

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Greek Immigration in America

O H 1205

PHILIP E. CINNIS

Interviewed

by

Michael G. Passas

on

October 22, 1988

Phillip E. Giannis was born on November 16, 1920 in Kalygnos, Greece. Phillip's father Emmanuel worked in the Sheet and Tube, subsequently sending money to his family to survive. His father sent for his family in 1935. They arrived by boat and docked in New York on Ellis Island. There, the family underwent a series of medical examinations. Their first impression of America was not a very good one. After all the necessary formalities, the family boarded a train for Youngstown and later took a car to Campbell, Ohio.

When World War II broke out, Phillip volunteered for Army duty. He spent almost four years in of that thirty-three months in Europe. His base camp was in Fort Hayes, Columbus. After that, he was transferred to Indiana. After being sent across, he was sent to Norwich, England with the 389 Bomb Group. Phillip married his wife Elypheteria in April of 1946. From this marriage came three children: Maria, Manuel, and Michael. After the war, Phillip worked for Republic Steel where his main job was as maintenance man in the boiler house. On January 1, 1983, Phillip retired.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Greek Immigration in America

INTERVIEWEE: Phillip E. Ginnis  
INTERVIEWER: Michael G. Passas  
SUBJECT: Greek immigration into America, entering Ellis Island  
DATE: October 22, 1988

P: This is an interview with Mr. Phillip E. Ginnis for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Greek Immigration to America, by Michael G. Passas, at 264 Gordon Street, Campbell, OH 44405, on October 22, 1988.

First, if you will, can you give me an overview of what your parents' life was like in Greece, like what do your parents do?

G: Well, my father actually was in the States a long time. He worked in the mill. Then in 1935, we came here. When I got out to New York City and saw those buildings, I was really surprised. It was the first time I saw there were blacks, and I also was surprised.

P: In Greece, what were your parents like, like in Greece?

G: Kind of rough. Kind of rough because if we didn't have any kind of money coming from the States, we would have been in bad shape. My father was saving money. We were buying groceries, and stuff like that.

P: Well, what did your father do in Greece? Was he ever

down there?

G: Well, he was over there, but I met him, you know, once I was a young fellow, I seem to remember, until after he came over to the States. He was working down at the Sheet and Tube. How long I couldn't tell you. There were three in my family; my sister, brother, and myself.

P: Do you remember what your mother did in Greece? What her life was like?

G: Her life was rough because we had to plant wheat. We had to harvest wheat. Make our own bread. Make our own oil to survive through the winter. Good thing we had the money come from the States that was buying clothes.

P: Did she work? Do you know what kind of job she did?

G: No. No. Just around the farm, you know, to support the kids. That's about all.

P: So, your overall parents' life was pretty poor then? You guys weren't wealthy?

G: Everybody was poor.

P: What do you remember about yourself, your childhood when you were in Greece? How old were you? Do you remember anything about your childhood when you were growing up?

G: Well, a lot of swimming when I was young, you know. A lot of fruit. A lot of fishing over there, you know, when you're a young fellow, you go all over the place. I did a lot of hunting. What else you got to remember?

P: Did you work when you were young?

G: No. Like I said, I came here when I was fifteen.

P: Okay.

G: There's very little you can do when you're twelve or thirteen years old. Plus, I used to go out with my, you know, grandfather to help him out at the farm once in awhile. But, most of the time I used to take off and go swimming, and he was there all by himself.

P: (Laughter) What most young guys do?

G: Well, sure. He was going to stay in the sun over there and do all kind of work with the sun staring in our face. We used to take off and go swimming.

P: (Laughter) Do you remember anything about World War II when it came to Greece? I mean, to your home town. How did it affect you? How did it affect your family or anybody?

G: I wasn't there at the time. I was here in the States during World War II. But when I came here, I finished school, grade school. Then, I tried to find a job for about three years. I could never get a job because my father was working maybe one day a week, two days a week. When the war broke out, that's when I got into the service.

P: So, you weren't there when the war broke out then?

G: No, I was here.

P: You were here?

G: Yes.

P: As you got older, all right. Let say you're sixteen or fifteen or whatever. What were your goals like? Did you have goals? Like today, we say, "When I grow up, I want to be this. I want to do that." When you're younger.

G: I never thought of anything like that.

P: No?

G: No.

P: You didn't have any ambition to be \_\_\_\_\_.

G: Nothing. One step at a time.

P: Okay. Who was responsible for your family considering to come to America?

G: My father.

P: Your father was?

G: Yes. My father was here, and he brought us up here.

P: Okay. How old were you then when you came?

G: I was fifteen when I came here around -when was it? December 1935.

P: Once you decided to come to America, your mother and you had?

G: My mother, my brother, and my sister.

P: Right. Did they give you any trouble over there to come to America?

G: No.

P: No. Because some people had problems coming.

G: Well, this was after that, you know. Back in them days, you had no trouble with nothing. You just put your papers in, and you come right in.

P: Yes.

G: Unless they changed the law after that, I couldn't tell you.

P: Do you remember the place where you came in the United States? Did you come by boat? What was your transportation?

G: By boat.

P: Do you remember anything about your trip, your life on that boat?

G: It was a rough place. I think it was about two weeks to come from France over here.

P: Yes.

G: But as far as water, you know, getting sick, nothing. I was running all over the place on the boat, and we came to Ellis Island.

P: Ellis Island?

G: Yes.

P: Can you remember anything more about your boat trip? I'm a little bit interested in what you saw on that boat, what you felt?

G: Well.

P: Whatever you can remember.

G: The first time you get on a big boat, you're surprised to see a big boat like that, but when you hit the water, the boat wasn't big enough, you know. We came to New York City. From there, we got on the ferry. We went to this Ellis Island. We went to the doctors. From there, the people who took care of us put us on the train, and they sent us right to Youngstown. But,

before we came over from Ellis Island, somebody gave us a piece of paper that said Youngstown on it, so the people who took care of us, knew where we were going. I was running back and forth asking everybody and showed them the sign.

P: On Ellis Island?

G: Yes. And they used to tell us, "Sit down. When the time comes, we'll take you to the railroad station." Finally, they put us on the train, and we came to Youngstown. When I got off the train in Youngstown and seen all the smoke and filth from Sheet and Tube and Republic, I was really surprised. I was telling my mother, "This ain't America. This is Hell!" That's the way I felt. All the smoke and filth and all that stuff.

P: Well, how old were you now when you were leaving Ellis Island? I mean when you were at Ellis Island, you were fifteen?

C: Fifteen, yes.

P: Do you remember anything else about it?

G: No.

P: A lot of people?

C: Yes, a lot of people because the boat was loaded with people, you know, with different nationalities. But, I couldn't remember too much about that.

P: What were your thoughts and your feelings in your mind and in your heart about leaving Greece? You were fifteen. You knew what was there, what kind of life you had. What did you feel? What did you dream?

C: Well, actually I didn't care because I wanted to come meet my father. But then, when I came here, I started to think I should have stayed back over there.

P: Oh.

G: See? Because the way things look over - you know, we got filth, and the homes look a mess and everything else. Actually, I wanted to go back again.

P: So, you were homesick, then?

G: Yes. How are you going to go back when you're fifteen?

P: What did you expect when you left Greece to come to America? What were your expectations? I mean here.

You are going to leave your home town. What was going through your mind? What did you expect you were going to find here?

G: Who's going to think of stuff like that when you're fifteen years old?

P: Well, just try to think what you can remember.

G: You think you're going to find something clean, you know. But, when I saw all the filth over here, especially Youngstown, . . . I know Europe wasn't too bad because I didn't go out to look around. When I came here and saw all the filth and the smoke, the way the homes looked, I was afraid. I was real surprised. Then, another thing. I didn't see no ocean. That was another thing. I was surprised because over there you can walk five minutes, and you're right in the ocean. Then, on the top of that, I saw my first snow. I didn't see the sun for--well, it came like in December--and I didn't see the sun until April of the following year. It snowed on top of snow, and when you see something like that you never saw before, you're surprised.

P: Yes. When you came here, you said you came to Ellis Island. From there they put you on a train. Do you remember anything about the ride on the train? Anything unusual happen?

G: Well, first time you got on the train, you start to think, "What kind of stuff they got over here?"

P: Anything unusual happen to you on the trip? Anything you remember?

G: Oh! We got to Paris from the islands. They took us at a hotel. Then, we slept over there overnight; that's in Paris. In the meantime, I had my slingshot in my pocket underneath the coat. We got up in the morning to go to the train and from there to get the boat. I forgot my slingshot, and then I left, all by myself, and went back to the hotel. I don't know how to talk French or nothing. I got my slingshot, and I got out of there. I don't know which way to go find the train. So, I went back to the hotel. I said "Well, these are the suitcases and trunks. You got to go to the train." I followed the people and onto the train.

P: That's how you got there?

G: My mother was hollering through the window. She thought I was going to get lost, and I finally made it. I was surprised I didn't get a beating that night.



P: Just by following the suitcases?

G: Following the suitcases

P: That's good.

G: That was something

P: Oh, it was

G: "How the heck am I going to find the train?" I said, "Well, let me follow these guys, here. The suitcases gotta go with the train, you know, because suitcases were over there." I just followed the suitcases and got on the train. That's when I found my mother, she had sent my brother to look for me. Oh, he was screaming and hollering and everything else when I got in there.

P: I wanted to ask you something else, here.

G: Yes

P: Something your mother said. She said something about you getting into a little bit of trouble in Greece with the authorities there. Something about you spent a couple days in jail. What happened there?

G: Well, we were playing down by the beach, and this guy came running, like a power train. He said, "You're making all kinds of noise. The noise the power plant was making was three times as much noise as we were making." He picked up a rock and hit me on the nose.

P: Oh, he hit you with a rock. Now, was these soldiers or were they?

G: No. It was a worker.

P: Okay. Was he Greek or was he Italian?

G: He was Greek.

P: Okay.

G: Finally, I got another rock, and I threw it through the door and hit a machine and ran. So, when I came home that evening, the police came up to the house. They told me, "How come you threw the rock?" And, I told them. I said, "He hit me on the nose, so I gotta defend myself. I threw one back." They threw me in jail for three days and three nights. At the end, the guy that squealed on me, he was in jail with us. The police said, "You squealed on your buddies, then you're

going to go to jail too " When we got out, the guy in the jail house gave us a boot in the behind and told us we should go home

P: Do you remember anything from those three days in there?

G: It was tough because of the guy I had next to me. Every time you heard those guys practicing with the machine guns, he screamed, "Oh, they're going to kill me! They're going to kill me!" I said, "They might as well kill you. Squealers like you, we don't want." They used to bring us food. I sat down and ate my food. He wouldn't eat his food. For three days and three nights, he didn't eat.

P: Okay, when you first came here to Campbell, I guess from the train, it landed where, Youngstown? It stopped at Youngstown.

G: Yes.

P: Then what? What happened? How did you get here?

G: Well, my father's friend, Mrs. Cougias, came down with the car and got us. The first house I remember was at Tremble Avenue, in Campbell, Ohio. Fifteen dollars a month rent, and we couldn't pay it.

P: You couldn't pay it?

G: We couldn't pay it, because like I told you, he was working only one day a week, sometimes two days a week, sometimes none. You try to pay your rent. You pay bills, and food.

P: Was the Depression going on at that time?

G: That was at the tail end of the Depression.

P: The tail end of the Depression?

G: Yes. In 1935, or 1936.

P: Yes, okay. So, what was your first impression of Campbell other than the smoke.

G: Just like I told you, when I seen the smoke, the snow, and all the stuff, I didn't want no part of it.

P: When you finally, eventually settled here, how did you earn a living? When did you start working? What year did you come here?

G: [In] 1935.

P: [In] 1935 Okay, you were fifteen.

G: Fifteen Then, when I finished grade school, I was working in a garage. I was making two dollars a week.

P: In the garage?

G: In the garage Two dollars a week.

P: Where did you go from there? What type of work did you have until you got laid off?

G: That's all That's the only thing I had. I couldn't find a job for, what . . . three, four years. I used to go up twenty miles from here and go out the Ravenna. But, after days of looking all over the place, I couldn't get nothing Finally, in 1942, when the war broke out, that's when I got into the service.

P: Okay Were you drafted, or did you volunteer?

G: No I volunteered

P: You volunteered? What do you remember about your service days?

G: Well, there were rough days and better days

P: Where were you stationed at most of the time? Say, you went in 1942?

G: I went down to Fort Hayes, Columbus That's where I trained for the service

P: Boot camp?

G: Boot camp

P: And from there?

G: From there, I went up to Indiana From there, I went to Louisiana From Louisiana, I went to New York State Then, I went back to Indiana, and from Indiana, I went across to England on the Queen Mary It was five days and five nights to go over there

P: Is that where you spent most of your time, then, in England?

G: Most of the time in England with the 8th Air Force

P: England at that time, they were hit pretty hard in that What do you remember from that?

G: They used to bomb day and night when I was over there. Then, the soldiers started going in there, and they started driving them back. They started bombing at night; only at nighttime. Sooner or later, they gave it up because our planes were bombing twenty-four hours a day too, day in and day out. Americans in the daytime and the English at nighttime. They used to bomb all over Europe. They used to go to Africa and load over there. Then, on the way back to England, they used to bomb all over Europe. This was twenty-four hours a day.

P: Where were you stationed now in England? Anywhere close to this stuff?

G: Well, we had bombs all over the airfield where I was at, but they never hit the airfield.

P: Which airfield? Do you remember?

G: There was a name, but I forgot.

P: Okay. Alright.

G: The place was close to Norwich, England.

P: Okay. Norwich. Alright, I heard of that.

G: I was a machine gunner over there, and we used to get up five or six times a night and went to our machine gun posts. Every time a siren would go on, we'd go over there. We used to see bombers come over, German bombers, but nobody was allowed to fire a shot. Our place never got hit. They used to bomb close to town, all around; in our place, nothing.

P: They just never called you to go over to see action or they just.

G: No. I was at the Air Force right at the point. After that, I got drafted with the infantry. They sent me to France. From France, I went to Germany.

P: What did you do in France?

G: I went through France.

P: Okay.

G: Then, I went through Belgium, and I met with the 3rd Armoured Division in Germany. I was a machine gunner on the Halftrack, AAA.

P: Halftrack. Yes.

G: In the meantime, the division pulled back for rest. I'm waiting for action. I'm waiting and waiting. The next thing you know, the war finished. After the war finished over there, I heard they dropped a bomb in Japan.

P: The H Bomb.

G: Then, we got called by a General who said, "We're going to go to Japan. We're going to show them Jap's how to fight." It was something. Then, we raised all kind of hell. I said, "Look at that. Thirty-five months across, now a chance to go home, and he wants to go straight to Japan!" There was another guy next to me. He said, "That ain't nothing. I got forty months over!" So, when they dropped the bomb, that was the end of that.

P: When did you start working in the mills? How did you get into the mills?

G: Well, after I came home, after I got discharged, I got a job at the Sheet and Tube, right away.

P: From application?

G: Yes. From application. A lot of people did in them days. After I worked for about a year, I quit. I went up to Chicago to a trade school. I came back and couldn't find a job over there. So, I got started with Republic Steel, and I put thirty-four years in there.

P: What did you do in Republic Steel?

G: I was working in the boiler house.

P: The boiler house. What kind of work?

G: Well, repaired boilers and stuff like that.

P: A maintenance man?

G: Yes. I spent thirty-four years in there.

P: Well, it's a hard question to ask, but, was it okay for you, that type of work?

G: There wasn't a good job over there. It was good that I could find any kind of job in the mill. I had a job before the last one. I used to work in the snow, in the mud, in the cold. When it gets cold and you have to go outside to do something, it's pretty rough.

P: Some people came to this country expecting certain things. Was your life fulfilled coming to this coun-

try? Were your dreams, your goals met when you came to this country?

G: When you're young you don't think about stuff like that.

P: Take it as it comes?

G: Go as it comes. Yes.

P: Alright. Let's take it this way. When you came here, obviously you thought how bad it was, the smoke, and everything.

G: Yes.

P: Did you feel America was good for you?

G: Well, it was. I used to sculpture all kind of stuff, like statues and sorts. There were teachers coming up and looking at my works. They told me, "Phillip, you want to go to school to be a sculpturer in New York City?" Well, who had the money to go to school to be a sculpturer in them days? The school was going to send me over there, all expenses paid.

P: Why not go?

G: I was fifteen years old. I didn't know the language. My father said, "You're going to go over there? Where are you going to work at to support yourself?" So, I gave that up.

P: Didn't try?

G: No, didn't try because you have to have money to go to a school like that. You can't go just on your looks. If I had the money and I waited to get over there, maybe things would have been different, help the rest of the family out.

P: Overall then, would you say that life was okay here for you?

G: Well, after I got a job, life wasn't too bad. Of course, you had to work a little bit hard. But, you had everything that you wanted; before, you had nothing. We used to go down the railroad tracks and get coal. We'd take it up to the house, and throw it in the stove. Shoes, full of holes. We didn't have nothing. In those days, everybody was happy because nobody had anything and everybody was equal. Everybody was happy. Now, everybody has everything, and they don't have enough. They're still looking for some more. In those days, we went every Sunday to see

family and friends. Now, everybody got cars and televisions. Nobody goes to see anybody. They got telephones. Nobody calls up. In those days, we used to go all over the place.

P: There was more closeness, then?

G: Yes, everybody was happy with what little we had. Now, it's all business.

P: What were your wages in the mill?

G: I was making seventy-five cents an hour.

P: How many hours a day were a typical day at work?

G: Eight. It was eight hours. Then, it went up to \$1.25 or \$1.50.

P: Were you renting at the time? Did you have your own home when you started in the mill? Did you have your own home, or were you renting?

G: No, we were renting.

P: What kind of rent were they charging then? I mean, to get an idea of prices then, fifteen dollars a month?

G: Well, when we bought a house, it was \$6,800. Between the three of us, we didn't have the down payment to put down, two thousand dollars.

P: That's you, your father-in-law, and . . . ?

G: And my brother-in-law.

P: And your brother-in-law.

G: We had to borrow money from two banks to get the house. Between the three of us, we paid the thing off. Three guys, no money. That's how rough things were in those days.

P: How about work?

G: My dad would go there, and the boss would say, "No work for you. Try at three o'clock." My dad would take his lunch and go back to the place. He'd say, (the boss) "No work for you today. Come try for the next shift."

P: So, back and forth.

G: Three times a day, you would try. Winter time, you would walk in heavy snow. Sometimes, you worked one or two days. If you'd miss reporting one day, the guy

would tell him, "Where the heck were you yesterday! You could have had a days work yesterday." That's the way it was done. You had to know someone to get a few days work.

P: So, you never knew.

G: No. But, for their friends, before the union come in, they had a job working four or five days a week. But, the other guys they couldn't get nothing. They used to give money under the table.

P: Oh?

G: They used to give them food.

P: When you were in the mill, did they ever have any strikes?

G: Yes.

P: What did you do? Were you afraid to go to work? Did you work? Some guys used to cross the line, and they went anyway.

G: Back in 1937, when they had the big strike. . .

P: I remember.

G: Down at Sheet and Tube, well, they had the strike because they [the company] didn't want the union. So, everybody walked out. Youngstown Sheet and Tube used to go down South and bring people in the boxcars.

P: A lot of blacks came up here.

G: Yes. They used to bring them up here and drop them off here on the road. Then, they used to cross the river and go in the mill. Then, the guys that stayed in the mill, they brought in their beds and chains to beat them. Nobody was allowed to go in, and nobody was allowed to go out. They had machine guns on top of the main office on Short Street. Then, after that, things started getting tight. The government from Ohio sent the National Guard over there. That's when they broke the strike up. But after that, a couple of these guys signed with the union.

P: There was one strike I remember where they burned almost all of East Youngstown.

G: That was the same strike.

P: Is that the same one where they say it did over a million dollars worth of damage. It burned that whole



area down here.

G: They busted all the windows with rifle shot. They killed I don't know how many going in and out of there

P: There were some deaths in that too. Yes?

G: Yes.

P: How old were you at this time? Do you remember?

G: Well, seventeen.

P: Seventeen?

G: Yes. Seventeen. After they brought the Army or the National Guard, they were standing over the gates with bayonets. What are you going to do? With the Army you couldn't do anything. That's when they broke up the strike. They said, "Everyone in there come on out." But, the guys that were in there before, were locked in there. They couldn't come out. Guys couldn't go in. Then, after that. . .

P: How did they get in there?

G: They stayed in there. They used to bring food

P: But, when the strike was over though

G: Well, when the strike was over, then, they started coming out. All of them, they snuck in the mill. Like I told you, they used to get those people from down South and bring them over. They used to sneak them in. They had beds. They had food and everything else. From New Castle all the way up to Warren was the same problem. They used to come out with doughnuts and food. They would feed them. They were over there twenty-four hours a day.

END OF INTERVIEW