

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Greek Immigration to America

Personal Experience

O.H. 1210

NIKITA PENTELLIS

Interviewed

by

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on

October 9, 1988

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P: This is the fourth interview with Mr. Nikita Pantellis. Tell me a little bit about your parents and their life in Greece.

NP: My parents and my sisters and brothers. The background was Tigris and my grandpa, both grandpas, my uncle, my mother's brother was, he became his own captain of his boats and he had sponge divers and they went to Egypt, Libya, for seven months and they left in April and they came back in November. My father was a cook and he would catch the sponges and separate the classes, you know number one, number two, number three. They had to be, you know, separate.

P: Your mother?

NP: My mother was just a house wife, she had four boys and three girls. And her job was at home. My father was gone with my uncle for seven months, and then he was home.

P: Would you say that they had a good living?

NP: Very poor living, seven children and with the money he was making there was not enough to buy food. We slept on the floor, all seven kids and my father and my mother had, a what do you call it?

P: A cot?

NP: Like a cot, yes you know boards and blankets. And the house was a room upstairs and a room downstairs. That was an old house.

P: Crowded

NP: Very crowded, so my father was doing what he was doing with sponges and then one time he started to go on small boats and catch some fish, all of the small boats around the islands. And then in 1961 he was on one of these in the reefs and one night he had very bad pains and he died on the boat. In 1961, in January. At that time I was at home with the other kids and my mother.

P: How old were you at that time?

NP: By that time I was married.

P: Oh you were married. Ok can you remember back when you were a young man , like those teenage years a little bit about your life and where you worked what you....

NP: Ok the governor we had, I was more of the family governor. My father and I and the brother in laws they had boats and they were killing fish with dynamite. So one day the town caught them and they put them nine months in jail, the brothers.

P: For killing fish?

NP: For killing fish and they got out and said they were going to do the same thing because it was their way of making a living and one day the Spartans, the Italian soldiers had to come in close to shore so they knew they would go back to jail for years, because it was the second time. So they decided to jump in the ocean and swim and get the boat away from land so that they could get away. So they shot one guard in the shoulder and put him inside the boat. So that if they stepped back, they wouldn't step in blood. And after they got away from the ledge when the boats couldn't reach them they got in the boat and they went about a hundred miles. To a Greek Island, which had a good government, so there was, well for about a year, that we heard nothing from them. Then one day my mother's cousin had a big boat which traveled from Tigris to Australia. And they stopped on the island and they saw them, you know. So finally they, my father and my uncle and my other uncle, who was in and stayed on the island, you know. So one night I was about three years old, we went to some place away from the city they had the boat ready that night and we went to Paros, that is another island. So in 1940 and 1941 the war started and it was there ok, a little better life, you know. My sister lived there, so finally we're still there in three years during the war, it was not bad. My mother complained and some other ladies from the same island, they wanted to go back home. So finally my father you know, both of them. Finally we got together, about three families and we started to travel during the day and we stayed on small islands at night time, where there were no people. We finally went back, back home. So we were home and we had to go away because the Germans and people who traded all of the lumber with us to build the boats or used it for cooking finally went to the ..... My aunt has a some place, and we stayed there for the whole war. After the war, you know, we came back home and fixed it, you know, in the meantime, before we went home we had to go to school. Third grade, about half way through it anyway.

P: Why did you stop?

NP: In the meantime in school, I was about, after the war I think I was about ten years old. And that's when I started selling peanuts, maples, fish, you know it was like anything to help my family, you know, because what my father was making wasn't enough to support us. That's the reason I couldn't go to school, you know.

P: To work?

NP: Because I had to go to work and help my family. So when I was about twelve and a half I went with my uncle to Egypt, up to about five years, went to Libya, Sicily....

P: What did you do?

NP: Oh I was working the boats, I was doing a lot of things, you know cleaning the deck, you know doing whatever. And there was this one day when I was about seventeen I left the rigs and went to Italy and got a passport and a seamen book because I had five years on the sea, you know. And after three years they give you a diploma, he was already a seaman.

P: A seaman.

NP: A seaman, you know, so I traveled from Italy and I went to Holland, there was a big port there, a ship was coming and I forgot to tell you that I went to Athens and borrowed about a hundred dollars from a friend of mine, and with that I bought my ticket, my papers and everything. So I had about forty dollars when I went to Holland.

P: Now why did you go to Holland?

NP: I went to Holland to find a job, to find a ship, so after the nighttime, the next morning I would get up and me and another kid that I learned in the trade would go down to the offices under the ship, finally I learned that Onassis was like the world. And the guy opened the door and he said "What do you want?" I said...I want a job. He looked at me and he says, What are you going to do on the ship, you know? He says your just too young. I said no I am not young, I says, I have enough experience. He said well what kind of experience do you have? I said I've traveled for five years on the boats. He says, do you got anything to show us? I said, sure. So I showed them my diploma and my seaman's book. So the guy was curious to see my papers, because you know, I was young, so he went inside and closed the door and he told me to wait. So I was waiting and in about five minutes he opened the door and says well you've got a job. He says where are you staying? So I told him where I was staying, he says a couple of us will be there in a taxi to pick you up to take you to the ship. So I went to the hotel and I packed up my clothes. And like he said a couple of them came in a car to pick me up and bring me to the ship. It was about sixty thousand tons of cargo ship and he got me, you know a first class job, you know. My pay was about a hundred dollars a month.

P: Now that was good money then?

NP: Yeah it was good money, very good. So I bunked up with my cousins, as a matter of fact one was a cousin of my mothers and the carpenter was you know, which one was married .

P: Yeah I know.

NP: His brother, he was here at one time. So he was a carpenter. You know it was nice, it was somebody from the same place. So I stayed there and we traveled the world. And we went to San Domingo, to get sugar, we stayed there about one month and we left and went to Los Angeles,

P: You went to the United States....

NP: Yes, we got some oil, you know food and water. And then from there we went to Tokyo, we stayed there about three weeks to load the sugar. The ship was under the Libya flag. And then we got, the captain tired and he went out of the main office to check. At that time China was after '54 it was kinda shook up you know. The only free country I think had the bill to go was England, another country. So it was to show the flag, it was on the ship. And we thought a lot of people didn't want to go because we thought they were going to stamp our passports with China and think we are Communists. And we were having a little bit of trouble you know, the cops from, you know England came and he explained everything to us, not to worry nothing about. The Greek customs followed and did the same thing, you know thinking we were communists. So if I were to try two different ports, we went to San Kai, Chi Dong, we went to two different cargos, you know, but we were supposed to take it to Yugoslavia. So we took the cargo, enough of that, we went to Singapore. Went through Egypt, through the Suez Canal and we went to Yugoslavia. And we left again and then went back. Anyway we did that for about a year.

P: And at this time how old were you when all of this was going on?

NP: Oh I was seventeen years old.

P: Seventeen years old and all of that traveling, Um I want to ask you another question now you were telling me that you were on a different Island when the war broke out, World War II, How did the war effect you and your family? Do you remember?

NP: Very bad, very bad, well on the first island it was not that bad you know, it was a little bit bad but not that bad.

P: So it was livable?

NP: Yeah, you could find potatoes, you could find oil, you could find bread, you know. It

was not bad, but when we were in Calanos and the Italians were leaving and the Germans were just coming in. In about six months there was nothing left, no bread, no oil, no meat. You were not allowed to go fishing because some of the fish were poisoned and there were no boats to go out. And people, you know were living out of the grass for two years. You know we would get some orange juice, you know through the winter, some lemons, you know we would squeeze the lemons and then we would eat the peel. So it was really for three years that we had nothing, and people were devastated because we had nothing to eat. Well there was no survival you know.

P: Now did you get in any trouble with anything, yourself? You know.....

NP: I used to go out in my pajamas and watch the, what do you call it. We would go, and take what was left, that was the only way, you know that we could find something to eat. So I was there everyday. And that was fine with me, I would see a lot of fights, a lot of bombings, a lot of the Germans, Greek people, I see them even killing a donkey, eat donkeys, dogs, I see them bomb about three ships.

P: There was no work for you at that time, nothing? Just whatever you could come up with.

NP: No work, anything you could find to survive, that's all, anything you could find, there was nothing, nothing.

P: As you got a little older, lets say, you were seventeen eighteen, nineteen.....

NP: I was one up until I was twenty-three years old.

P: You were a seaman until you were twenty-three.

NP: The last was a tanker about 35,000 tons, that was one big ship you know.

P: Did you have any goals for yourself at this time, I mean is that what you wanted to do just be just a seaman?

NP: That was the only thing I could do at that time.

P: Did you ever think though that well, like we do today, well when I grow up .....

NP: I wanted to do something with the ships

P: Yeah, yeah well you wanted to stay with the boats...

NP: I'd like to stay on the boats because, well I had nothing else to do, I'd come to the United States and I would see that people were different they were marrying better and they make a lot more money than I was making, you know they were making it seem as if they were making a

thousand dollars and I was making a hundred, and you know I was out there to make some money. So I traveled for about a year, you know Venezuela, work for me , make some money..... And I was wishing that would be the year, so.....

P: But basically you wanted this right now to be a seaman and make more money, is that what you are saying?

NP: Well that was the best I could find, on my position, you know. It was not exactly paying more money, it was paying you know, the ship.

P: Who was responsible for you thinking about coming to America?

NP: Nobody

P: Nobody, it was just from when you traveled here?

NP: Well I had been in the United States with ships many, many times, from California to Savannah Georgia, New Orleans, Virginia, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Maine, New York, I've been .....

P: When did you decide you wanted to leave Greece and come here? I mean you have all .....

NP: Oh you mean leave the ship and come here?

P: Yeah, when did you finally say, well I am going to America.

NP: Well when I was twenty-two I was here in the United States, often what I see are married people and old people who had been on the ship for a year and having kids and families and in Greece there is just no life, you know to have a family, now if you stayed single, it is alright. But if you have a family, I says No way!! You can't be married and do this kind of work. So I decided to come see my relatives here. I worked in Europe and then I was transferred, I was supposed to go on a trip to Japan, to take over another new ship, a lot bigger you know. I was supposed to be the chief up on deck. It was the highest position, you know, without being, you know, educated. You finished high school and you can be a captain, as long as you passed. Without high school the highest position is to be chief of the deck. And you took care of the whole ship, the crew and everybody. You took orders but you were the second captain. So I was given that position, the captain asked me you know if I wanted to go with him, on the other big ship, he says I want you to come with me and you will make a lot more money, and it would be a better life. So I said yeah, no problem, so me and another two guys went with the captain and we, one was a beginner to be a captain, so with that and everything, they give us two weeks, um no, two months, sixty days. They gave us sixty days and then we you know left for Maine, went to Maine, went to New York, I stayed there for a week and then I decided to come here and see

my relatives, you know. It was different because when you are on a ship you go to a port, you don't go to a real nice place, and you realize how people lived here.

P: You just see the country right?

NP: So I came here, the reason was my relatives and they said would you like to stay here? And I said yeah I would love to. So that is what I decided to do, get married and stay here. I had many cousins.

P: Now did you have trouble leaving, when you decided to leave did you have trouble from the brewsky to come here?

NP: No, what the United States? Well I came on a ship from Greece, so I was on a ship here already. I'd already spent one year here, every week I was here. And so I decided to stay.

P: Let me ask you this then, what were your feelings, you know in your mind and in your heart when you decided to leave Greece? You decided I'm going to leave, this is going to be my new country, what was going on in your mind?

NP: What was going on in my mind was, this not my life, there was nothing for me there.

P: Didn't you still have family there?

NP: Yeah I do.

P: Who did you leave behind?

NP: I left three brothers, I left my mother, I left my father, I wasn't planning to go through but then I actually did, but I decided I wanted to have a good life, and I'm going to live, and if I could help it, I'd help it. So I decided to leave and I left. I came here and I got married and I brought my three brothers, and I brought my two brother-in-laws, all of them are working here, all of my brothers, you know even my own brother worked here.

P: How about your mother?

NP: My mother, she came here twice.

P: She is still there?

NP: Yeah, no she left there a couple of months ago or a month and a half, no mother she is real healthy, she has a good life now, you know, all of her kids are married, she's alright, no problems.



P: So when you came here you were right off the boat?

NP: Yes

P: You didn't stop any place like Ellis Island, or Francesca Testagati?

NP: No

P: Who gave you your papers then?

NP: Immigration

P: Immigration, they gave them to you right on the boat?

NP: Immigration gave them to us, now because we were being transferred ok from one ship to another.

P: And you had no problems with customs?

NP: No, the company for the ships they have very large office in New York and they were responsible for us if anything happened. So that is why they gave us two months we got to stay here and do whatever we wanted, go anyplace we wanted, you know, and then after two months we got to leave the country. So I came here and visited my relatives and after the two months was over I was, um what do you call them? Alien? (Laughter)

P: Yeah ok

NP: Immigration was often chasing me left and right. So I was....

P: Did you get it straightened out?

NP: After I got married, yes. After I got married.

P: Well no because there were thousands, hundreds of thousands that did the same thing.

NP: Oh yeah I know.

P: They couldn't wait to get to this country because of the quotas.

NP: They did chase me all over.

P: Let me ask you this now when you, what did you expect to find in America when you came here, now you said jobs, anything else besides that, when you came here?

NP: Well,

P: What did you think you were going to find here? I mean you left a job, you had some money you were traveling, what did you think you were going to find here?

NP: Yeah but like I told ya, I wasn't planning to be married and do the same work I was doing. Because I like to stay with my family. I figured that be married at least I can stay close to my family. And do the best that I can, but all of those years I was travelling, coming here, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Maine, Los Angeles, all of those ports. I was seeing you know people with a nice living, it was free, there were no problems they had nice houses, there was making three times more on that ship then I would be making at home. It was a better future for the children, you know send them to school and everything. I didn't want what happened to me, you know I went to third grade, and worked all of my life for a living and I had to go through all of that salvation and everything and I said that my kids would not have that. I said my son would come here to the best country in the world. He could do whatever he wanted, he could be whatever he wanted. You could make all of the money you wanted if you were smart enough, and not be lazy, so here was the opportunity here, be what you wanted to be. So that is why I decided to stay here.

P: Since you did a lot of traveling and you came to America before, what was your first impression of America?

NP: I loved it. I was wishing you know, that I was part of it. But I thought you know, every time I came here I was on some type of Greek boat. And I would have to get back on the ship. And there it was happy, and everybody would be crying because they were back. And I said well maybe someday you know I'll do the same, and I was right.

P: Okay so when you came here, you were in Campbell.

NP: Yeah,

P: When did you start your company or start working?

NP: I worked as a painter with the Marsus Paint Company, for a year then I worked for Ohio Valley Paint, we painted machines and equipment, I worked with him for three years. Then one day Uncle called me from his work, he worked for a big company in Pittsburgh, He worked for Delta, and he asked me if I wanted work in Pittsburgh and I said yeah. They had some substations, some smoke stacks. I said I'd do it, it was the smoke stacks up in Vienna, Ohio, West Virginia. So I went to the job fast it was good money, so the owner saw me and he said, well you did a good job in the past and you are going to be a friend of ours so I said ok. So I went home and in a couple days they called me, and he said well we are going to make you superintendent. I want you to run one for us, go apply for it in Jonesburg Indiana, that was in

1964. So I went there I was about thirty-nine. So I did that job just like anything else, I stayed with that company for about four or five years. Then I got a better offer with another company in Pittsburgh, more money, same position. So I worked there for about fifteen years, and I made good money. Then I decided that, when my children started growing, I wanted to spend a little bit more time at home.

P: What were your feelings though here you are for years you are on a boat, you are traveling, you are seeing the world You know and here you are all of the sudden and you are working with a paint brush, and I mean the job, I mean didn't you regret the idea that you are working hard painting when you could be, you know, you left the world-travel.

NP: I traveled for Oh My God five years on the boats and five years on the big ships, I 've landed all around the world, about three, four times, I've seen almost every country in the world. Ok then here I found a home, family, had my kids. I was happy and I knew that I had to push for somebody and one day somebody would have to push for me. And that's what happened.

P: Your life then, did America fulfill the dreams you had?

NP: Yeah it did, sure I am glad to see my kids graduate from high school and go to college, get married and live happy, my son goes to Youngstown State and I hope he decides something. And that is about it.