

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Social Work

Working Experiences

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JAMES KIRIAZIS

Interviewed

by

Kathy Lutseck

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: JAMES KIRIAZIS
INTERVIEWER: Kathy Lutseck
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L: This is an interview with Dr. James Kiriazis for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Social Work by Kathy Lutseck at Dr. Kiriazis' office on May 19, 1975, at 1:30 p.m.

All right, just to get started, Dr. Kiriazis, can you tell me something about your parents and your family background?

K: My father was born on the Island of Rhodes, which is in the Aegean Sea, and he came to the United States when he was thirteen years of age. My mother was also born on the Island of Rhodes, and she was brought to the United States by her parents when she was about two or three. Most of his life he spent working as a steel-worker. And she was a housewife almost all of her life. She went to school here in the United States. They both spoke Greek primarily with an Eastern-Aegean dialect. They were both very family oriented. We have large families in certain areas, certain cities such as Warren, Ohio, and Canonsburg, Pennsylvania

L: Okay, could you tell us about your childhood?

K: I was born in Weirton, West Virginia. We moved to Warren, Ohio, when I was in high school. As a matter of fact, I went to Warren G. Harding High School for only two years. I graduated from there when I had just turned seventeen.

I've always been a member of the Greek Orthodox Church, although I was very heavily oriented towards the Baptist Church because there was a settlement house that was sort

of the focal spot of the immigrants in Weirton, West Virginia. So we spent a great deal of our time there. It was called the Weirton Christian Center. In the summer they had classes there and they had a swimming pool and a playground. In the winter time they also had classes every Saturday and Bible classes on Sunday. So a great deal of my childhood was spent around that Weirton Christian Center. I know all the Baptist hymns, even though I'm an Orthodox.

L: What was it that made you decide to go into the area of work that you are in now?

K: That was a later development actually. When I started college, I was majoring in English. Eventually I began taking more and more courses in sociology and psychology and I think I ended up with several majors and minors. I came out with a heavy concentration in sociology and anthropology. I had taken quite a few courses in history and English and I had a minor in economics. I had decided by that time to go into social work. I received a masters in psychiatric social work from Louisiana State University. I had already gone to Ohio State, as a matter fact, and that was when I started off in English. When I came to Youngstown State University, that is when I made my switch over to sociology and psychology. Then I went to Louisiana State University and got my master's in psychiatric social work.

I worked in hospitals and the mental health agency in Warren. And then the Department of Mental Hygiene of the State of Ohio transferred me to Youngstown to help start the clinic here. In the meantime, I had started taking some advanced courses towards a doctorate in social work. I always had a great love for anthropology, so I decided to take a few courses in that too. And the next thing I knew there was a scholarship made available to me. It was a major type of scholarship. It was the N.D.E.A., which was probably one of the best "money" scholarships around in 1960, I would think. So I took it, and that is what gave me the financial backing and made me start heading toward anthropology. I always liked anthropology, but the other thing, of course, was that I began teaching here part-time around 1957. I was still working for social work agencies. Mrs. Pauline Botty, chairman of the department of sociology, realized that I always liked anthropology and that I had always gotten good grades in it. So she wanted to know if I would teach a course in it since the man who was teaching anthropology was leaving. So I stepped into it and then I thought, "Well, I'll just take some more courses in anthropology." I received that scholarship in about 1959 or 1960. Then I got my masters and doctorate in anthropology from the University of Pittsburgh.

So that's how I ended up in this field.

L: You mentioned that you were working part-time in some of the social work agencies. What type of work were you doing?

K: No, at first I was working full-time in social work agencies. Actually, the best way that I can describe it is that I was a therapist, a psychiatric caseworker. I was working with mentally disturbed patients. I worked with the Children's and Family Service for a while. I don't know whether I can check this out or not, but I was probably the first social worker in private practice around here. I remember that social workers, themselves, took a very dim view of this. Although I was working with a group of physicians in Salem, Ohio, there were several social workers and some of the psychiatrists here in town who sort of objected to it. About this time, too, I was working full-time for the mental health clinic in Warren. I turned part-time when I came to the mental health clinic here in Youngstown.

That's when I started moving more towards anthropology. Eventually I gave up my private practice which was in Salem. It was going pretty well there. I wasn't making much money because social workers are sort of masochistic anyway, and they don't make much money.

L: Masochistic? (Laughter)

K: Yes, I have a feeling that we are. They really don't charge enough money, I don't think. My training actually was very thorough. I was very fortunate. I had gone to Louisiana State University, as I said, to get my degree in social work. During my second year--it's a two year masters as you know--they sent me to North Little Rock, Arkansas. It was a VA hospital, and a training center for the Chicago Institute of Psychoanalysis. I was very fortunate to have had some of the people that they had there as supervisors and instructors. Every two weeks we had different lecturers. We would have Franz Alexander from the Chicago Institute of Psychoanalysis, and even Maragert Meade, who although she was an anthropologist, came down there for two weeks. I remember I was her driver for a while and that was a big thrill. So I really had a terrific placement my second year. And I was paid for it too. They gave me a beautiful scholarship. I remember it was the equivalent of thirty-two hours a week that they paid me.

L: You said that with your interest in anthropology you sort of moved into the university. When did you make the switch to become a full-time professor?

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K: I was still working at social work agencies even up until about 1960. I was still working part-time for the state of Ohio at the mental health center. I realized that I was the only anthropologist in the univeristy and I was still working on my degree with the N.D.E.A. Fellowship. Then I quit working for social work agencies.

I think it was 1962 when I was appointed full-time on the faculty here. It was a very small department at that time. I think that the only full-time people were Mrs. Pauline Botty, who was our chairman, and Edna McDonald. I don't remember exactly whether Jack Foster was hired just before me or just after me. J. E. Foster, who recently was the chairman of the criminal justice department, and I were hired almost at the same time in 1962. About that time too, I had been asked to teach part-time at the University of Pittsburgh and then at Carnegie-Mellon--it was Carnegie Tech at the time. So I always held about two or three jobs at a time during that period.

L: Well, what was a typical day like for you then?

K: It depends on which year you are talking about. I remember in 1958, it was probably a very busy time. I had just begun to switch. I was taking courses too. I think I was taking one course a quarter at that time in anthropology. I was teaching a course here at the university, one or two courses a semester. I was working part-time at the mental health clinic on LaClede Avenue, and I also had a few hours down in Salem. So I was trying to support a family and I was trying to go to school.

L: That's a lot of traveling around.

K: Yes, it seems that I have slowed down as far as traveling. Well, I don't mean that this job is slow because being the chairman of the department keeps you hopping, but I always seemed to be doing an awful lot of things at one time until 1963 or 1964. And that's when I finally settled down to staying here, full-time.

You asked me about my childhood. I graduated when I had just turned seventeen. I went to college for a year at Ohio State and then to the Army where I served with the Paratroopers. There was no war at the time, so I was out of the Army by the time I was nineteen. I worked in the steel mill. I worked in the steel mills, by the way, when I was in undergraduate school too. I'm going backwards on this thing. I worked off and on at the steel mills, Republic steel and Copperweld Steel in Warren. I worked off and on for about four or five years.

L: Can you think of any special period in all your years

that has been of the most special significance?

K: I don't know. I felt that 1960 to 1962 were very important years to me because this was the time I began to seriously move toward my doctorate. I was taking my courses, although I didn't get my doctorate degree until much later, 1967. But I was getting my courses behind me and I was teaching more. And by the way, once I began teaching on a full-time basis here, it was a full-time job. It wasn't a fully staffed department where each individual taught about twelve quarter hours or less, usually with two preparations. Mrs. Botty used to give us some heavy assignments. I had as many as four preparations. I taught almost everything in this department. I remember teaching Juvenile Delinquency, American Indian Cultures, Asian Cultures, et cetera, but you were expected to teach just about anything. Sometimes you had four different preparations. She felt that you had to stay on the ball. And she was very vigorous and she expected a lot of herself too, by the way. She wasn't easy on herself.

L: How about before your doctorate?

K: I felt that 1960 to 1962 were important years. Another period that was very important to me was 1967 to 1968 because this was the period when I got my doctorate finally. And then in 1968 I became the departmental chairman replacing Mrs. Botty who retired a year later. I moved fairly rapidly as I was promoted at this time from assistant to associate professor. I also received the Most Distinguished Professor Award.

L: What particular agency did you like working at?

K: I like the mental health work very much. I really did enjoy that. But I always felt that there were too many nuts on the wrong side of the desk. I always felt that psychoanalysts were great even though some of their theories were a little bit far out. I always felt that they knew their stuff. I was completely disillusioned by what I came across in psychiatry. Well, they really know much beyond the mechanistic diagnostic area. I mean what I saw in psychiatrists was what I had been reading about for the 1890's, what they call the mechanistic Kraepelinian Approach. Not much being done in terms of treatment. Treatment emphasis was on electric shock or insulin shock. I was really disillusioned. They would come off with definitions of schizophrenia, and various categories. They were great on nomenclature. They had so many diagnostic categories at the time, but what they did with it, that was something else. They did hardly anything.

And I began to appreciate the fact that social workers, at that time, were skilled in the area. The only thing I didn't like about social workers was that they constantly criticized themselves. I think that they were their worst enemies. I mean they don't allow their field to move ahead. Just like now, they are talking about licensing. Who's stopping it? Social workers are stopping it, not the legislature. But if social workers really got together in body for licensing, they'd get it. And they'd get it fast. And the N.A.S.W. [National Association of Social Workers] really doesn't have enough push to move towards licensing. I always felt that the profession had a lot to offer. They are watering it down somewhat now.

I always felt that social workers were the most skillfull interviewers. I don't think they give themselves enough credit for it. I don't think that they know as much psychology as psychologists. I always thought that psychologists were bright, generally, and more useful to a clinic than psychiatrists. And I said, I was extremely disappointed in psychiatrists, not only because of their approach, but also the field of psychiatry, which I believe lends some credence to the cartoons that we see. These cartoons about the psychiatrists being nuts, well a lot of them are, I think. Now there are exceptions. I have an uncle that is a psychiatrist and he is very sane.

L: As you look back are there certain things that you would have liked to see changed or something new instituted when you were in the field or even right now?

K: When I was in the field, I think that we had a more professional approach. Maybe I'm wrong on this, by the way, because I'm not as much involved in practice as I used to be. We complained about politics getting involved and I think that there is even more now. At that time for instance, social work was very much afraid about you must not do this and you must not do that without getting the okay from somebody or some agency. Like this private practice thing, social workers were deathly afraid of it. We knew it was going on in some places like New York. I even heard of another one in Ohio at that time. But now it is not too uncommon. As a matter of fact, I had one in the other day, who is a consultant, a former student of mine. He is making big money as a consultant. And I know that there is another one in Cleveland by the name of Serapio Zalba that is a big consultant. But this is the thing that bothers me, was that they were so much afraid to move ahead at that time. And I think that this is showing up in the profession now. It's being watered down.

I am appalled by what I see from therapists at the mental health clinic. I helped start that clinic several years ago and we set up professional standards. Today they are hiring people who haven't been through high school to do treatment. Now, you see, diagnosis is important, but I don't just mean just plain nomenclature diagnosis, I mean ascertaining what the dynamics of the case are so that you can determine your treatments. If they don't know what the diagnosis is, how in the world are they going to decide on treatment? See, it's not just a matter of going in and saying to the patient, "Tell me everything," because if you come up against a paranoid and you tell him to tell you everything and he obeys, he is liable to think that you know too much and he is going to go down and try to get rid of you. Right?

L: Yes.

K: Today what they are doing is hiring to meet quotas. If the closest one happens to be one without a degree, fine. Fortunately, they do have some with degrees. But I know that they take people without high school degrees that are up there working as therapists. That's appalling and I think it's terrible.

Now I realize that a person can be a very nice person that may gain rapport easily and be able to maintain relationships. You don't need schooling to do that, it is true. But I think that you do need some experience. You need some theoretical background to be able to work with people and decide which way you are going to move. And I really think that social work, at this point, is sort of in a state of decline; and if they don't watch it, I think that other fields are going to start to step in to reduce the gaps and proclaim that they are the more professional group. Although I think masters' degree social workers are safe right now, I do think that the field itself is in peril, I really do.

L: Do you have any ideas of what might be able to be done?

K: Yes, I think so. We usually swing like clocks, and I think that eventually, and I think very soon, the social workers are going to put up their hands to the politicians and the legislators and administrators and say, "Look, we've had enough. Let's get back down to business. Let's maintain some professional standards," because I think this is what is being sacrificed here, professional standards, in order to meet certain quotas. They are just not racial or ethnic quotas either, sometimes they are political quotas. The mental clinic is an excellent example of this type of thing. I'm not condemning the entire mental health

and retardation board, I'm merely saying that certain agencies have gone into a decline, and it is characteristic of some aspects of social work.

L: Do you have anything special that you want to add or talk about?

K: Oh, what can I say? No, I don't think so. About what?

L: Anything that happened to you?

K: One of the great things that has happened to me is the field work that I have done. The main phase of my field work has been with people of my own background. My main field work has been with the Rhodians, on the Islands of Rhodes and Rhodian immigrants in the United States.

L: Have you gone over to the Island of Rhodes?

K: Oh, yes. And I really enjoyed that.

L: What have you been doing?

K: Well, I did a study of changes in certain communities in the United States among the Rhodian immigrants and compared them . . . For instance, there is a large group of Rhodians--those people who are related or strongly identified with the community whose parents or grandparents are from that island--in Warren, over five hundred from that one island, and about that many, maybe more, from Canonsburg, Pennsylvania. That was really one of the main stop-off areas of the Rhodian immigrants. There were certain towns that they settled in, in large groups. So I was there conducting studies. I have one book, 444 pages on the comparison and the culture change among the Rhodians. And then I have a lot of notes which I always mean to write up. I have an awful lot of notes. Of course, I have also collaborated on a couple of other studies that are going on now with two other groups, one in Campbell.

This group from Campbell is very interesting. I've been describing Rhodian ways and Rhodian customs and how they've changed. Well, of course, part of what I did was a historical reconstruction. What I found in Campbell among the Greeks are things that I have described about in the Rhodian culture during the 1920's. But now I find it going on in Campbell and I have become a participant observer. I began to study with this group and they are from the Island of Kalymnos, which is also in the Eastern Aegean. I speak the dialect, by the way. They are interesting. There are about eight hundred of them in Campbell, all from one island.

L: When did they come over?

K: Well, they're still coming, but most of them came over into Campbell in the early 1930's. The American Greeks here call their counterparts "Dips" or "DP's." They are still coming over quite heavily. This is a very interesting group. I really enjoy working with them.

One of the troubles in working with these groups is that when you go from house to house to interview, the custom among the Eastern Aegeans is that you must eat. And I always gain weight when I am doing these studies. In the last year, I've put on some pounds because I've been working with them. I know that sounds like an excuse, but believe me, they just keep putting it at you. Well, they found out that I eat fruit. So when I go to their houses, they'll put certain foods out for me. They found out that I can eat a lot of fish, so they put a lot of fish out for me.

L: And you offend them if you don't take it?

K: Oh, yes. This is something that is difficult for some to understand. As far as dialect, when I was in Rhodes, every time I would speak they would ask, "How long have you been gone?" Well, then I would say, "I'm not from here. I am an American of Greek decent." Well, of course, I was raised by Rhodians and my mom and dad insisted we would speak Greek in the house, even though my mother knows English better than she does Greek. Nevertheless, she wouldn't speak to us unless we would speak Greek. When we went into the Army, she told us that we should write in Greek so that my father could read it, although he also knew how to read English. She said that unless we wrote in Greek, we would not get any replies. So we wrote in Greek. (Laughter) We had to go to Greek school when we were kids. We went to public school and then we'd come home about three o'clock and we'd eat and then we'd go to Greek school. We'd get out of there about seven o'clock. We always hated it, just as my kids hated it when I sent them. I didn't insist on Greek as much because my wife is not Greek. I didn't realize it at that time, but I spoke with a definite island accent. Later on when I went over, even in Athens, they knew that I wasn't from the mainland. They knew right away. In Rhodes they would say, "Why, you even talk like you come from this particular village." Even when I wasn't in the village, they would pinpoint my village for me, my dad's village. And then I found that sometimes I could even change my dialect to fit certain villages. Lately, I've been studying these people in Campbell, and my mom has mentioned to me a couple of times that I'm using some of their words, some of their particular words and certain accents. So you pick them up just by talking.

I really enjoy doing field work. It's one of my main loves, I think. Doing it means not only taking notes, but also doing some pretty enjoyable things too. It means

attending baptisms, weddings, and dances. I really learned to dance Greek quite well after I was an adult. At least I think I dance quite well. I keep telling myself I do. So, I really enjoy it.

Something happened this year. It was near my birthday and these people I've been studying rented . . . Well, they didn't really rent it, it was donated free. It was what they call the Kolymnian Hall. These people from this island have a hall besides a church hall, and they gave me a birthday party.

L: Oh, how nice.

K: There were 250 people there. It started off small and kept getting bigger and bigger. It was a surprise party by the way. I didn't even know about it. But it all happened within two weeks they tell me, and they ended up selling tickets for it. They had free booze--I mean it was donated. And then they had a caterer. In other words, you paid \$2.50 and you could go to the party and eat and dance. They had volunteers from three different Greek bands that played. We had music. We had food and cakes donated by different people.

L: Oh, that is really nice.

K: It was from this group that I'd been studying this past year and a half. So really it was terrific. It wasn't even my island group.

L: You got adopted.

K: Yes, that's about it. In fact, the other day they said, "Well, you're coming next Saturday, aren't you, because we're going to have a big dinner?" And I said, "I don't know because the Rhodians of the United States are meeting in Pittsburgh. The representatives are sending delegates to Pittsburgh. And I should be at the Rhodian Conference." And they seemed to feel that I should be at the one in Campbell, which is on the same night. So I really haven't decided and it's only six days away.

But that's my main love, working in the field, doing interviewing and working with these people because there is some work, but there's also some play too. I don't know what else to tell you.

L: Okay, thank you very much.