

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Greek Immigration to America

Personal Experiences

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SPIRO KATSARAS

Interviewed

by

Michael G Passas

on

November 13, 1988

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INTERVIEWEE SPIRO KATSARAS
INTERVIEWER Michael Passas
SUBJECT Greek Immigration to America
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P This is an interview with Mr Spiro Katsaras. First I want to ask you to give me a little overview on your parents, your dad's name and a little bit about him.

K Well, my father's name is George Katsaris. He was born on the island of Symi. He married my mother. Her name was Sylvia Kontos. He started to work on freighters and he farmed land in New York. From there he came to Youngstown, Ohio and he got a job in Youngstown Sheet and Tube as a painter. He worked there until he was about 65 years old, and then I hired him in the dry-cleaning business that I owned and I started him off as a partner until he was 75 years old and around 76 he passed away.

P Is his life in Greece, when he was in Greece, do you remember what type of work your dad had at that time?

K Like I said, when he was probably between the age of 15 and 20, he probably worked on sponge boats. After that he left the island of Symi and he went to Piraeus and that's when he got a job as a sailor in a freighter and he made many trips to different parts of the world. And then, like I said, he landed in New York and since then he remained here in the United States.

P How about your mother? What did she basically do? Housewife?

K She was strictly a housewife, yeah.

P How many children did they have?

- K They had two brothers, well, three sons and a daughter and a girl and a boy died in Greece, while in Greece
- P Okay Well, let me ask you this then Overall, how was your parents life in Greece? Did they live okay? Did they have adequate income? Did they live a good life? Was it a poor life? Tell me a little bit about their economic situation
- K Yeah, they had enough income Like I said, my father was working in a freighter and then when he came to the United States he was still a young man and he was sending money from Youngstown, Ohio to Piraeus, Greece Economically, we were in pretty fair condition
- P How many years were they separated because he was working?
- K Yeah, they were separated I would say about 15 years and 1929 that's when he sent for us He sent for my mother and myself and one of the brothers, Stan When we came over and we lived in Campbell, Ohio My mother had my younger brother Dennis Katsaras and my sister, a younger sister, Katherine Katsaras
- P Do you remember what year your father came to America to work? It's not really that important but I would like to know
- K About around 1920
- P About 1920? Oh, okay When you were in Greece you came up in 1929 Were you old enough or did you remember anything about World War I, like how it affected your family?
- K Well, it was around 1912, 1914 I remember very little, but I remember the hardship that my grandmother had to obtain We were fortunate to have a hospital in Piraeus, she was working there She was able to bring extra food We got along through WWI
- P As you matured and also came into your teenage years, did you have any type of goals for yourself? Like for us today Like you say you want to end up being a teacher and you later become one
- K While I was in Piraeus, Greece I was only a year old when they took me from the island Symi to Piraeus There I went to private school for my education
- P In Greece?
- K In Greece That's where I got my high school diploma from there

P What were you going to do with that diploma? Did you have any ambitions?

K Well, my ambition was to actually be an engineer because my uncle was an engineer in the Royal Navy in Greece where he was an instructor. I always looked forward to following in his footsteps, but then when I was about 15 years old we came over to the United States and we went to grade schools for about a year. Then I went to Campbell High School in Campbell, Ohio. I graduated in about a year and a half. It took me about a year and a half to graduate from Memorial High School.

P That's all the time it spent?

K Yeah. Then I got a job in the mill and was going to night school at Youngstown College, the college that is now called Youngstown State University.

P When you were younger and still in Greece did you work as a young teenager?

K No. I was going to school.

P Who was responsible for your family considering coming to America?

K My father.

P What year was it that you left?

K 1929. Yeah, we came on the boat. The name of the boat was Edison. It took us 21 days to cross the ocean.

P Did you have any trouble when you left Greece? You know, sometimes the country give people problems about the systems. Did you have any of these problems?

K No. No problems at all.

P Do you remember anything about your trip? How old were you at the time?

K 15.

P What do you remember about this boat trip?

K It was a beautiful trip. Real nice. We had no problems. We found real good weather and the food was excellent. We had a second class room and we had an advantage over some of the lower class on the boat. We had a very good trip.

P Where did you disembark when you came to America?

K Gosh Ellis Island

P Do you remember anything about Ellis Island?

K I remember that while in Greece one of the boat dockers said that something was wrong with my eyes I had to make five or six visits to an office We had to pay almost a hundred dollars, and in those days a hundred dollars was big money So, when we arrive at Ellis Island I noticed that they had hundreds of people lined up to be checked by the doctor Well, for some reason, being that I was a second class passenger, the official picked me out and my mother and my brother and took us to the side and told us we were free to go

P They gave you no problem?

K No problem No nothing

P: Did they ask you any type of questions at Ellis Island?

K No, no problems There were many other people We were fortunate

P Do you remember any experiences inside Ellis Island?

K No, I don't remember at all It was too crowded and too noisy There was confusion After, we went to a New York hotel From there we took a train and came here to Ohio in 1929.

P Did you leave anybody behind when you left Greece? Grandparent?

K Yeah I left my grandmother

P. What was her name?

K Anna Kontos and my uncle, who was my guardian, and he was a single man There was my first cousin His name was Michael and there was other people that I missed while living in Greece.

P What were your thoughts in your mind and in your heart about leaving your country? I know you were only 15

K Well, I was afraid I was worrying about what was ahead of me I hear some good and some bad I was living with a heavy heart

- P When you say some good and some bad, you wanna share that Tell some of the things that scared you There were a lot of rumors at that time Any idea?
- K They were saying that you'd make a lot money here. On the other hand, they were saying that they used to work in the mills where it was loud, there was danger, fire and unsafe places
- P What were your expectations of America? What did you think you were going to find here?
- K I was expecting to go to school and go through the university and still had in mind to be a mathematics teacher or an engineer I went to Youngstown University and took geometry and calculus my first year of college I did expect to graduate, but we went into the Depression and it was pretty tough working in the mill. Then after that I got married and that made it a little tougher. Then I went into the dry-cleaning business I was self-employed, I've been self-employed ever since until my retirement
- P Did you ever miss or regret that you never finished school?
- K No, I didn't because most of the years a business man was better off than many professionals, until the later years from 70 and up Of course, I never regretted it I always had a good life
- P How bad was the Depression on you and your family when you came here? I mean it affected many people in different ways
- K It was pretty tough, because my father was arranging to buy a home, an older house He was only getting two or three days He was only working part time Being that I was just a school boy yet I was working at a grocery store and I even worked at a shoe shining shop I was only making about seven to eight dollars a week That was quite a bit of help for my family, but the around 1936 or 1937 that's when we started and opened up the dry cleaning business Things started to pick up and that improved our financial problems
- P What made you get into the dry cleaning business? Was it by chance or just something to do?
- K Well, no My partner had something to do with it He said that Campbell didn't have a dry cleaning plant, but Cleveland did We went up there and checked them out We thought it was good idea to open up a dry cleaning plant in Campbell It was the first dry cleaning plant to open up in Campbell with my partner. We employed about 20 employees in Campbell and later on about eight or ten years we purchased another dry cleaning plant and we went in the wholesale dry cleaning business We had about 40

employees The name of the company was Cana Cleaners in Youngstown, Ohio.

P At that time was that Youngstown or was the Campbell?

K: Cana was in Youngstown Sunbright Cleaners was in Campbell

P Okay I want to ask you just one more question Did your life in America, was it fulfilled, what you expected to find and what actually happened to you and your family?

K After I got married and I was very fortunate to marry a good woman and we had to children, to sons, and naturally our expectations were for them to become professionals and like I said my son George is a school teacher in Miami, Florida

P. Is that your oldest son?

K Yeah, George and the young one, Dino He went to Youngstown University, and he is presently employed at Universal Rundlel in New Castle as a credit manager and had three children So we have six grandchildren all together and we enjoy them very much They fulfilled our expectations to have grandchildren

End of interview