is going to be conducting the interview in sign language. Mrs. Myers is deaf.

**BONURA:** Good afternoon. This is Carol Bonura for the National Park Service. Today is January 16th, 1992. Today we are here with Nelly Myers, who was born in Vienna, Austria, and left from Genoa, Italy, May, 1940 at the age of eleven. Good morning, Ms. Myers. What is your father's name?

**MYERS:** Isadore. Isadore.

**BONURA:** What kind of work did he do?

**MYERS:** Very expert in clothing, suits. Suit operator. Very good. He was born in Poland and had scarlet fever and that's how he became deaf.

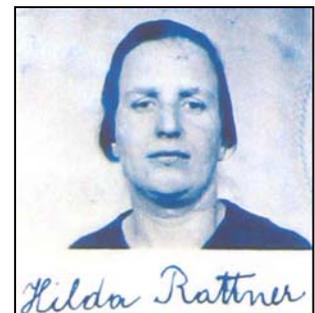
**BONURA:** What is your mother's name?

**MYERS:** Hilda Ratner. [*See photo from petition for naturalization, right. Notice she spells her name "Rattner."*] She was a dress maker in America and in Europe. Oh, she was a very STUBBORN person! That's why we came to America. If it wasn't for her stubbornness, we'd be dead in Vienna.

**BONURA:** Do you have brothers and sisters?

**MYERS:** One sister. She's deaf, too.

**BONURA:** How did you learn sign language?



**MYERS:** Through my mother. She taught me. But sometimes I do talk because when I was in school I signed at two years old and I learned to talk there. I was very thankful I learned to [speak] in kindergarten. We had fun going to school, oh yes. I loved going to school. I loved my friends. I had friends and everything was fine.

**BONURA:** What kind of religious life did you lead in Vienna? Did you go to temple?

**MYERS:** My family aren't strong religious people but we went to the temple. But my mother must eat kosher food, yes, and my grandmother. Very strict.

**BONURA:** What was it like to be deaf and Jewish before World War Two?

**MYERS:** OH! They all make fun of me because I'm Jewish.

**BONURA:** Did they tease you because you were deaf?

**MYERS:** No, no. Just because I was Jewish. But deaf, yes. When I signed, they teased me and they made funny hand gestures, made fun of me but today they don't do that anymore. Thank God. (she laughs)



But one time I think I remember, I was in, sometime in, I saw Nazis coming in Vienna. MARCHING! [NOTE: Germany took over Austria in 1938, before World War II began.] I looked out and I said, "What's that?" My mother was so scared. She knew something bad was happening. They had rifles, marching. Because I lived near the Danube River. Because I was so young I was very curious.

How does Nelly communicate with people?

Where was Nelly's father born?

What is her religion? Is she very religious?

Did Nelly suffer from anti-Jewish prejudice before the Nazis took over Austria?

Everybody warned us. The first Nazis came in and then they started to do something terrible against us Jews. They closed the whole school. I had no school for two years. For two years no school. I felt so bad. But the Gentile people were so good to us, and one teacher from my school came to my house to help me with lessons, my lessons. If the Nazis found out that she helped me they would have killed her. They were so courageous. They were so nice. It was a pleasure learning. In two years I had no school, for two years.

The super in my building, they hid us because the Jews couldn't buy any food from the stores [except] from eight to nine. The Jews can pay for food from eight 'til nine. We weren't allowed to buy much food. It was awful. And one time, I was not afraid. My mother was afraid so I went out to buy her milk or something and I saw a group of Nazi youths and they came to me and they surrounded me. And they said, "Are you a Jew?" and I didn't say anything so they slapped me in the face.

**BONURA:** What did you do?

**MYERS:** I said nothing. I ran home and I told my mother. My mother was in great fear. I wasn't. I was too young. I was too young to be afraid.

*[Oral historian's note: In a letter dated 4/13/92, Ms. Myers asked that the following paragraph be added to the transcript of her interview.]* One experience that I could never forget. It was when the Nazis gathered many Jewish older men and pushed them to walk with a sign holding "Ich bin Juden" [I am a Jew] on the street. I started to cry as it was the saddest thing to see for a ten year old girl.

The Nazis were horrible, raped all the Jews. In my building all the Jews had gone. They took them to concentration camps and they left because they weren't born in Vienna. We were the last ones because we were born in Vienna. I was lucky. We were one of the last people to get out. So my father was in one of the [trains] that picked up all the Jews. My father was one of them. They put gas all over the [train cars] and they would take them to concentration camps in Minsk, do you know where that is, and when they stopped at that camp and opened the train doors, all there were dead and they pushed them out of the train. It was awful. My father was one of them. **[NOTE:** Minsk is now the capital of Belarus, which used to be part of the Soviet Union.]

**BONURA:** That's how your father was killed?

**MYERS:** Yes. He was gassed and my mother wanted to divorce him anyway because he was not so good to us.

Give three examples of how the Nazis began to persecute the Jews of Vienna.

What do you think people said or did to the group of older Jewish men who had to walk with the sign saying, "I am a Jew"?

Why did Nelly's father have to go to the concentration camp first?

Nelly says something surprising about her father's death. What is it?

**BONURA:** Who decided to come to America?

**MYERS:** My grandmother was the only hearing person, because the four of us were deaf and knew nothing about the outside world. We knew nothing. No happiness...my grandmother heard the neighbors saying, "Please get out of Vienna now because the Nazis want to destroy you!" The teachers in school told me, "Get out now, now!"

So my mother started to act before it was too late. We went to the Consulate, United States Consulate, I'm not sure. "I want an affidavit to come to America."

But we happened to have an uncle who left Vienna a long time ago who got a job here. So I asked him to write us a letter that he would take care of us and he said he would do that for us. So the Consulate gave us an affidavit so we could get out anytime now. We were poor. We had no money. So we managed to get train money. It was awful because my mother and uncle worked hard and had some

money left over. But the Nazis took everything from us. We brought nothing, just our clothes, that's all. No money. Nothing.

We went in the train going out of Vienna border when we were leaving to go to Italy. The Nazis went in the train and examined us. And my mother had gold in her teeth and in her suits and they were looking all over. We were small. They didn't bother us. And they examined my mother and my uncle. We were okay and then we went on the train to Italy. Some experience, yes. I will NEVER forget. Never. Impossible.

At first my mother thought of sending us to Israel because my aunt was there, but later she changed her mind [because she] thought America was a free country.

Why was it important that Nelly's grandmother could hear and that her teachers kept visiting the family in secret?

Both Nelly and her mother got two documents which they needed to come into the US. What were they?

The mother and uncle had saved some money. What happened to it?

Why did Nelly's mother decide to go to America instead of Israel (which was not yet an independent country)?

**BONURA:** What had you heard about America when you lived in Vienna?

**MYERS:** My father tells me everyday about America. America is a wonderful country. He kept telling me and telling me. The Statue of Liberty, yeah, yeah, yeah!

**BONURA:** Who came to America with you?

**MYERS:** Me, my sister, my mother, my uncle and my grandmother. Five of us.

**BONURA:** What port did you leave from?



**MYERS:** From Genoa [in Italy]. I remember the ship, named *Rex*. (Left: Nelly with her mother and sister on board the *Rex*.) Beautiful thing. And the staff there were so friendly. We had ten days of a trip from Vienna to the United States and I vomited everyday. I vomited everyday because the ship went back and forth.

**BONURA:** Did anyone help you to come to Italy? Anyone help you?

**MYERS:** The HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] helped us a lot. When we got to Genoa they welcomed us in some kind of house. We ate there for two days because the ship hadn't arrived yet, so they helped us. They were very hospitable people. Italians are.

**BONURA:** Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

**MYERS:** When we were nearing the port I saw. I looked up. I was so thrilled to see the Statue of Liberty. I looked and I saw the sky scrapers and I was so thrilled about it because I knew something about it because my father had told me. People were jumping, they were so happy. All immigrants were so happy when we got here. When we left the ship and I saw so many people all over and I had to go through, what do you call it, the gate. And I had to go through the gate and they stopped us, the five of us, because there were four deaf people too much, so they had to send us to Ellis Island. They took us on the ferry to Ellis Island.

**BONURA:** The people that worked at Ellis Island, were they good to your family?

**MYERS:** As far as I remember it was nice. They were good. They had separate dining rooms. One group for kosher and the other for nonkosher. Imagine that. I never expected that. My mother felt so good! For five months we were here. FIVE MONTHS!

**BONURA:** Did the people that worked at Ellis Island say why you had to stay for five months?

**MYERS:** They were afraid that we will depend on the United States financially because they didn't know anything about deafness. Tanya Nash, have you heard about her?

**BONURA:** No, I've never heard of Tanya Nash.

**MYERS:** New York Society for The Deaf, Tanya Nash, she used to work there. She signed good and she knew about us and she came to Ellis Island and spoke with a judge there explaining about deafness. "Very independent people" and all that. That we would never depend on United States money. "Let them go." They wouldn't let us go.

So they decided, the judge decided that we must be bonded, \$2,500.00, from the Jewish philanthropists. This is money to support us if we couldn't work or something. So then, later, they did and finally let us go. We were so happy to leave. When we got out my mother and uncle worked, saved, paid back the money. It took five years. The money was all paid off, finally. \$2,500.00 in five years. They both worked so hard.

**BONURA:** Did you play games? Did people come? Shows?

**MYERS:** Oh, yes. I went to the really nice library. Books all over. You know what I picked, one book? I learned English. I became an expert in five months. Smart me. (she laughs) I learned a lot. And the sailors, the sailors used to dock around us and we were in the middle of the New York Bay, in the middle, and the soldiers came and they stopped there and I used to wave and flirt with them and say, "Hi!"

Two groups—one in Italy, one in New York—helped the family as they immigrated to the US. What were the names of these organizations?

Why did Nelly and her family have to stay at Ellis Island five months?

What clue tells you that many other Jewish immigrants were at Ellis Island?

Why did the judge finally allow the family to enter the US?

**BONURA:** Who came to meet you at Ellis Island when you left?

**MYERS:** My uncle helped us to find an apartment for us in the Bronx. I lived there in the Bronx for one year and then we moved to Brooklyn. Then we moved to Manhattan. Then I moved to New Jersey when I got married.

**BONURA:** How did your mother feel in America, working, when you left Ellis Island?

**MYERS:** So happy. She loved the United States. She kissed the United States. So happy.

**BONURA:** Where did you go to school?

**MYERS:** When I got here I went to Lexington School. I was there for five years. I was not happy there at all. Because I'm a foreigner, the kids were very cruel. They made fun of me because I'm foreigner and I wore hand-me-down clothing. They made fun of me. Everything was horrible. The teachers were horrible. I was not happy there, but I survived anyway.

**BONURA:** Did you learn English in school?

**MYERS:** Oh, yes. I had some English at Ellis Island and I picked up very fast.

**BONURA:** How about your other family members? They learned English?

**MYERS:** My sister, but my uncle and my mother were very slow. My sister went to Lexington School. When I was in Vienna, I went to Oral School, when I was two years old in Vienna, and I learned to talk there. And I moved here and they signed and they wanted to have speech, too, so I had no problem with that. What else?

**BONURA:** How did your family support themselves?

**MYERS:** Sewing, sewing machine operators. My uncle had an extra job doing hand sewing. Very expert for fine places, for British suits. My uncle sewed clothing, coats.

How did Nelly learn English?

What work skill from the old country helped the family to adjust in America?

Again, Nelly suffered from teasing and prejudice. Why did the children in Lexington School (a school for the deaf) tease her this time? How did the teachers at this school treat her differently from the teachers she knew in Vienna?

**BONURA:** When did you get engaged, married, children, when?

**MYERS:** [In] 1949 I met a nice man. I fell in love with him so we got married and I have two lovely kids and I'm happy I married him. But I divorced him. We don't get along.

When I finished school, I started with key punch operator. So BORING! I worked there for many years. When I finished with high school, I got married and then I went to Hunter College for two years. I dropped out, finished, because I'm stupid. (she laughs)

**BONURA:** What did you study at Hunter?

**MYERS:** Many, I forgot the name of it, about, I wanted to learn German more, I forgot the word for it, about the world, how groups of people live, their culture. I forgot the word for that. I forgot. Studying the different cultures. There's a word. But I couldn't get along well because I'm not able to understand things unless I have someone sitting near me to make notes for me but it wasn't enough, so I left.

What do you think was Nelly's opinion of German culture? Give evidence from the oral history to support your opinion.

Why do you think she became a key punch operator?

Why did she drop out of college?

Compare and contrast the difficulties Nelly faced as a Jewish person and as a deaf person.

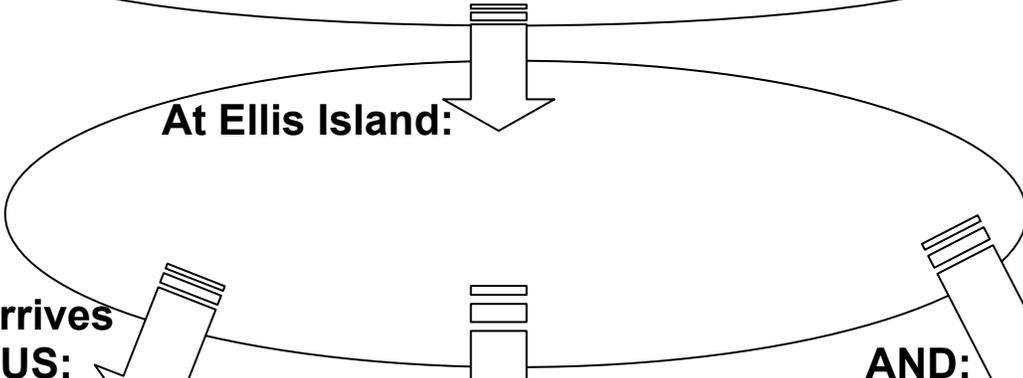
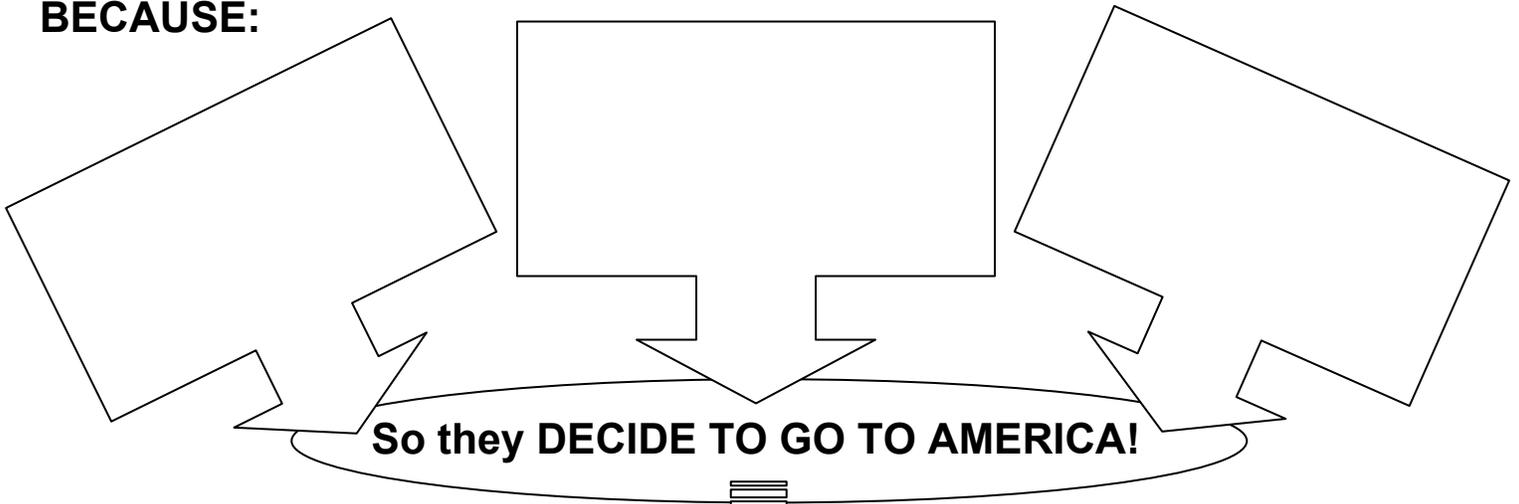
# GRAPHIC ORGANIZER for Ellis Island Oral History

**NAME** of immigrant: **Nelly Ratner Myers** **FROM:** \_\_\_\_\_

**YEAR** she came to the US: \_\_\_\_\_ **AGE** upon arrival: \_\_\_\_\_

**PUSH-PULL:** Why did her family choose to leave home and come to America?

**BECAUSE:**



AND:

AND:

AND: