

I Would Cross a Million Borders

Brendan: Welcome to *How to be American*, a new podcast from the Tenement Museum in New York City. I'm Brendan Murphy, from the Museum's Education Department.

Here at the Museum, we welcome hundreds of thousands of visitors every year for tours of our two historic tenement buildings located on Orchard Street, and the vibrant neighborhood that surrounds them. But the stories we share aren't just about the Lower East Side of Manhattan, they're about the nation as a whole. They're about identity, place, and belonging. They're about "becoming American."

We're going to dig into the stories of families who called Orchard Street home using a variety of primary sources, like oral history, government records, and photographs. We'll join this research with the expertise of musicians and politicians, of historians and pizza chefs, to hear how immigrants, migrants and refugees have all helped shape American culture.

It is no secret that our country is incredibly polarized, especially in terms of immigration and what it means to be "an American." Sometimes it feels like we're living in an "us" vs. "them" world. Is it possible for us to come together under a shared American identity? To explore this question, we're going to ask a bunch of other questions.

We're going to begin with a fundamental one: What does it mean to *become* an American?

(*Montage of contemporary news clips*)

I never really had to think about that question for myself. Growing up in a small town in Washington, I never questioned my Americanness. I was born in this country. I learned about immigration in the classroom, and, like many of us, was presented with a pretty straightforward narrative about immigration to the United States. The personal stories I did hear were from a hundred years earlier - the joy, fear, and hope people felt as they stepped off the ship onto Ellis Island. What happened after that was always a little fuzzy - I just kind of assumed – now they were Americans!

But it has never been that simple. The law isn't a doorway that you simply walk through, more like a big messy maze, one that you can get trapped inside of.

And today we're going to look at what it has meant to be trapped, to live in legal limbo through the experiences of two women who both navigated the American immigration system, but a half a century apart.

I want to know how people dealt with living in the gray area of hoping and waiting to become officially, legally American. How did they cope? What were their fears? What did becoming American mean to them?

Our first story begins in the early 1920's in Palermo, Italy, at a local market. Enter Rosaria Mutolo. She was just about five feet tall, and from the photographs we know she had large brown eyes and a soft smile. She was teenager, and the family's youngest daughter. Imagine her working with her mother, selling eggs from their farm. Presumably, Adolfo Baldizzi was one of their customers. He was a few years older at 25. A strapping young military man, Adolfo fought in WWI. We have a great sepia toned photo of him in his uniform, newspaper and cigarette in hand. It's very classy. When he returned to Palermo after the war he began to plan his next great adventure.

According to their daughter Josephine, who the Tenement Museum met in the early 1990s, Adolfo used to tell his children that he fell in love with Rosaria at first sight. He had plans to go to America, and he wanted to bring Rosaria with him as his wife. This was probably an enticing offer to the Mutolo family, who were enduring unrest and hardship caused by the rise of Fascism and the downturn of the economy in Italy. Like many Italians, they likely saw a life in America as a chance at success and prosperity for their daughter.

Rosaria and Adolfo were married on December 16th, 1922. Just ten months later, Adolfo began his journey to America, leaving Rosaria behind in Palermo. Following a common pattern, Adolfo planned to work, and save money, and then send for his wife to join him once he was settled. Now on October 20th, 1923, Adolfo boarded the Suffern, the ship that carried him across the Atlantic.

I've always wondered about the conversations between Adolfo and Rosaria on the night before he left for the United States. Did she ask him to write her immediately when he landed so she knew he was okay? Was she nervous? Exasperated? There is no way for us to know. We do know about the push factors that motivated his journey to America, such as the high taxes, and lack of jobs and opportunity. Adolfo would have known of many people who left, and maybe he heard stories of work and money in America. A carpenter in Sicily might earn as little as a dollar eighty a week vs. eighteen dollars a week in the United States.

Adolfo immigrated in 1923. And I wanted to know what were – if any – the limits on who could and could not come at that time. So, to get some context, I reached out to Mae Ngai.

Mae: I'm Mae Ngai. I teach history at Columbia University and I write and think and teach about immigration and citizenship.

Brendan: Mae told me that at the country's founding, the American government paid more attention to who could be a citizen than to who could enter the country as an immigrant.

Mae: So the constitution actually doesn't talk about immigration, but it talks about naturalization and it talks about citizenship. And the first law in 1790 said that people could become a citizen if they were free white persons of good moral character. So there's a lot in those few words.

Brendan: This law, the Naturalization Act of 1790, was the first set of rules the government ever made about who could become an American citizen. An immigrant *could* become a citizen if he were free and white. But who did that leave out? A lot of folks. Native Americans, indentured servants, enslaved people, free blacks, and all women.

With some notable changes, that standard remained in place for almost 100 years. In the late 1800s, anti-immigrant sentiments were on the rise in American politics. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion act -- the first law to explicitly name an ethnic group restricted from immigrating.

Then in 1917, another law was passed, this time to limit immigration from Europe.

Mae: The 1917 law includes for the first time the literacy test, which is really reading a few simple words in one's own native language that are shown to you on flashcards ... It's an easy test. I think the people in the senate may have underestimated the level of literacy in Europe. They had a lot of stereotypes that all these were peasants that were completely illiterate, so it wasn't true. So, the literacy test really didn't do the job that it was intended to do.

Brendan: The laws kept getting tighter. Right around the time Rosaria and Adolfo married in Italy, a complicated quota system was being implemented in the United States. I asked Mae why. What was the push for restricting European immigration?

Mae: So there's kind of a hysteria raised about Europeans now are coming back. They're flooding the country. So they cook up a scheme which is just to restrict people by setting a number, by setting a quota, which is different than literacy tests because that's arguably, arguably, not necessarily desirable, but it's arguably a way to measure an individual's competency right and enhance their desirability. So a quota is a number, so there's an absolute of how many people can come in and then where they come from becomes a question.

Brendan: From 1921 to 1924, these quotas became tighter and tighter. The fact that Adolfo made it into the quota, that was impressive. Not only was he coming to a new country, but he was competing with hundreds of thousands of others for a spot.

Mae: So under the 1921 act, there was a spectacle of steam ships racing to get into New York harbor and Boston harbor on the first day of the month when a new quota would be released for the month. So they were waiting and waiting outside the harbors right, to enter so they could unload their people first.

Brendan: What happened if you were, say from Hungary or Italy and you boarded the boats and you saved up all your money and you end up getting there on the fifth or the sixth and the quota's already met?

Mae: Tough luck, tough luck buddy.

Brendan: Fortunately, Adolfo made it to New York harbor. Once he arrived in New York, he began saving money and sending it back to Italy to pay for Rosaria's ticket to the United States. Then one day – maybe he heard it from a newsie shouting in the morning, or maybe from a radio broadcast – he learned that his wife's journey was about to be even more complicated than he thought.

The Johnson-Reed Act had been passed. The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 was the culmination of those consistently tightening quotas. It's complicated, which is no surprise. In short, the government used a formula. Two percent of the foreign born population here, in America, from any given country in 1890. That was the quota.

Mae: So they used a formula ...there's a lot of figuring and crunching of data and making up data and manipulating of data to come up with what they then called national origin quotas, which is the idea that we should let in a fixed number of people and that number should be distributed to countries based on the proportion of people in the current American population can trace their ancestry back to their country.

Mae: They excluded all black people, all Asians, all nonwhites. So gee whiz, the quota has come out looking just like they want them to with 65 percent going to northern and western Europe and only 35 percent going to Eastern and Southern Europe. So Italy, which had been one of the largest sending countries before world war one, now had a quota of 5,800. So these are devastating numbers and it makes it very difficult then for people to come in.

Brendan: Rosaria was not considered a desirable American. The Johnson-Reed Act had an immeasurable effect on countless families. To put the impact it had into perspective, in 1921,

222,260 Italians were officially allowed to enter the country, but by 1925 that number dropped to only 6,203.

And now, separated by an ocean, Adolfo and Rosaria's future together was uncertain. They were married, she had a home in America and the money for her travel - but she was now fighting for a coveted spot with thousands upon thousands of others in the exact same position.

And here's where it gets even more complicated. The precise path Rosaria took to arrive in America is remembered differently among members of the Baldizzi family. But the consensus is that when she arrived in America in 1925, she arrived using an alias and as an undocumented immigrant.

Rosaria told her daughter that at the time, she had not realized how drastically this would affect her life in America. Here's what her daughter, Josephine, told us.

The audio we have of Josephine Baldizzi is a little rough, sorry about that, the recording isn't great.

Josephine Baldizzi: My mother came on a ship as an American citizen.

Interviewer: How did she do that?

Josephine Baldizzi: On somebody's passport. Somebody gave her a passport. I don't know how they finagled that! When she told me, I says, "Wow! What if they caught you?" and she said, "Well in those days a lot of people, you know."

Brendan: Rosaria and Adolfo first lived in an apartment on Elizabeth Street, a crowded, and mostly Italian Street on the Lower East Side. Josephine, their daughter, was born in 1926, and Johnny followed in 1927. A few years after Johnny was born they moved to the third floor of 97 Orchard Street, a six-story brick tenement building a few blocks away.

Adolfo, a skilled carpenter, was initially the family's primary wage earner. But that changed during the Great Depression when it became hard for him to find work. Josephine told us that he was often at home, playing games with her and her brother. For them, a welcome treat. For Adolfo, however, every game might have been a constant reminder of their precarious financial situation. Thankfully, Rosaria was able to find seasonal work in a garment factory, sewing linings into coats.

During this time, Rosaria was undocumented and the possibility of being discovered, the possibility of deportation, that was real. Josephine talked about Rosaria crying at times. She said her mother longed to visit Italy to see her family, but she knew she couldn't risk it. If she returned to Italy, she might never be able to reunite with her family in America.

Mae: So, for people who entered like Rosaria, without proper documentation, it all comes down to whether or not you're caught. So certainly, somebody in her position, I would guess was living with looking over her shoulder half the time, not knowing if her presence was really secure, worried about what would happen to her family if she were found out and deported. So people live with these fears and it's a terrible thing because it colors your whole life, right? You don't really know, you know, you don't want to stick out, you know, it would affect how you would raise your children, you know, just to be extra careful not to call any attention to themselves. This is an added kind of motivation maybe to be particularly strict with your children, um, where you work, where you're willing to go.

Brendan: In her later years, Rosaria didn't have to live with that fear. For a long time, we weren't sure how Rosaria had managed to go from being an undocumented immigrant to becoming an American citizen, but somehow she did. As luck would have it, in 2016, a museum staff member made a discovery while browsing through an online database. The internet can be a magical place.

I am now holding a government document with Rosaria's name on it. It's two sided, the text boxes were filled in with a typewriter. And as someone who isn't a legal scholar, it isn't the easiest document to understand. Some of the text is just abbreviations, some of it is crossed out. One aspect of it is very clear, however. It says Rosaria entered the country in 1925 and, in 1945, she left... and then came right back.

What is this piece of paper, and what did it mean for Rosaria? For that, we need to take a step back and meet a woman who advocated for immigrants like Rosaria during this time period.

Mae: So this is the brainchild of Frances Perkins, who's the secretary of labor.

Brendan: Someone who's familiar with the Lower East Side.

Mae: Yes, and she came with Roosevelt. Basically. She is served in his cabinet when he was governor of New York and she's a longtime progressive reformer and I think she's the first woman to have a cabinet position.

Brendan: Just like in our modern time, laws cause reactions. Perkins was building off a movement for immigration reform and responding to mounting criticism from both lawmakers and the American People.

Mae: So Perkins cooks up this idea that they can use some...there's this obscure part of the 1917 law that says people who left the country for on a temporary visit at the time when the law was

being passed and when they come back from their visit are denied entry for some technical reason that the secretary of labor can suspend their exclusion or deportation and let them in.

Brendan: The rationale behind Perkin's idea was rooted in family-unity. Keeping families who had been formed here in the United States, made lives here, together.

Mae: Okay. So she takes this idea and she says, well, what if like, say Mrs. Baldizzi left the country temporarily and then we let her back in because we consider her exclusion to not really be relevant.

Brendan: The pre-examination process provided a sort of amnesty to European undocumented immigrants. Individuals had to have arrived after 1921, have lived in the United States for at least seven years, and have established families. Rosaria, with a spouse who is an American citizen, Adolfo naturalized in 1939, could go through a process allowing them to visit Canada and return to the United States as a legal resident.

Mae: So this was really creative action on the part of the secretary of labor. And she just interpreted a temporary departure from the country to be a voluntary departure, which is a kind of informal deportation, it's like a self-deportation. It doesn't go in your record as a formal deportation.

Brendan: As part of the process, courts also granted pardons for those who committed small crimes, fraudulent entry among them. Perkins said that the crimes committed quote "amounted only to violations of law committed many years ago and were counterbalanced by long periods of good moral conduct and useful service in the community." End quote.

Her pre-examination process involved at least 17 separate steps, stacks and stacks of paper work, years and years of waiting, and countless visits to bureaucratic offices.

- Oct 1940 Rosaria registers as an alien
- Feb 1942 Rosaria applies for a Certificate of Identity
- Oct 1944 Adolfo files an immigrant visa application for his wife
- Nov 1944 Rosaria files an Application for Pre-examination
- Jan 1945 Visa application approved, now we just need to secure permission to enter Canada
- Apr 1945 Canadians worried US won't let Rosaria back in due to the original fraud, so they hesitate
- May 1945 INS working to get her special permission to enter Canada
- May 1945 INS explains to Canada that Rosaria is a spouse of a United States citizen, so there is no problem
- May 1945 Canada gives permission for her to enter for 10 days

- June 1945 Before she leaves for Canada, Pre-examination takes place in New York City
- Jul 4 1945 Rosaria admitted as an Legal Permanent Resident at Rouses Point, NY
- Mar 1946 Rosaria petitions for naturalization
- May 1947 Rosaria applies for a Reentry Permit
- May 1947 Reentry permit approved
- October 1947 Rosaria reenters the US on that permit

For eight years Rosaria worked her way through this process. Between 1935 and 1958 approximately 58,000 applications for pre-examination were processed, and almost all were accepted.

The security this process provided allowed Rosaria to leave and enter the United States without repercussion, something she'd be unable to do since she arrived in 1925. Imagine all of the things she missed in Italy, births and baptisms, weddings and funerals. Finally, in early 1947, Rosaria had the chance to return to the country of her birth. A few months after her return, in May of 1948, she received the paper that she and so many others coveted. Her naturalization papers. She was now an American citizen.

This pre-examination program did not *change* any laws, simply make use of the space between them. Additionally, it was not open to all undocumented people, only to European immigrants like Rosaria.

Mae: But then just to make sure that Mexicans or Asians don't use the program, they, they refine the law, that the program is not still not a law. Sorry. They refined the law to say that eligibility is limited to people who are from non-contiguous countries.

Brendan: So, who was this program not open to? The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, for all intents and purposes, was still in effect. A series of other restrictions had further expanded the list of individuals banned from entry. That means all Asian immigrants are ineligible for this waiver process. In 1945 the government added a provision that prevented immigrants from Mexico and the Caribbean from applying to the pre-examination program as well.

Rosaria's story is reflective of what was happening the country in the 1920's and 1930's, but, let's be real, the world changes. Who is coming to this country changes. And while in the early-1920's Italians were arriving in significant numbers, that had tapered off by the 1960's. And though Frances Perkins helped erase the illegality of Rosaria and other European immigrants, making them able to become legally "American", that was not possible for everyone – like those who came from Mexico. While immigration trends were changing, their hopes, ideals, fears, and rationale for taking these risks were and remain similar to Rosaria's.

In 1965 a new law was passed, the Hart-Cellar act. This law worked to rectify some of the racism embedded in the Johnson-Reed act, but it wasn't a net positive for all immigrant groups.

Mae: So the Hart-Celler act, um, but did two things. First, it eliminated the national origin quotas as the basis for distributing quotas and replaced it with a system where every country has the same, a maximum number that it can have. It's not really a quota, but it functions like a quota. So in 1965 the overall ceiling was set at 290,000 a year and no country could have more than seven percent of the total, which worked out to 20,000 per country per year.

Brendan: No matter what country it is.

Mae: Right. So it's at one level a liberal reform because it gets rid of the racist structure of the national origin quotas.

Brendan: Which really fits along with the civil rights act or the civil rights movement.

Mae: Exactly. In fact, its sponsors saw it as a civil rights act for Europeans. But it was extremely illiberal and reactionary in that it imposed quotas on countries of Latin America, which previously had no quotas. So you could say heart seller is actually the single most responsible cause for decades of undocumented migration from Mexico

Brendan: We can bring this story up to today, because the consequences of the Johnson-Reed and Hart-Cellar acts continue to shape the stories of families. Cora Cervantes is part of one of those families.

Cora: My name is Cora Cervantes. I grew up in East LA, I was born in Mexico. I live in New York City now.

Brendan: Cora shared her story with the Tenement Museum almost five years ago when she participated in the Your Story, Our Story project. Your Story, Our Story is an online exhibit where people can share their own stories of immigration, migration, and American identity. You can visit the site at yourstory.tenement.org. The site helps us uncover the ties that bind our stories together across time and place; We couldn't help but see the threads that linked Rosaria's story to the story Cora shared of a very special object – her mother's comal.

Cora: This smooth griddle connects my family to memory and food. I grew up eating warm tortillas that came straight from the comal. I experienced one of my first "grown up," moments when my mom allowed me to flip the tortillas on my own for the first time. This comal prepares many dishes, including midnight snacks, during late family gatherings in the kitchen, like toasted bolillos (bread) with cajeta (Dulce de Leche). When I first arrived in the US, items like this comal,

brought me a sense of home. The comal was mailed to my mother in 1989, just a few months after her arrival to the United States. My mother speaks of my grandmother going to various mercados (markets) in Toluca, Mexico, looking for the right one. "The one that would last our family many meals." Living as an undocumented immigrant creates many barriers, including the inability to go back to your home country in times of family crisis --including loss of family. My mom describes this comal as a connection with her mother, and memories from Mexico, like the time when she felt like a grown up as she made tortillas with her mother. This year, after many delicious meals, we decided to retire the comal, but not without it warming up it's last set of tortillas at our family's Fourth of July carne asada.

Brendan: Like Rosaria, Cora and her family came to America seeking better opportunity. You know I'm curious, why did your parents bring you here?

Cora: My mom said look, Mexico, where she grew up as a woman, was a really difficult space. She said I want you, as a woman, to have access and opportunities you may not have here because of your gender. But also, my brother he has cerebral palsy, and at that time in Mexico, like if you went to a sidewalk, it wasn't like wheelchair accessible. Like you couldn't get on a bus on a wheelchair. Like it was just, difficult. There are a lot of "No's" that you experience being undocumented, there are a lot of "no's" if you have a disability. My brother couldn't go to school. For my mom she wanted opportunity for us to thrive and live in different culture. For her the US represented more access for women. It represented the idea we could walk down street pushing my brother's wheelchair, and crossing the street would be possible, you know? That handicap sign in parking lots, or all over the place, that meant so much to my parents, that idea of access for my brother. They said, I want you both to grow up in a world where you both have access, I want you to grow up in a space--which is so ironic because we were undocumented when we got here.

As I get older, now I know why they did it, it's taken on this whole new meaning. Someone said something to me a long time ago, they said, no one will ever understand being the child of immigrants and living up to the dreams they have for you. And they made it seem like it was this stressful thing, but to me it's this infinite well of inspiration, that I'm my parents' wildest dream. It brings me so much joy, it's a testament to their unconditional love. My dad says I would cross a million borders for you if that's what it took to give you what you have.

Brendan: Cora moved to Los Angeles when she was seven. She spent much of her childhood not knowing that she was an undocumented immigrant. What did it feel like to have parents in a state of limbo?

Cora: For many years, we were all in a state of limbo, we were all undocumented. I didn't know for a very long time that I was undocumented, my parents kind of kept it from me up until high school. I didn't know. I just remember, in the early 90s, believe it or not, California was a red state and they had a Republican governor. And voters passed this bill called Prop 187, which is probably one of the most anti-immigrant pieces of legislation in the state, it's kind of like the grandfather a lot of the bills we've seen in other states.

It never dawned on me that I was undocumented until I was in high school, and then became very real. Because 9/11 happened and both of my parents lost their jobs because of a verification system that went into place. They didn't have documents to present that showed that they were eligible to work and, you know, live here.

Cora: It became very real - oh my gosh we're undocumented. Or they were undocumented. Shortly after, they were like 'oh that FAFSA that they're having you practice on at school to fill out, that driver's permit, you can't get that. Because you don't have a Social Security number.' And I was like 'Well, can we go to office where they hand them out? Can we fill out a form? Why haven't we done this?' My parents were just like 'We can't do that. There isn't a place where we can go to get that for you. If there was a way or a place I promise we'd move heaven and earth to get it for you. But it's just not an option.' Overnight, in 2001, it went from Can's, like I'm going to go to college, I can do this I can do that to Cant's. Everything was a Can't. I was sharing not too long ago, even if you have a headache, going to Safeway which is like a market in California, I had a really bad headache, needed extra strength Tylenol, they wouldn't sell it to me because I didn't have a California ID. I had like a Mexican Consular ID and they said we don't accept this in the store. I wasn't even in a position to do something about a headache, without a proper document. So it really is a lot of can't. I mean, things have shifted, but in many ways they haven't or they've gotten worse. So it's interesting to navigate that, and live life undocumented and figure out that gray area between the cans and cant's. And find a way to go to school, go to college, to you know work or live up the dreams your parents have for you, if they're sacrificing so much. So, yeah it's a really strange, your life changes, everything changes overnight when you get your documents in order. And at the same time, some things stay the same. Like you realize, wait, I'm still the same person, I still have same values, except now I have these 9 digits that say something else about me and open this door to this world that I wanted to be a part of but couldn't.

Brenan: Cora became an American citizen. But that process was long and complicated. Was there anything, I mean aside from, just the process as a whole that was so baffling to you, as a part of either your father's experience or your experience, a moment that was either a particular frustration or that was particularly challenging?

Cora: While I mean, when I went through my process, what was challenging for me was getting all the documents, and just I had to talk to my parents about why they brought me to the US, when they came. Because you need a lot of that information, you need to talk about when you came, and who your parents are, it's just a very comprehensive application that speaks about who you are in this country, right? And so It was really difficult to have conversations with my parents because they already feel a tremendous amount of pain for placing me in a situation where I was undocumented for so long. Like there were colleges I couldn't go to, there were jobs I couldn't take, there were fields trips I couldn't go on. So, they felt a lot of guilt. So, as I filled out those forms, I felt terrible about the emotional toll it took on my parents. Because, here they were, and they continue to really dream amazing things for me, and work towards them, filling out this form painted a, I think, image of them I wouldn't ever want them to feel.

There's a form where they ask you 'Are you a communist?', 'Are you this or are you that?' And it was weird cause like, dude I got here when I was like 7 years old. You know, I go to the movies, and I hang out with my friends, and my dad loves watching the super bowl. There's all these things that are part of my life here, and it was weird to, I've never felt so othered, through like a legal context as when I was filling that out. Cause it's like you're proving that you belong. When it was like, I've been here, I always say, I was made with Mexican parts but manufactured in the US. I was practically homegrown here, I went to elementary school here, High School here, I went to dances here, like everything here. So it was so strange to fill out those forms for myself and then later for my dad. Like one of the documents you have to prove that they're your relative, so I had to prove that this person was my dad. You know what I mean? So, I have my birth certificate, but it's so bizarre. I think people think its a very easy and accessible process, but it isn't. There are so many forms. So many questions. And its a really serious document, you can't afford to mess up. And I mean, now, recently there are changes where, before if you were missing a document or something, they'd mail it back to you, and you can submit more evidence or whatever the case may be. But there are incidents where, Now they're like if you're denied, have to re-apply. So you have to pay for everything all over again. You can't afford to mess up. So I think even then as we were navigating this We started doing this early this year, it was really tense. I checked every document 5 times. Then our attorney checked it. Then I said, well let me see it one more time. I wanted everything to go as smoothly as possible because I didn't want to risk something not working out and then placing my dad – now my dad's been highlighted. Now they know he's here and, I can't afford for it not to go well.

Brendan: In what context do you feel most American today?

Cora: I feel most American every day now. But it took me a while to own that identity. It was something taht I craved, but I felt like I couldn't have. It just felt so inaccessible. Every time I'd try to claim it, I'd see the news, and it would be like, you know, these terrible Mexicans doing these terrible things. Drug dealers and rapists. And it was just, Oh my gosh that's not who we are. Not only am I that, but I always say Mexican-American because , 4th of July my family we have a carne asada, but, I always say, you'll never meet more patriotic people than immigrants. Like my parents, it's just an explosion of US flags and the works when we have a 4th of July thing. And I think, I just wish some of these people that see us as foreigners would just step into our carne asada for the 4th of July. One, they'd love the food. Two, they would see that we have so much pride, and we're so invested in making our community the best it could possibly be. And I think it was that as I got older, you know what, actually really what blew my mind: When I was getting my citizenship, I was taking the oath, right? They have everyone stand up, and I did it in Los Angeles with 4,000 other people from all over the world that were becoming citizens. And my parents came and we all dressed up. My dad and my mom were so cute. My dad put on blue suit, my mom put on a little red dress outfit. I was like, 'you're being so extra right now!' But in the best way possible. They were just – it just meant so much for our family.

Cora: But, I remember standing there and I got to go all the way in the front. So I remember looking back as everybody raised their hand to take oath, and I just like, looking back at everyone, I was just overcome with emotion. Because I knew we all had different journeys and stories, but we were all standing at a convention center, ready to take our oath, and say that this was our country. But it was so strange because this has been my country, you know? And then, at that time, President Obama came on, that had like a video of like 'Welcome to the United States', but I've been here since I was 7! Thanks for the welcome, but uh, you know. And he says 'Welcome' this is your country. And part of me was like 'Yes! This is my country!' but part of me was like but this has been my country. When I helped in my community, When we go to church, when I went to school and I stood up for pledge of allegiance in second grade. You know, my parents do so much volunteer work, and they have so much investment in community. Because, it's our home. So it was weird for someone to welcome us. When it's like, we've already been here. This has been our home.

Brendan: While Rosaria's story challenges long-held ideas about how past immigrants navigated our complicated system, Cora's reminded me that our friends and neighbors might still be stuck within that same system. Their family's reasoning for coming to the United States is so similar. Their journeys toward "becoming American" were shaped by laws that defined them as undesirable and narratives that labeled them criminal. Those laws shifted and changed, sometimes almost overnight, leaving them and their families a in a surprising state of uncertainty, afraid of what would happen if their status was discovered, all the while waiting for

a pathway to appear. Concerned the pathway in front of them might suddenly disappear. Most striking is their shared and sincere desire to live in the United States. Their sincere desire to be American. The risks they took to make that happen for their families, their children, and their futures.

Sometimes we take for granted the fact that many of us were born here. We have the benefit of legally “being American” by default. We don’t have to work for it. By sharing the stories of these two incredible women, we can take a moment and remember those of us who fought and continue to fight to be part of American Society.

Thank for joining us for the first episode of How to be American. Be sure to subscribe to “How to be American” on Stitcher and iTunes, and follow us on Facebook. Also check out the podcast page on our website at Tenement.org. There’ll you’ll find additional material about each episode, like photographs, links and copies of the documents we talked about.

Join us next time as we take a deep dive into the history of one of America’s most beloved and hotly debated immigrant-origin foods ...pizza!

How to be American is a podcast from the Tenement Museum. This episode was produced by Max Savage Levenson. Our editor and composer is Craig Kepen. Special thanks to: Mae Ngai, Cora Cervantes, and Pineapple Street Media in Brooklyn, New York. If you liked this episode, subscribe to the podcast. You can help us reach new listeners by rating and reviewing us on Apple Podcasts. To explore more stories like the ones in this episode, visit www.tenement.org. Consider donating or becoming a member to support us in telling stories that illustrate what it means to be American.

For the Tenement Museum, I’m Brendan Murphy. Thanks for listening.