

Immigrant Experiences: Roberta Escobar

Roberta Escobar emigrated from Brazil via Portugal in 1925 at age eight.

I was born in Manaus, Brazil, the state of Amazonas...in the northern part, right under the equator.... My mother taught school to the children of the plantation workers....

I was a sickly child. I had malaria, and they told me that I was going into a coma.... My father also was coming down with malaria. So the doctor recommended that we all get out, because otherwise we would die. It was getting that critical. I was about four. And that's when we left and went to Portugal, and stayed there three years, then came to the United States....

My mother's sister, Nilda, married a fellow of Portuguese descent.... He was...sent by some zoo in America to catch snakes and bring them back. I heard...one of his snakes had babies in my grandmother's basement. That didn't make him too popular. But they married and moved to Massachusetts, where he was from....

We went by boat from Brazil to Portugal first. I was very sick. My mother was nursing my father and I. So the trip was not very nice. In Portugal, I remember...the church chimes. My father and I would dance in the kitchen to those chimes....

We decided to come to the United States because Nilda's husband, Daniel Days. His [last] name was Diaz, but they changed to Days, because the [English] translation.... He was writing to my father always urging him to come to the United States.... After being there three years, my father realized there was no future for him in Portugal....

My father planned everything...well in advance.... We were in a cabin [upper class]....In New York, up on deck, everybody was trying to get a glimpse...as we were approaching. We had an exam by doctors at the Ellis Island. They put some kind of a number on our garment...gave me a biscuit, and some milk.

We arrived here in May, still in need of a coat.... We went to Fall River, Massachusetts...for four months.... I don't think there were five hundred Brazilians throughout the United States.... My father wanted my mother to pick up English as soon as possible.... So she shopped in the supermarkets that were strictly English-speaking.... I knew how to count up to ten, and that was it.

My father couldn't find work...because Fall River was a mill town and the industry there was factory work. So he wrote to different companies in New York. The day he was to leave, he played the violin.... After a few weeks, or so...he sent for me and for my mother to come...to Brooklyn, where he found a room.... It had a two-burner stove, but very little [else]. My mother worked on Twelfth Street at the Ansonia Clock Company.

Every Friday we went to a movie.... When we came out, there was a little tiny store where you could have a hot dog, or my father would buy me a Love Nest candy bar. So that was our beginning of life in the United States....

You had to be twenty-one to vote, and when I became twenty-one I voted and gave my citizenship number, and that's all you needed. The fact that you were voting showed that you wanted to be an American. I feel that I'm very American, since I didn't attend school anywhere else, and I regret I don't know more of the history of Brazil, but I certainly feel that I'm very much part of the American Dream. I regret that I didn't go back to Manaus, where I was born. Because now, instead of rubber plantations, I'm told they have Sony and all these other different companies and radios...so Manaus is now thriving again as a different kind of thing, and they restored the opera house, and I would love to see it.

Peter Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words*, (New York: Facts on File. 1997), 376-380.

Immigrant Experiences: June Gusoff

June Gusoff emigrated from Palestine in 1929 at age twelve.

I never left Jerusalem. I left once to go on a trip for school. We went to Tel Aviv. But that was the only time until we came to America.

My earliest memory is of a house...next to a huge wheat field, and you could see nothing on the horizon. It was that big of a field... When the poppies were in bloom, it was a big, red field...with other flowers interspersed.

I had two older brothers, an older sister, and a younger brother.... We had a lot of fun together. There was a lot of music and laughter in the house. In looking back, I realize that my mother had a very difficult time. She had five children to bring up alone.... Times were very hard for her, which I wasn't really aware of at the time....

I remember my school and my teachers, and I was a member of the scouts. It was not Girl Scouts, because there were boys in the troop. I remember many trips, hikes, camping....

After World War I, the British were the victors. Palestine had been under Turkish rule up to that point. In fact, during the war my father was in the Turkish army, and he had been stationed in Damascus. He was not a soldier; he taught art.... Before he went into the army, he worked as a craftsman. He was a jeweler. Before that he had done a lot of metal work. He made plates, and metal pots with pictures on them, decorations.... My father wanted to come here for economic reasons. It was difficult to earn enough to support a large family, and he thought he'd do better here....

I came with my older sister and younger brother. My two oldest brothers came about a year before we did. It was just a matter of getting all the money together.... I remember my last day in school and saying good-bye....

I don't remember having luggage. We just had the clothes on our backs, nothing else.... At the last minute, my mother was not allowed to board because her [eye infection].... She was not allowed to come with us....

We stopped at so many places. We stopped in Constantinople and Algiers and Madeira. We went through the Dardanelles and the Strait of Gibraltar. It was a long, long journey. It was fascinating, it was interesting...fun....

I remember getting off the ship and coming into Ellis Island with my brother, because my sister was taken from us and put into quarantine in the hospital on Ellis Island...wondering how my father will ever find us in this place where there were so many people. I didn't recognize him, but my brother did....

We went by subway to Brooklyn and I remember being very impressed.... My father found an empty apartment, a cold-water flat, no steam heat, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

It was odd being with my father, because I didn't know him.... He didn't know very much about children, because he had been away for so long without us. So I spoke very little....

When my mother came, it must have been very hard to be together again, never having much privacy. I mean, we were seven people in a small apartment. Just two bedrooms. And, you know, Williamsburg was not a pretty place to come to after Jerusalem, which was a beautiful city, and it was sort of country life...quiet, and the air was clear and fresh. This was a very noisy slum. We lived in a tenement building. So that transition was difficult for me.

I was very angry at being uprooted. I had to learn a new language. I was put into a grade with younger children until I learned the language.... In 1929, it was not one of the times when many immigrants came. We were the only ones who came from that part of the world. They were accustomed to eastern European immigrants. We were well-treated, but it was uncomfortable being with little children. I was as tall as the teacher. I was given the name June....

Peter Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words*, (New York: Facts on File, 1997), 406-410.