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TRANSCRIBED INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE KLITSAS

March 29, 1968
Interviewed by Irene Long

"Mr. Klitsas, where were you born?"

"In Greece."

"What part of Greece?"

"Karpension, Evletensia, the west part, the mountains, where the Evzone come from - all my people become Evzones instead of going to the army."

"Was your town near a bigger city?"

"Yes, Lamia."

"How far from Athens was this?"

"From Athens about six hours by bus."

"What year were you born?"

"1895."

"Do you know this for a fact? Do you have a birth certificate?"

"Yes, naturally."

"Did you go to school in Greece?"

"Yes."

"How many years?"

"I left before three years in high school."

"Oh, so you went about eight or nine years?"

"Yes, Four years in low school, three years in high school, but I left before I finished."

"Did you start when you were about six or seven?"

"Yes."

"What did your parents do?"

"My father used to have a coffee house in our home town. Then he came to America, to Spokane, Washington. He

worked there for years. Then he went to New York to wait for me and had a coffee house there. Then I came in 1912."

"You were about 17?"

"Something like that."

"How many brothers and sisters did you have?"

"Two brothers and two sisters."

"Did they come over too?"

"No, because the war started, you know; and my brothers were going to school there and they couldn't come in then, you know. I came in just before the war started."

"Was that the Balkan War?"

"Yes, the Balkan War."

"And you were too young to go?"

"Well, if I were there I would have gone but I left just before the war was declared."

"I see. Was the town you lived in large or small?"

"About three thousand people."

"When did your father come over?"

"My father came here about five years before me, I think."

"He had run a coffee house in your home town. Why had he come over then?"

"He came because he heard people coming in talking about America and the land there was so poor. They all came to better themselves."

"What would you have done if you had stayed in Greece?"

"I had an uncle, he used to be a lieutenant in the King's body guard and he asked me to be in King Constantine's household."

"Really."

"That's true. But I didn't like it. I wanted to come to America to see my father. So I come over here."

"In what way would you have been in the household? As a guard?"

"No, I was young. As a waiter. You start like a busboy first- clean the silver, you do different things. And I'm glad because in so many words I wouldnt be here today."

"Was this a family thing?"

"Yes, he was my father's cousin. He was there and before the war was over, he left the palace and he joined the army and the Germans captured him and took him to Germany and later they repatriated him and he went back to Greece."

"How did you get to the port from which you sailed?"

"In a bus."

"Was the port Pireaqs, is that where you sailed from? Where you caught the big boat?"

"Yes, I came in with an Austrian boat. Its name was Kaiser Fransiscus Joseph ."

"For Heaven's sake. What port did this boat come to?"

"From Patras we come into New York."

"Oh, you left from Patras then."

"Yes, we come into New York. I think it was one of the quickest boats. It took us only eleven or twelve days."

"Eleven days in 1912? It took you just eleven days. Some boats took thirty."

"Those little boats, sure. Now I'm not very sure but I think so. Eleven or twelve days but not very long. It was

a very big boat."

"A passenger boat."

"Yes a passenger boat."

"You had decent accommodations?"

"Yes, very nice."

"Was it very expensive?"

"No, very little. I don't remember but not very expensive."

"Did your father send the money over?"

"Oh yes. Sent my ticket."

"Your mother didn't come though."

"No, because she had the other kids, the other family, my two brothers and two sisters. They was going to come in after that but the war started and from one day to another. And my brothers started going to school and they done alright over there."

"Did your father ever return?"

"Oh yes." He got sick here and went back and died."

"Were there other immigrants on this boat with you?"

"Oh yes. The people who came in from my home town. There was about fifteen or eighteen of us."

"Fifteen or eighteen from that one town."

"Yes, round there."

"Young men like you, all looking forward to the New World. Did you land at Ellis Island?"

"Yes."

"Did you have any difficulty there?"

"No, the man from Ellis Island took me to my father's place."

"Oh, so you had someone to meet you."

"The immigration official from Ellis Island, he took me to New York to my father's place."

"Did you have to sleep overnight on the island?"

"No."

"Did you have to get any papers in Greece?"

"Yes, plenty papers. You see at that time if I didn't sail at that time I would go to the army. I wouldn't go to the army but I wouldn't sail. But I was already in America when the war started 1912."

"Because you were just at the draft age?"

"Yes."

"When you got here, did you work for your father?"

"No, I went to Atlantic City, New Jersey. A friend of mine used to be a captain at a hotel - Marble Plenheim- and I worked as a busboy there."

"Did you - with a friend?"

"Yes and that hotel there was forty or forty-five Greeks working there - waiters and busboys."

"Did you live in the hotel."

"No, we had a house and a housekeeper."

"Oh, did you all hire a housekeeper?"

"Not all of us; but two in a room; two beds, two, three houses and we live here."

"Oh, but you took care of this yourselves, you didn't just rent a room."

"No, the woman used to come and clean and we would clean ourselves, too. And I stayed there for awhile."

"How much were you paid?"

"At that time, I think, twenty-five dollars a month and your meals."

"Did someone else do your laundry?"

"Yes, and that time it was very cheap. We didn't do our own."

"What did you do for recreation? What did you do when you weren't working?"

"I never remember the time when I never worked."

"That's what most of you say."

"I worked all my life. During the Depression I loafed for two weeks and then I went to work for fifteen dollars a week. At that time I lost my business in Camden, New Jersey. I had a big business there."

"Then where did you go from Atlantic City?"

"From Atlantic City I went to New York and stayed with my father and then I went to Boston, Massachusetts."

"What year is this now?"

"Hmmm, about 1914, I guess."

"Now you've been to Atlantic City and New York - why did you go to Boston?"

"I had an uncle who had a restaurant there. A cafeteria, two or three. And my father sent me there to work for him. But I got a job in a hotel."

"Oh, you didn't work for your uncle."

"No, I got a job in a hotel because my uncle he didn't want me to work right away; he wanted me to look the town over, but I wanted to go to work to have a little extra change, you know. He used to give me money. So I went up and got a job in

a hotel - Quincy House, a very nice place. I worked here till 1917.

"Oh, you stayed there three years."

"Yes, till just before that. Then the war started and I registered to go into the army but they didn't take me so I went up to get a job with a construction company - Fred Eleigh Construction Company from Massachusetts - from Springfield; and I used to go around to Massachusetts and pick men, Greek fellows, to work for the government and build places and I was foreman."

"Now how did you go from a restaurant job into construction?"

"Well, I had a friend of mine - well, you had to work or fight, you know. But from a friend of mine, he was a foreman, he knows the outside work, he used to work for the railroad and different places. 'Let's go work for the government.' And so we went up there and I used to go from town to town and get Greek men and they used to work for the government. We take them to new places."

"Were these mostly young men who had just come from Greece?"

"Yes, from Greece. Young men and old men, too, you know. Forty or forty-five years old. They were working and building these places. I was in Camp Devon, Massachusetts, one of the biggest camps. Then from there someone like me there. The people from where I work and Mr. Smith used to be up from the company and he used to go different places to find and build for the government. He took me to Perry Point, Maryland, Perryville, Maryland. And I was one of the first men there. I didn't know anything about it then, but I listened and I learned. And we

put the first railroad tracks from Pennsylvania Railroad inside in the ground and bought the land and put the houses for the people to work there."

"I see."

"Shanties for people to work thre. Then I stayed there six months, then I went to New York. I went to the office; I had a man from the army, he was a sergeant named Buschell. And they used to picket New York City at that time, people when you go in the street. The policeman could stop you and asked 'You working? Where's your card? Where are you working?' 'Well, I'm not working anywhere.' They pick you up and take you police station or somewhere I don't know, and every week or two weeks they send you on a train. They put six or seven hundred people on a train. They send you where the government needs people to work. It was time it was work or fight."

"Wouldn't they take you in the army because you didn't have citizenship papers?"

"No, I wasn't in the army but I was working for the government because Fred Eleigh Company was construction company for the army." And I went to Charleston, West Virginia, in a train four or five times with five or six hundred people in that train. Me and this sergeant together."

"Oh, I see. You helped this sergeant with these groups of men."

"Well, he would tell me to what to do and we used to give them bread and eggs, sandwiches on the train. We would take them there; leave them with the government people, and then we go back to Port Penn, Delaware. I was with the same company all this time, Number 109."

"Were there other Greek boys working this way?"

"Oh yes, that's what I was doing. We had ten, fifteen gangs with twenty-five men in a gang, working for the government, digging and building places."

"Were there Italian men who were doing this? Were there alot of immigrants?"

"Oh yes, but there were American people, too. If he was a carpenter, you work as a carpenter. All nationalities-all nationalities there."

"How long did you do this?"

"Till the war was over. I quit. And then I went to Wilmington."

"Oh, you finally arrived in Wilmington."

"From Port Penn, Delaware, I stayed in Wilmington."

"What year was that now?"

"After the War."

"1917?"

"Yes."

"What did you do here?"

"I come into Wilmington and got a job from Mr. Govatos at Eighth and Market. I worked for him for awhile."

"What did you do there?"

"I was at the soda fountain and then I like to do something for myself. I had alittle money. And I went up and opened a grocery store on King Street, 708 King Street, with the little money I had. Across the street was Mr. Haldas who came in from Philadelphia. I stayed for a year and a half. It was a very little store and I had to stay from seven o'clock in the morning till twelve o'clock at night. Then I close that place and went to

King Street. Front and King. Second and King and then I sold it to someone else and went to Front and King Street and opened a little place. I stay there for about a year and a half."

"Was this just groceries and meats or fruits?"

"No, a little restaurant - just lunch. A lunch counter."

"All this time you were in business, did you use to send money home. Did you have to send money to your father?"

"Yes, I used to send money to my parents because they need it; and after the war, there was nothing they could do, no work left for them. I used to send money to take care of them. And I sent money for the boys to go to school. One of my brothers went to law school and came out a municipal judge."

"Is this in Greece?"

"In Greece. And the other brother, he was a mountain police."

"Like a ranger?"

"Yes."

"How about your sister?"

"My sister she got married to a Greek fella. He went from here and married her. And the other war started and she couldn't come in here and he was in North Carolina. He had a place there. And by the time the war was over, she got sick and she died."

"Well now. You are in Wilmington and it's about 1918, 1919?"

"And I left in 1922 and I went to Camden, New Jersey. Work for a cousin of mine in a restaurant."

"Why did you close up here?"

"Well, it was too much for me. I worked too hard. And then I thought I'd better myself. I had a little place here -

one table and four or five chairs and I thought I'd go there. He had a nice place and I was manager there for my cousin and I work for them for awhile and I had a little money - not much - and I borrowed some more money and I open a place. It was closed. One of the best places."

"This place had been closed and you bought it and reopened it?"

"I opened it up and was doing very good business. I had a partner then and I remember just before the depression I was doing well. Then in 1929 the R.C.A. Victor had a big parade in Camden. Twenty, twenty-two thousand people on Saturday and I had a party for the officers on a farm that day. And a week or two weeks after that they started laying off."

"Was this a celebration?"

"Yes, it was a celebration. They used to that every year. Well, maybe not two weeks later but a little longer than that. Then the depression started."

"What year was that, '29?"

"Yes, '29, and then I stayed there pretty near to '32, trying to see if things would turn around and go back. Then I had to give up and I lost what I had. Then I was looking for a job. I had to go to Philadelphia to a place to a Mr. Williams. He had two or three places. They used to sell sandwiches ten cents a sandwich for the poor people. You know the people didn't have any money."

"Was he Greek?"

"Yes, a Greek man, Mr. Williams and I worked there for him for about a year and a half. With very little wages to

start but them he paid me more, the man. Then I left from there to come into Wilmington because I always liked Wilmington and then-"

"Why did you like Wilmington?"

"Well, people them days was different. And that's why you always say, 'If you live in Wilmington and you go away, you got to come back to Wilmington.' You walk in the street, the people they say hello to you even if they don't know you. You make friends."

"Could you see this in your restaurant business. Were the people friendlier than in other cities?"

"Well, I only had a very little place, very little place. Then I got a job in the B.&O. Restaurant and worked there for awhile. Then I meet Mr. Laskaris and we opened the San Regis Cafe on East 4th Street. And I stayed there for pretty near two years. Then I left and went to work for the New York Restaurant for awhile."

"When you worked, did you cook or did you -?"

"No, waiter, for Mr. Laskaris and Mr. Saros."

"A waiter."

"I work there for awhile and saved my money and I know alot of people in Wilmington and I went up to the Liquor Commisssion and I had good references and I got a license for 406 Pine Street."

"Was it difficult to get a license then?"

"Yes, it was difficult. They had to screen you."

"You had to meet certain requirements?"

"Yes, the people find out what kind of person you are and all that. And they know me. I had good friends and I hadn't done nothing so I got the license and stayed there for

twenty-six years, from 1940 to 1966."

"In all the years you were in business did you ever feel any bias or prejudice, anti-foreign feeling? From the first years you came here, in Atlantic City?"

"No, because I like the country and the people they was good to me. I didn't have any trouble with anybody. Any place I go, you talk nice, they treat you nice. I went all over to South and East."

"You traveled a lot?"

"Yes, I got a lot of friends in the South. I got friends, relations. I go there. I never had any trouble no wheres."

"Did you visit Coffee Houses in this city?"

"Yes, I used to go there once in awhile and get a cup of coffee."

"Was this the custom of Greek men?"

"Yes, the bosses were Greek men."

"Were there any other nationalities there?"

"No, them days it was only Greeks went to them places because they didn't drink Greek coffee."

"Oh, it was made the Greek way."

"Yes, it was demitasse. Very few other people went there."

"Did you ever return to Greece?"

"Yes, in 1963."

"You went to your hometown?"

"Yes, to see my people. I stay there six weeks and like it very much. It was that time when they had that trouble. There was a doctor, he was from Pireaus and he went to Salonika to speak and they claimed he was a Communist and they kill him.

I happened to be there at that time and things changed. When I came back here in America, there was some left wingers. They got the young children from the schools and college boys, you know, they go against the government and go against talking about. There was a couple professors who used to be here in America and they were there then. They educate these young children, the youth from Greece. They had a lot of trouble then. So then I went back in 1966, after the junta and I like anything I see there, what they done. You're safe. You can walk on the streets, nobody bother you. You can talk. And there's a lot of difference. And the people I saw and I talk, because I got a lot of friends and relations. And I took them on the side and say, 'How is it? What do you like now? Tell me the truth; I ain't going to say nothing.' And they say, 'We're glad they're here these fellows, the army.' And I used to sit down on my brother's porch in Athens and I see women, young girls. They used to go to the movie and the movies there get over late, twelve o'clock. And they can walk fifteen or twenty blocks and they're safe, nobody bother them."

"Might not be the same thing here."

"I'd like to see the same thing here because Wilmington has changed very much in later years."

"What was here the first years you came here, when you first opened the grocery store?"

"Haldas Bros., John Govatos, Nick Govatos, James--used to own the Savoy Theater and Nick -- used to own the Savoy Theater."

"Were they married?"

"Yes, some of them were."

"Where did you live then?"

"I used to live - I don't remember now - West Street - No, East 7th Street."

"With other Greek boys?"

"No, I used to have a room myself."

"Did you do anything with these young men? Did you go as a group any place?"

"We used to go to movies and houses and birthday and names' days. Every two or three weeks someone had a birthday or name's day. We used to go there. You didn't have to be invited to have a good time."

"Oh, you didn't."

"No, them days you didn't have to be invited like now."

"If you were a Greek, you were automatically invited?"

"You go up there and say, 'Wish you a Happy Birthday.' And set down there. Everybody used to invite people in their houses. All the Greeks they used to be open on birthdays, Easter, Christmas. If you don't have no home, if you weren't married, they invite you in their home after church."

"Oh, I see. Your name, did you ever change your name in any way? Was it shortened?"

"Only thing I cut my name short - Klitsas. My name is Klitsakis on my American citizenship papers."

"Is it?"

"Yes, and I vote with that name."

"Do you?"

"But I've been known as George Klitsas because a lot of people can't pronounce my name."

"Does it have a Greek meaning?"

"No, it's an old name."

"You were telling me about the Evzone in the be-gining when we first started. Did these traditionally come from your town?"

"From my town, from my state."

"From that state."

"When you're twenty-one years old in Greece, you got to go to the Army unless something happens."

"Oh, it's Universal Military Training."

"Yes, you go to the Army and most of my people they go to the Evzone because they're mountaineers."

"Oh, were they bigger?"

"Yes, they were big husky men and hard working men from the mountains. Of course, later years from other states, they used to go. Of course, now there aren't many Evzone."

"Are there many of your countrymen here in Wilmington - from the area in Greece from which you come?"

"Not many. Another friend of mine, Harry Demetriou-Mr. Demetriou, that's the only man who's here now."

"Did many people from your town come when you did. Did you know of many who came over?"

"My home used to be open all the time. Every time they come in from the South, New York, or Boston, they came to see me."

"People from your hometown?"

"From my hometown and other friends."

"Do you plan to return to Greece?"

"Oh, I like to go there for a visit. Way things is

now there's nothing wrong. I'm not afraid to go there now. I was before. And I hope nothing happened."

"Is there anything you want to add? Any stories we have bypassed through this?"

"Nothing else. Only thing I like to say that Wilmington is changing. Business is not here no more. People they're moving out on the outskirts. And Wilmington is not like it used to be. Because weekdays or Wednesday and Saturday you can't pass in Wilmington from the people that came in from town and country, different places. In fact, when I used to be in the New York Restaurant I used to see people come in from a lot of states, out of state, far away - California. They used to know Wilmington. They used to hear about."

"But no longer?"

"No, no more now. Course everybody's got his own troubles now."

"All right, sir. Thank you very much."

"You're welcome."