Hello. My name is Gerri Balter, and I'm a first-generation American. I'm here to tell you how I came to be born in Minneapolis. My parents were born and raised in the Ukraine, my father in Odessa and my mother in Kiev. It was difficult for their fathers to earn enough money for the families to survive. Their fathers decided to emigrate to the United States where they would be able to earn enough to bring their families over and give their children a better future.

They arrived in New York at different times during 1913 and made their way to Minneapolis, where a thriving Orthodox Jewish community found them a place to live and work. My father's father became a delivery driver for Northside Bakery. My mother's father worked at an Orthodox Jewish synagogue. Both men felt sure it wouldn't take long before their families would be able to join them.

It was rough for the families left behind. My mother's mother and one of her brothers died. Her remaining brother, who was a teenager, was left in charge of her and her two younger sisters. Food was scarce, especially for orphans. My mother told me horrific stories of stepping over dead bodies of soldiers to look for crumbs of food. Sometimes all they found was moldy bread. My mother didn't want to eat it. It tasted so awful. Her brother forced it down her throat so that she could survive.

My father, also a teenager, and his family weren't in much better shape. He told me stories about hiding in haystacks with bandits sticking pitchforks in them, looking to kill any young males of fighting age.

They hoped to send for their families at the end of World War I. But the Bolshevik revolution began and they had to wait until things calmed down. By 1921, the revolution ended and life became more peaceful. My father's mother applied for permission to leave the country. The government refused. The only way to leave was to escape, so that's what they did. They managed to book passage in steerage class on a ship leaving for New York.

Because my mother and her siblings were orphans as far as the [Soviet] government was concerned, they weren't allowed to apply to leave the country. Her younger two sisters were put into an orphanage. My mother and her brother were forced to work. It took longer for them to find a way to escape. The first time they were allowed to take the younger girls out of the orphanage for the day, they never returned. They boarded a ship, steerage class.
It wasn’t an easy trip for either family. Even though each had a family member living in
the United States, they weren’t assured entrance. They had make sure they stayed clean, not
easy in steerage where there was no port holes and the few bathrooms were being shared by
more than a hundred people. So they would sneak up to first or second class areas of the ship
to use those bathrooms and to get some fresh air. They shaved their heads to make sure they
didn’t have any lice because you couldn’t get into this country if you had lice.

My mother told me that one day when she stood on deck, a sailor gave her a banana.
She had never seen one before and didn’t know what to do with it. He mimed peeling it, so she
did and threw away the inside and tried to eat the peeling.

When my father and his family reached Ellis Island, they were examined and
interviewed. When my father left Odessa, his name was Srul Balter. When he left Ellis Island,
his name was Israel Balter. All foreign names were Americanized in those days.

When my mother and her siblings arrived, they, too, were examined and interviewed.
When she left Kiev, she was Udeef Ushuranko. When she left Ellis Island, she was Adell Rank.

After both families left Ellis Island, they traveled from New York to Minneapolis by train. I
wondered how they managed to get there when they couldn’t speak English. They told me that
their destination was pinned to their clothes so people could help them get there.

My father’s father met the train when his family arrived. They had a joyous reunion.

My mother’s father met the train when his family arrived as well. It was a bit different for
them. My mother’s youngest sister was a baby when her father left. She didn’t recognize the
man who tried to hug her and screamed. It took my mother some time to convince her that this
strange man was her father.

Up to this time, my parents hadn’t met. That happened when they went to night school.
My mother’s brother introduced them. They started to date and got married after they
graduated. They remained in North Minneapolis, and that’s where I was born.

I grew up being a first-generation American and people seem to think that that was
strange when they meet me and they talk to me. But then they talk about things that I don’t
understand. I’ve never decorated a Christmas tree. I don’t even know how to dye eggs for
Easter. Some of the food that people eat, like three bean casserole, I’ve never even tried. And
some of the food I ate, like tongue, only makes people say, “Eww.” But that’s what happens
when you grow up in a family whose culture is different. Even though they settled in Minneapolis
and it was sixteen years before I was born, they still kept a lot of the things that they learned while they were in the Ukraine and passed them on to me.