

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Immigrants of Ellis Island Project

Personal Experience

O. H. 484

HARRY KITAKIS

Interviewed

by

Cheryl Bugnone

on

June 2, 1977

HARRY KITAKIS

I was born May 2, 1913, at Crete Island, Greece. I came to the United States in 1920 with my father, mother, two sisters, and two girls for my brothers to wed in the United States. It took eight to ten years for my brothers to save enough money for us to come over to this country. When we arrived at Ellis Island off of New York, we could not speak English. We were told what to do by hand signals only. We arrived on an English ship named Alexander II. On Ellis Island we had it a little rough not knowing how to speak English. Other than that, everything went well. From New York we went to Morgantown, West Virginia, where my brothers picked us up and took us to Purselove, West Virginia, a coal mining town, where I started school at Davis West Virginia using the name of Bobby Kitakis. In five years, I learned to speak, write and read. My mother died in 1925. I quit school and started to work at the age of twelve years old at a shoe shine parlor in Morgantown, West Virginia. In 1927, dad went back to Greece. From then on, I was on my own. I went to Wheeling, West Virginia, and worked at a shoe parlor until 1930 when I came to Warren, Ohio, and did the same thing here for \$12 a week.

I got married in 1934, 43 years ago. I am still married to the same woman and we have six children ranging in age from 21 to 42 years old, and nine grandchildren for which we are very proud.

I started to work at VanHuffell Tube in 1936 and worked on production for 14 years and then as a supervisor for 18 years, a total of 32 years and retired an Van Huffell Tube in 1967. I started to work for the Charles E. Kline Company in 1968 and I am still working at the age of 64 and I will be working for Mr. Kline as long as I am able to work.

I have no complaints;I made good in the United States and I am proud to say that I am living in one of the best countries in the world. I went back to Greece five years ago, and enjoyed it, but not to live there. I'll still take the good old U.S.A.

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INTERVIEWEE: HARRY KITAKIS

INTERVIEWER: Cheryl Bugnone

SUBJECT: Ocean voyage, Processing, Adjustment/Adaptation,
Socialization

DATE: June 2, 1977

B: This is an interview with Harry Kitakis for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Ellis Island by Cheryl Bugnone, in Warren, Ohio, on June 2, 1977, at 8:00 p.m.

Tell us about your childhood in Greece.

K: I was born on the island of Crete, in 1913. In 1920 my brother over here sent for us to come to this country. There was me, my mother, my father, two sisters, and we brought two daughters over with us for my brothers to marry.

In 1920 we left on the Alexander II. It took us two weeks to get over to the United States, for which one day of that was spent on the island for checking us for disease, lice. I can't come up with anything else on that because I was small, eight years old.

B: What stories had you heard about America?

K: At that time I didn't hear too much about it because I was young. I came with my parents.

B: What stories had your parents heard?

K: How good it was over here compared to there. That was the reason they sent for all of us to come over here and bring their wives. Other than that, I couldn't tell you much about it.

B: Do you remember what preparations your parents made to come to the United States?

- K: At that time, before they came, they were looking for two girls to bring over as their wives. In those days, they used to get married through a picture. They never even knew each other at the time. My dad found two girls and brought them with us.
- B: Where did you have to go to catch the boat?
- K: From Crete we went about three miles from Athens to get the boat to come over to this country.
- B: Do you remember how much they paid for the passage?
- K: That I couldn't tell you.
- B: Tell us about your voyage to America in 1920.
- K: In 1920 the voyage was rough because we were in third class down below. We had one room for all seven of us. There were bunks we were sleeping in. My parents were both sick at the time. It seemed like I was young and it didn't bother me. I used to go out and get tea for them, and water. We had our own food on the boat, mostly bread.
- B: Did you share facilities with anybody else?
- K: No, we had one room with seven of us in there. We were down in the third floor. That's where they had the sheep, cows, and chickens for the cooking for the first class and second class.
- B: Do you remember how you felt when you pulled in to the harbor and first saw the Statue of Liberty?
- K: We were all standing out there looking at it because we had never seen anything like that before. We were told once you see that that you're in the United States. When we got off that island we thought we were already in until they searched us and checked our hair and clothes to see if we had lice or any kind of disease at the time. At that time they found lice in three of us. They made us go through the procedure to get rid of it with steam heat. Then they turned around and gave us a shot for diseases.
- B: Do you remember any of the questions they asked your parents?
- K: No, I don't.
- B: You had a destination?
- K: You had a destination to come to. At the time we couldn't understand American, but we had tags hanging on our clothes where we were going and our name. That is the only thing

we were going by.

B: Do you remember any of the medical examination? Did they go through your hair?

K: Yes. They went through my hair all right, and my clothes. They checked it really good. They had to, due to the fact that on the Island of Crete at the time there was a lot of lice. If they hadn't found that on us we wouldn't have had to go through that steam. Mostly all of the third class that came through had to get examined and was held back.

B: What did they do after they found the lice?

K: After they had taken us in a room with steam they would steam our clothes out. It was like a hot bath. They got rid of all that before they let us come out. Then we got dressed again to come in to New York.

B: What about your name? Did they change the spelling of your name then?

K: No, there was no change at all.

B: Was anybody in your group detained on the island?

K: That one day we were detained on account of the lice.

B: Nobody was detained because of illness?

K: No.

B: How would you rate your treatment at Ellis Island by the officials?

K: The treatment was good, I have nothing against that. We knew what was going to happen before we left New York. We got rid of most of our clothes and got new clothes and everything, but still some of us had it in our head.

B: You didn't find that anybody cheated you or tried to trick you in any way?

K: No.

B: Where did you go after you left the island?

K: After we left New York I don't remember how we got to Morgantown, West Virginia, because that is quite a ways. We got to Morgantown, West Virginia, and my brother was there, two brothers, and another guy with a Model T old car. We got in it and it was all on a mud road. There were no roads in the mountains. We would run maybe a mile or two

and then we would have to push it maybe two or three hundred yards when it got stuck. For about twelve miles that we went it took mostly all day to go to Morgantown, West Virginia.

B: At Morgantown did your father have a job waiting there?

K: In the coal mine. My two brothers were working in the Davis Coal Mine.

B: Your family settled there?

K: We settled over there in one house. At the time it was mother, father, my two brothers and their wives, and two sisters.

B: How long did you stay there?

K: From 1920 to 1925. In 1925 my mother died and in 1927 my dad went back to Europe and I came into war in 1930.

B: Looking back, how do you think you would change the processing of immigrants if Ellis Island was still open? How could you make the processing of immigrants any better?

K: I don't know how you could make it any better. You have to watch out that they don't bring any diseases coming across in to the United States. There was more disease over there than there is in the United States.

B: You felt that the facilities over there were good?

K: The facilities were good; I have nothing against that.

B: Were there Greek interpreters?

K: I don't recall any. The only thing is we had to go where that tag was hanging on our clothes.

B: How did they make your parents understand what they wanted you to do?

K: By motion only.

B: They didn't find any hardship?

K: No.

B: Have your feelings about America changed in the years since you've lived here?

K: It's not better now than what it was. Living and everything else is one hundred percent better than what it was in 1920.

B: You think America lived up to your parent's expectations?

K: Yes, I would say so. You couldn't ask for better than what we have now.

B: You've been back to Greece?

K: I went back there five years ago. It seemed like everything was just like I left it. There was not that much change over there. The houses were the same and everything. There was just more homes built.

B: Is there anything else that you think is important that we didn't cover?

K: I couldn't say offhand.

B: Thank you, Mr. Kitakis.

END OF INTERVIEW