

**EI-1130**

**JOHN M. KOKKINS**

**BIRTHDATE: OCTOBER 15, 1901 (JULIAN CALENDAR)**

**INTERVIEW DATE: FEBRUARY 29, 2000**

**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 98**

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**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:**

**GREECE, 1921**

**AGE: 19**

**SHIP: THE MEGALI HELLAS**

**PORT: PIRAEUS**

**RESIDENCES:**

LEVINE: Today is February 29<sup>th</sup>, the year 2000. And I'm here in Palm Beach Florida, with Mr. John Kokkins. Am I saying it right?

KOKKINS: M. Kokkins is the middle name.

LEVINE: John M. Kokkins.

KOKKINS: Middle initial.

LEVINE: John M. Kokkins, who came from Greece through Ellis Island in 1920—

KOKKINS: One.

LEVINE: 1921?

KOKKINS: Yes.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. You departed in December—

KOKKINS: Yes.

LEVINE: —of '20 and arrived—

KOKKINS: I had Christmas and New Year's on—on board. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Good. Well, that'll be interesting too. And you were 19 years old when you arrived here.

KOKKINS: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: And today, Mr. Kokkins is 99?

KOKKINS: Ninety-eight, as of last October.

LEVINE: Okay, okay. [unclear].

KOKKINS: October is my—

LEVINE: Ninety-eight. Only 98. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, could we start by you saying your birth date and where in Greece you were born?

KOKKINS: All right. I was born on the island of Karpathos—K-A-R-P-A-T-H-O-S, which is situated exactly between Crete and Rhodes in—in one of the villages of the island called Othos—O-T-H-O-S—

LEVINE: And did—

KOKKINS: —in October 15, 1901, (Julian calendar).

LEVINE: Okay. And did you live in Othos—

KOKKINS: I lived in Othos—

LEVINE: —up until you left?

KOKKINS: —up until I left, which was September of 1918.

LEVINE: September of 1918. And where did you go when you left?

KOKKINS: After I left, I went to Athens to high school.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, let's—let's talk about life in Othos for a few minutes. First of all, what was your mother's name and her maiden name?

KOKKINS: My mother's name was Frangua [PH], which the equivalent of Francis. Frangua. Frank, Frangua, you know. It was a family name. And her last name was Protopapas—Protopapas—P-R-O-T-O-P-A-P-A-S, Protopapas.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: That was her maiden name.

LEVINE: Right.

KOKKINS: And she was married to my father—oh, she was—she was left an orphan when she was two years old, the youngest of the three children. And when she became 12 years old she was married to a man who was more than twice her age. And he was from a good—a son of a priest but he—he died by an accident because he was fishing with dynamite and he fell and broke his back. By three years, when she was 15, she was married again to my father when she was 15, second marriage to my father.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

KOKKINS: My—my father's name was Minas—M-I-N-A-S Kokknos—K-O-K-K-N-O-S. But he changed it to Kokkinides. [PH] Kokkinides gave it the Homeric [PH] ending. You know, it was a style those days. The Greeks used to give Homeric endings. Nicholas Nicholides [PH], because Agamemnon was the son of Artus [PH]. And they called Arthides [PH]. That's how Homer is. Achilles was the son of Palaos [PH] but he calls him Paladies [PH] like [unclear]. It's that Homeric ending, the son of—the son of.

LEVINE: I see.

KOKKINS: So [chuckles]—

LEVINE: [unclear]

KOKKINS: —later on you had all the endings. Anyway, he made it Kokkinides.

LEVINE: Now, was your father's family from this island?

KOKKINS: The same—same village.

LEVINE: Going back?

KOKKINS: Oh, going back, God knows where. They don't know—have any records of it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And did you know your grandparents?

KOKKINS: I—I never saw them. They were dead when I arrived.

LEVINE: Ah.

KOKKINS: My—my grandfather—well, they were both called Johns. That's why I got the name John. My—my grandfather from my father's side was a very competent carpenter, who was an expert in making windmills. You have seen the windmills in—in Greece for this? He—yes, he knew how to do that because was a very high—highly experienced carpenter that can do that, because has big gears and everything else. And yeah, so he built three of them and he gave one of them to each one of his daughters as a dowry. [laughs] My other grandfather was left—was left an orphan when he was two years old. And he was raised by his aunt, who had very important properties in the island—in the village. And she was a big shot in town. She was the only woman who was in the coffee house and she had her own chair and armchair, an ordinary—but it was armchair next to the fireplace and nobody dare sit in that chair. She brought him up and she had the bishop of those three islands, gave them private lessons all the way up. He was the best-educated man in town because [chuckles] had private lessons of a pri—and when he was the—age 18, she made him the mayor of the town. And he was the mayor ever—when she was shot by a deranged man on the arm by—by a deranged man—he didn't know what he was doing. And they didn't have a doctor on the island. And so they had to go to another island to get a doctor. In the meantime, had gangrene and died and left three little children. And my grandmother was completely illiterate. She didn't know what to do. And she br—she married them off quickly. [chuckles] Like that.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh. So that's why your mother was—

KOKKINS: Yes.

LEVINE: —married so—

KOKKINS: But my grandfather, [unclear] Protopapas [chuckles]—that wasn't his name. He was—a title given to him by the church.

LEVINE: Oh.

KOKKINS: Chief—chief priest. It was a title by the Byzantine Church from Constantinople. His name was Nicholides—Nicholides.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

KOKKINS: Became Protopapas [PH]. And my uncle kept that Protopapas and the family did. But this was a title given to them by the—by the bishop.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

KOKKINS: And not only he was the mayor or the perpetual mayor in town until he died at the age of 26, but he was also the chief recorder of weddings and births and everything else in town.

LEVINE: Oh.

KOKKINS: [chuckles]

LEVINE: Wow. So when you grew up, what—your family must have been somewhat privileged. No?

KOKKINS: Not really. Not really, because they went through this tragic ending. My uncle, my—my mother's brother, was two years older than she was—had decided to be a professional lawyer. And he took his share of the properties and sold them and he went to the University of Athens. And he became the first professional lawyer of the island. He became a professional university trained lawyer. And of course, he was a big shot in the islands there. And he was—back in 1915 or '16 the Italians took possession of those islands in 1912 from the Turks, from the Ottomans. And he was the chief judge of the island when the Italians exiled him because he was creating a movement to get Italy to give the islands to Greece, because the island is not a hundred percent Greek. And he went to Greece. He joined the government of Venezelus, [PH] the great leader of the Greeks. And eventually, he died, but he—he's the only man I recognized as—I recognize—I—felt to us like a father to me.

LEVINE: Oh.

KOKKINS: Because my father had a little problem with his brother. When my grandfather died, my father was away in Egypt. And his brother took all the money that he had because at that time they had the money in—in bags.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: And he had a [unclear] case and there was [unclear] with his brother. And finally, he got disgusted and he left us. My mother—my—my father left my mother and my sister. My sister was eight years older than I was. And I was only five months old when he left the last time, because every year they used to go to Asia Minor or Egypt to work for several month and come back and cultivate whatever they had. And this was a regular way of life. They used to go and make some cash and come back. This time, he never came back. He stayed down in—and I never saw him anymore. And I don't even have a picture of what he looked like.

LEVINE: Oh.

KOKKINS: So—

LEVINE: So—so when you were a little boy, your father wasn't there but your grandfa—

KOKKINS: My grandfathers—both of them were dead by that time.

LEVINE: Yeah. So you were really with your mother and your sister.

KOKKINS: And my grandmother and my aunt. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Okay.

KOKKINS: I have—that picture's out there. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Yeah, right. Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: Yeah, those three women raised me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah. Well, they did a good job, I guess. [chuckles]

KOKKINS: And I—and I say so in my book.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

KOKKINS: That everything I learned in the way of principles or character, everything, I got from those two women, my mother and my aunt.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do—can you—can you say in words the kinds of things that they did instill in you, or they tried to teach you about—

KOKKINS: Well, they didn't try to give me formal lessons but one—for instance, I did try to steal a few figs from the trees. They says, "You don't do that.

And you have to do this.” You did it. But as I say, my book never—I had—never I—there was never a time that I wasn’t sure that my mother loved me, even though she disciplined once in a while. I had never lost that love. Back in—in 1933, I told you before, I went over to Greece to get away from the Depression.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KOKKINS: I stayed in Athens for several months to see if I made some connections. In the meantime, the shambari [PH] in the island went to the Italian police and said that my mother’s son cheated some hotels and he was—was sort of after by the police. So the chief of police went to see my mother. And—and my mother was sitting at the door in there in the sun. She was very old. And the police lieutenant was trying—he wanted to go in and talk to her, find out about the son. He told her that, “Your son did this and this and this,” and they wanted to come in to talk more about it. And she says—she told him, “Don’t you come into this house. You are not permitted to put your foot in my house. Get out of here. I have no son like that. Get out.” And he didn’t dare get out. He got out. She stood there. She was a very old woman. She says, “Don’t you come in here. I don’t have a boy like that.” When I went down a couple months later and I was going to pass through this town where the police was, that same man, the chief of police, called me to go into his private office. And he apologized up and down. “I made a mistake. There was a mis—mistaken identity.” And he even went to his closet and took a box of candy that his wife sent him from Italy to offer me candy, and he didn’t know how to apologize. [laughs] But I always admire her for having the guts to tell the chief of police, “Don’t you enter my house. I don’t have a boy like that. Get out.” That’s principles.

LEVINE: Yes. Yes, it is.

KOKKINS: Uneducated woman, completely. She could, with difficulty, write her [unclear].

LEVINE: Well, how about your schooling? When did you start? Did you start to go to school on the island?

KOKKINS: Well, the—

LEVINE: The small—

KOKKINS: The—under the—the Ottoman Turks. The Ottoman Turks were very intelligent governors. They never interfered with the education or the family affairs or the religion of the people. They left them alone. They

never [unclear]. But therefore, they didn't have [unclear]. So each village had to get together and hire a teacher and pay the teacher each year to teach the children, and that's how it was done. That's how I went through the eighth grades in the island.

LEVINE: I see. And then was it usual for a—a young man to go to Athens for high—

KOKKINS: No, it wasn't. I was—after I was through the eighth grade, my mother didn't have any more money to send me to school to go to Rhodes high school or Athens. So I—I was out of—out of school for two, three years then doing work in our properties in there digging, grow potatoes, vegetables and had five sheep. I became an expert. I could milk the sheep in no time at all. We had five of them and a goat and a couple donkeys. I was in charge and also, cultivation, raising vegetables and things like that for two, three years. And then some people down in the Sudan—that's where my father was—apparently influenced my father to send some money to go to school. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh.

KOKKINS: So he sent some money to a relative in [unclear] to go to school there. And that's how I left to go there.

LEVINE: I see.

KOKKINS: So—but my—my schoolmates in the island, especially two or three of them, they were better off. And they went to the high school in Rhodes and they came back next summer with ties and [unclear] a hat, so—and they could go to the coffeehouse and so forth. But I couldn't because I was barefooted and that humiliated me a lot. And that's why I didn't stay—want to stay in Rhodes, because at that time the war was not over yet. There was a lot of submarines going around. And I went to Athens to a commercial high school, a very good commercial.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: They're one of the best commercial high schools in Greece, the best.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KOKKINS: We had very good training there. I was very well trained in French. And I also—very well trained in English when I came here.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

KOKKINS: I knew the English grammar better than the high school students in the United States. The simplest thing for me. [chuckles] If you mastered the Greek grammar of the classic Greeks, you can master any language in—under the sun. There is no grammar on the face of the earth in the land—in the history of the earth that is as perfect as the Greek grammar at that time. The Latin grammar is a photocopy of it, which is the next best. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, wow. Could you say something about the—the coffeehouse?

KOKKINS: Yeah. [chuckles]

LEVINE: The cafe. Wh—what was the—

KOKKINS: It was an ordinary coffeehouse. People go there. Only men go there and they get a coffee and they play backgammon or something.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: But it was the only place where the—the men—that is only for men—congregate, talk in the evening after they worked and so forth. And this young man—and one of them in particular was the best—was my bosom boyfriend. I grew up together. And he had a [unclear], so forth, but I didn't dare go in there because I was improperly dressed.

LEVINE: And what—did the women have anything that was an equivalent—

KOKKINS: Nothing.

LEVINE: —as far as a social—

KOKKINS: No, no.

LEVINE: —gathering place?

KOKKINS: Women stayed home.

LEVINE: They stayed home.

KOKKINS: [unclear]

LEVINE: And how about your sister? Did—did she—

KOKKINS: What—

LEVINE: —go to—

KOKKINS: They were—they went to school. My sister finished fifth—fifth grade.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KOKKINS: And later on, the girls used to go also with the same routine, the six, seven grades. That's the far—the furthest you could go in the island. There was no further school that that. So I show you the picture. And there I was in the sixth grade. You see? [chuckles]

LEVINE: Yes. Yeah. I want to mention that we're going to have a copy of your autobiography that you wrote for your grandchildren and—

KOKKINS: Well, I have that biography. I made it for them, not—

LEVINE: Yes. And so we're going to a copy at Ellis Island.

KOKKINS: Okay.

LEVINE: Now, so, okay. So then you went off to Athens. Did you have to work while you were in school?

KOKKINS: Well, the money that my father was sending wasn't enough for me, very little. But I had my Uncle George, was politician and was in exile. He had a—very influential politician with the government. He—he found a part time job with a law firm, lawyers. In Greece, the—the lawyers are—had—they—they take cases in the court. But there are also lawyers that do nothing but contract—contracts. They do nothing else except writing contracts between the [unclear]. And this particular firm, my uncle knew the—the lawyer that also had one of these. And all I had to—all I was doing was copy—he bought the records of another contract lawyer that they had to refer when transactions in real estate and so forth, and trained me how to go and look in the records and copy them, the records for law cases. And that's what I was doing, copying old contracts.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KOKKINS: But I didn't make very much. I say in—I said in my book in there. It's a long story to tell you. You'll find it in the book.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay, so when you—when you finished school, what was—

KOKKINS: But after—after the second year—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: After I finished the second year, I decided to go and see my mother because I hadn't seen her for two years. And I thought it would be all right. But apparently, my father objected very much and he decided that was—he wouldn't give me any more money. So I contracted with my uncle and I came to the United States.

LEVINE: I see. Okay. So that's why—why did you—did you—had you thought you would go to the United States before that?

KOKKINS: Well, I—I didn't have a—before that, I didn't have a thought of—but I was familiar with people, working men, who came to the United States two, three times. And I could see what they were and I knew better English than they did. And I was better educated than they were. And they were telling me the stories that you could do, the—this and that. Oh, there was a—another gentleman who was the same age as my uncle. And he was educated in the university and became a very prominent professor. He was a professor of—of Greek in—in Rapper [PH] College in Constantinople, was the [unclear] Foundation, but very exceptionally good man. And he was married to a woman from Constantinople who was well educated. And they were living on the island because of the war. And she was teaching us English privately. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh.

KOKKINS: And—and she made—she gave me a book to read, small book. It was the—"The Power of Wealth" by the—biography of—of Andrew Carnegie.

LEVINE: Oh.

KOKKINS: And her husband was a family friend with—distant related. My mother, I remember I heard him—asking him desperately, "What can I do with my boy?" "Send—send him to the United States," he says to her. "Because you're familiar with the American tradition." But she says, "What can he do there? He doesn't have any training in the coal mines and the"—"No," he says. "Don't worry about him. He may be a banker someday." When I hear that [chuckles], a banker [unclear]." [laughs] So I was excited about it. And I read the—the story of—

LEVINE: Andrew Carnegie.

KOKKINS: —Andrew Carnegie. [laughs] There was another thing, that in town there was a man. Two brothers came out of a family born blind for some reason. And he was playing an instrument but he was inquisitive

and he wanted to learn. And he used to find books, novels and things like that and used to bring them home for—my sister used to read it to him. My sister could read. I was too young. And in the evening in the wintertime she used to read for him, my mother and I and my grandmother. But I was listening to the story. And the next day, when everybody was—I used to take the book and read it. That's when I first read my big novel, "Les Miserables." [chuckles]

LEVINE: Wow!

KOKKINS: I was nine years old. [laughs] And my mother was very much concerned because sometime there were love affairs and she didn't want me to read about love affairs. She says, "I don't want him to hear that." [laughter]

LEVINE: Wow. So you had a lot of ideas, I guess, about America before you came.

KOKKINS: Oh, yes. Yes, I—I had—but I said to myself, "If this fellow's going to make it, I certainly can."

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

KOKKINS: [laughs] So I [unclear] hesitating. But I didn't have any. I had only one ad from—one address, a distant cousin who was in Pittsburgh and another one who was working as a waiter in a hotel in New York. I didn't know anybody else in the United States. So I chose to go to Pittsburgh where I supposed to meet my cousin, Frank. [chuckles]

LEVINE: And did you correspond with Frank before you left?

KOKKINS: No.

LEVINE: No.

KOKKINS: No, no.

LEVINE: Okay, well, I know there's more to that story.

KOKKINS: But the whole family were a very closely-knit family.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: His mother and so forth.

LEVINE: So this is your cousin? Your cousin?

KOKKINS: Distant cousin.

LEVINE: Distant.

KOKKINS: His—his father was a brother of my great grandmother and that kind of a thing.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay, so when you left, did you take anything in particular with you?

KOKKINS: No.

LEVINE: No. You—

KOKKINS: Just the things I was wearing on my—

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And where did you leave from?

KOKKINS: I left from Piraeus.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And the ship that you traveled on?

KOKKINS: Migaleolus, the Great Greece.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: It was a 9, 10,000 foot. But this was right after the war and all the Europeans from Central Europe, especially, by the hundreds of thousands were coming to the United States. So the shipping companies ripped all the partitions and made it open space, like a—what do you call them?

LEVINE: Dormitory.

KOKKINS: Like a—what do you call them?

LEVINE: For freight, you mean?

KOKKINS: No, when—when people travel on the deck, what do you call them?

LEVINE: Steerage?

KOKKINS: Steerage. And that's how we were. They put pipes and had two lines for beds, one on top of the other. Mine was on the top that far away from the ceiling because the [chuckles]—

LEVINE: You couldn't sit up, probably.

KOKKINS: [unclear] but [unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: A—a small boat like that had two and a half thousand people in there. It's a good thing it was stormy, the ocean. Took me three weeks from Gibraltar to come here. And when people get seasick, don't eat. Otherwise, we have to stand in line for an hour to get something.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So was there anything about the voyage that—that stands out?

KOKKINS: Oh, the—when—when we—the first stop we made was in Sicily in Palermo to take some more passengers. And that's when I sent a postcard to my mother. That's the first time she heard that I left Greece from [unclear]. She didn't know that. And she was crying for days. [chuckles] Anyhow, as soon as we entered the Atlantic, it was three weeks of continuous storms. The boat was always on one side and always covered—waves. And I remember one time it was so bad we were full of vermin. And I went up on the top there and a huge wave came, and I was going to [unclear], you know, go to another deck. And the wave came up and I was holding on until the wave went over. [chuckles] [unclear]. Finally, when we arrived in New York it was in the evening. We docked in Brooklyn. You know, the docks there—26, I think. And I was trying to see the skyscrapers that I heard about. But there was fog. I could see the lights up there but not down here. Anyhow, we were told that there were so many other ships ahead of us that Ellis Island didn't have the facilities where to wait. And we did for five days before we get in there.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

KOKKINS: —water at all. And it was the middle of January, cold. And I remember I went up on the deck because there was a place with the showers. And I—I had a little bit of a beard at the time. And I shaved. My uncle had given me a straight razor with the soap. And then I took the bull by the horns. And I stripped and I took my undershirt and I wetted it in soap and I—well, and everything I had on me, including the shoes and my hat. I put them in—in my overcoat. I had an old overcoat and put them in there and I make a big ball and I throw it overboard. [chuckles]

And I kept only what I was wearing on and a couple of notebooks that I kept. I thought they were valuable. But everything I threw overboard.

LEVINE: What was your thinking?

KOKKINS: Well, it was dirty, full of lice and so I couldn't—I don't want any more of that, not because I was thinking from a broad point of view. I just didn't want having it on my body anymore. And—but I had \$10 in my pocket, which was required to have that. While we were at Ellis Island, there's a big room in there and there's some inspection. I remember there's a lot of people, a lot of big room. And then, the way they gave us a box for a dollar and a half. I had two, three sandwiches in there and a couple of apples, an orange to eat while we're going someplace. [chuckles]

LEVINE: To take on the train.

KOKKINS: Yes, that's right. And then there was a ferry that picked me up to go to—B&O—Baltimore and Ohio and [unclear]—to go to Pittsburgh overnight, the whole night. It's freezing [unclear] all night. And finally, we arrived at Pittsburgh the following afternoon. [laughs]

LEVINE: And did someone meet you?

KOKKINS: Huh?

LEVINE: Did someone meet you?

KOKKINS: No, nobody. But there was a lady, a very nice lady in sort of a uniform with a nice hat, a good-looking woman, middle aged woman. And she was with—she—I didn't know at the time. She was from the Traveler's Aid Society, but very elegant, very nice woman, very respectable. And she came to me and asked me, because I knew English. And she was surprised that I knew so much English. And I told her that—my address. "Oh, yes." So she called a taxi right away. She put me in the taxi and she told the taxi to take me. But the address of my cousin was close by there. So when we arrived there, it was a shop with the shoemakers on one side and shoeshine on the other side. And I looked inside. In one there was a couple of blacks on the shoeshine. And I told the driver. I said, "There must be a mistake. This is not the place where my cousin lives." "Oh," he says. "This is it—is right." Says, "But he couldn't be living in a place like this." But one of the boys in the shoeshine heard the conversation. And he came over and spoke to me in Greek. He was from another town of Carpathos [PH]. And he says, "Whom are you looking for?" I told him Frank. Oh, he says, "Frank." This is the delivery. That's where he gets his mail because he—he

didn't have a steady address." It was a mail drop for him. I said, "Where I can see him?" He says, "You can see him. He works in a club and he come out three o'clock in the morning." I said, "What am I going to do in the meantime in a strange country?" Says, "Do you know a Greek place, a coffeehouse?" "Yes." So he told me there was a Greek restaurant, a coffeehouse. And I told the driver. The driver took me there. The driver didn't accept any money. So I went into the coffeehouse. At that time, my hair—I was filthy. The first time I felt warm water after four weeks and he gave me—washed me up and he gave me a shave. And I—was nearby a small restaurant. I had a nice Greek food and I had the address of another fellow, distant—another distant rel—in Rochester, Pennsylvania. Oh, it was about a couple hours train ride from Pittsburgh. I didn't know what to do. So I got instructions from the Greek fellows to go to the train. And I got the train to go to Rochester, Pennsylvania. [unclear] was in the afternoon, late afternoon in January. So he told me, "This is the only train that goes in there." And I bought the ticket and they said, "It's a local train. It'll take a few hours to go there." So I had no choice so I—and I told the conductor there that I was going to Rochester, to let me know. Every—it is a local train. Every time it stopped, I was ready to go out. And he says, "Wait." Finally, about eight o'clock—it was dark, night, you know. It was January. He says, "This is Rochester." So I got my bag and I got out and the train left. Nothing around. Wilderness. There was a little booth in there with a hanging light. There's nothing around. I said, "Gee, it's the first night in the United States in the middle of winter." And I was reading [unclear] Pinkerton and [unclear] Holmes, you know, and that kind of stuff. Gee whiz. What is this? I was—I got scared. But then I heard some talk around some place. And I go in there and I see four or five boys shooting crap under the streetlight. And when the saw me they all stopped, staring at [laughter]—with my bag. I looked strange, you know. And I started to tell them. I knew in that place—I knew from the Old Country there was a fellow from our own hometown who owned the poolroom with several pool tables in there. His name was Nick George. I didn't see him because he was older but I knew him from pictures that he was sending home. So I said, "Nick George is just [unclear] poolroom. It's a poolroom." I says—but I [unclear]. I didn't know how to say bald headed. I say, "No hair on his head." And the boys—one of the boys says, "Oh, I know him." So says, "Come over here." So he [unclear] and we're all running around the corner there and we arrive at this big pool hall, lighted up, about seven, eight pool tables in there. And fellow says, "Hey, Nicky. It's your cousin from the Old Country." [laughs] Nick—I recognize him from pictures and he knew my family very well. And, oh, I said, "Now, I'm safe." [chuckles]

LEVINE: Wow.

KOKKINS: That's—that's how—

LEVINE: Quite a first day, yeah.

KOKKINS: Yeah. And I was starving. But two, three days further up was the other guy that I had the address on. He had a small store with Nick, shoeshine and, those days, people used to wear hats, and hat cleaning. I don't know. You ever—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: Clean—that's theirs. There I saw his name was also Nikitas—Nick, whom I knew. I had seen him before in—from the island. And I felt safe. There were a couple of others in there. They were all very happy. They took me around to a corner there with an ice cream parlor. This is nine, ten o'clock at night. And they tried to treat me, ice cream. So I—I never had ice cream in my life before. I didn't—I had—I didn't know. So they made it very nice with chocolate sauce on it. So I started eating like a—you eat rice pudding. But when I put it in my mouth, the whole thing—I thought I would lose my teeth. And I went like this and everybody started to laugh. "Oh," she says. "Take it easy. You don't eat ice cream like that. You lick it slow." [chuckles] That's how I learned to eat ice cream, first time in my life.

LEVINE: Wow.

KOKKINS: [laughs] Anyway, next day, well, I was freezing because I didn't have an overcoat, was freezing. You know, this is winter. So this fellow, Nikitas gives me an extra coat and he takes me to the big city, Pittsburgh, to find a job. [laughs]

LEVINE: Did he take you in an automobile?

KOKKINS: Why, no, a train.

LEVINE: Train.

KOKKINS: Nobody had an automobile then. No. So he knew some Greek fellow that had a flower shop to make me a delivery boy, deliver flowers. But they says, "He doesn't know the streets. He doesn't know very good English and so forth. Wouldn't be the right kind of a job." What else? He says, "There's a big cafeteria, the biggest cafeteria in Pittsburgh. Miller's Cafeteria. And the co-manager of that cafeteria is a fellow from the island, from Karpathos." So we went there. His name was Socrates. So we got acquainted with Socrates, a very good-looking guy, and he was the manager. And he says, "Well, we'll give him a job

as a busboy.” So he gave me a jacket and an apron and a cap. And he says, “What is your name?” Because they had punch cards, you know, for the time. I said, “John Kokkinides.” Oh, no. That’s too long. You’ll have to cut it.” So made it John Kokkins—he made it. I didn’t have anything to say and it stuck. It stuck. That’s how I got my name. But later on, I found out that his name was Socrates Iliadas—Iliadas [PH]. Ilias Iliadas Socrates. But he change it. He made it Jim Louis. [laughs] So everybody knew her—Jim Louis.

LEVINE: Were there other things those first few days and weeks that—that were different that you—like the ice cream and—

KOKKINS: Well, I couldn’t—

LEVINE: Were there a lot of other things—

KOKKINS: I—I was only used—well, this—this job as a busboy, 12 hours a day, six days a week, nine dollars a week, plus your meals. But I couldn’t eat that food. I never saw roast beef or ham in my life. And all that red, I said I didn’t like that. And I couldn’t eat it. And in the afternoon we had an hour off. I used to run out and go to a Greek restaurant and have something to eat. The only thing I could see, anything cooked like stewed tomatoes and oxtail stew and things like that. And I remember I was on the late shift. And the cook was a Polish cook and he had big pieces of ham and roast beef. And because he knew that I was a favorite of, you know, the manager, he offered me the cut of—slice of roast beef. I said, “I don’t want any. That’s red.” I didn’t care. I never saw anything like that before. And he got insulted. He says, “I’m giving you something which is against the rules.” And he says, “And you don’t say anything.” In the meantime, Socrates came in there. He—“What’s the matter with your boy?” He says, “I gave him a roast beef and you know it’s against the—he doesn’t want it.” “Well, he’s not used to it.” [chuckles] Give him stewed tomatoes. But gradually, I got so—we had—my job was to go early in the morning, eight o’clock, and go—this is around the [unclear] to go to the bakery. The baker was an excellent baker, German Austrian baker, making pies and everything, the best you can imagine, and plenty of them. And I was supposed to take them from there to bring them in the counter, had two counters where the girls used to put them in display. So I got to know them, chocolate eclairs, chocolate cream puffs, fruitcakes and all these things with whipped cream on them. His name was Charlie and—but I was fast. I wanted to do it fast. And [unclear] of work and he says, “You have to learn how to do some”—he taught me how to beat whip cream and put it in a little bag and squeeze it into—oh, punch holes in the cream puffs and in the eclairs to fill them in with filling with—with the whipped cream. Well, I liked that because it tasted good. I never had anything

like this in my life. So when Charlie wasn't looking I used to squeeze whipped cream in my mouth. [laughs] Anyhow, I liked that but I couldn't go to school at night. So I asked Jim, the manager, to shift me so I would go earlier, and he did. But the other boys—oh, in the cafeteria, I remember there was a customer there at lunch, that every day he used to sit in the same place. And every day he used to have a smelly cheese. I didn't know but was a smelly cheese wrapped up in aluminum. And I asked one of the other boys to clean that table and I reciprocated because I didn't like the smell of that cheese. It was Roquefort cheese. But at night when I was cleaning the—the counters underneath to take the food away and so forth, I came across a plate that had a number of these things. So my curiosity got the best of me. And I cut a piece of that cheese and I tasted it and it tasted good. Cheese just like the—the cheese we had in the Old Country from the [unclear]. That—ever since that time, I loved Roquefort cheese. That's how I got [laughter]—

LEVINE: Where were you living while you were working in the cafeteria?

KOKKINS: Oh, with that—with my cousin, Frank, who I got to know. He was living out of town and I shared the bed with him. Oh, he was very nice. He—he gave—he was a sweet guy. As a matter of fact, many years later I had a house here and I had a boat. And Frank was with me all the time with my wife. He was just—just like a close cousin. Anyhow, I lived with—but then, I got to know other Greek fellows around. I joined the YMCA with another guy.

LEVINE: What did you do at the YMCA?

KOKKINS: Well, I was trying to be a wrestler. [laughs]

LEVINE: Oh. [chuckles]

KOKKINS: Yeah, the fellow that was a wrestler—became wrestling. So I learned how to be a wrestler. And one time they had an exhibition inside the YMCA. And they had several of us [unclear] with the people around, the same people. I mean, nothing [unclear] around like that. But they matched me with somebody who was taller. And I—I was pretty—on my size and my weight, I was pretty good. And I gave him a few rough holds in there and he got angry and he put the scissors on me. He was—he was a professional. Scissors on my waist and I lost my sight. I almost fainted out. And they stopped him, of course. And they told me later that he was a professional. He got angry because I was pushing him around too much and that was a good lesson for me to be careful from then on. That's how I got to know the YMCA from Pittsburgh. But anyway, at night when I got the job that permitted me to

go to night school—night school was out of town—I mean, on the north side. It was really a high school. And at night they used to use it for foreigners because a lot of foreigners, especially Polish people [chuckles] from—from Europe. Pittsburgh was full of Polish people. And I went there. The classroom was full but they were all older than me, was only 19. And they were older people, middle aged and so forth. Anyhow, there was a very nice teacher, all very—very nice woman with gray hair, beautiful hair. But she was—she had gray hair but she was awfully nice lady. And I was always a little late because I couldn't make it. And—and she didn't know what to do, apparently, what to tell these people that came from different parts of Europe that didn't know enough English and tried to teach them. And the—the day school left a big division on the blackboard, many letters with—you know, how they—the old division?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: And apparently, she found that convenient to tell them how to do a division and—that didn't know. So then she asked me, "Do you know how to do it?" But I came from a commercial high school, which was the best in Greece. I knew banking arithmetic very well. And I knew shortcuts how to test the big division like that. I still have that book because the director of that school was a very famous mathematician, commercial—they used to call it banking arithmetic, the banks. So there was a short way of doing it. And when I did it, one, two, three, I says, "It's correct." And she asked me, "How do you do it?" I told her how, the shortcut way. And she says to me, "When the class is dismissed, I want to talk to you." So when everybody was gone, she asked me a few questions. She says, "My boy." Says, "This school is no good for you. You go to a prep school in the YMCA someplace, get a prep school and go to college." [chuckles] I didn't know what [unclear]. Anyway, she used to come to the cafeteria once in a while with another teacher to check up on me. [chuckles] Yeah. I remember that woman. And when I came to New York, I joined the YMCA in New York, 47—48<sup>th</sup> Street, again to exercise and swimming and like that. And then I found out there was a prep school in there, the Mike Burnik [PH] Prep School.

LEVINE: Oh.

KOKKINS: And that's what she told me. So I had a certificate from the school in Greece that I attended so much, with stamps from the consul and everything else. And I went and I saw the director. And he was there with another teacher. And I taught him what I wanted. By that time, I could talk pretty well. And I showed him my things. Says, "How—how can we"—this was a prep school. They were discussing among

themselves how to place me in this. So they decided to put in the senior class. [chuckles] Okay. I didn't have anything to say. But I didn't have time because I had a full job in the Hotel Astor [PH] as a waiter in the—taking—serving the personnel, the checkers and the accountants and captains. And I only could go two days a week in the morning. That's the only way I could squeeze out. So they decided that I should take English, senior English and—and algebra. We—in the commercial high schools, they didn't teach algebra. They teach banking arithmetic. So I didn't have an algebra before. So anyhow, this teacher, Mr. Rankin [PH]—Rankin was English, was his class. So I went to his class and they were teaching, at that time, Milken's [PH] poems, "La Pensarosa" [PH] and "La Legra" [PH] and "Comos" [PH] and things like that. I was listening and I couldn't understand anything that was said. So I told the teacher. I said, "I don't understand anything." Says, "Don't worry. You sit there and you learn some. Don't give up." She was very good, a very good teacher. And then I went to the other, who was teaching math, algebra. The same thing. They were teaching intermediate algebra. And I didn't have any algebra at all. And I told him. He said, [unclear], an older man. So he said, "Don't worry. I'll give you a book that has both of them, intermediate and so forth, and also a little booklet that has all the answers." He says, "Try to solve them all and when you get in trouble, ask me." And I—anyhow, that was good. At the end of the term, I passed the—the math, both intermediate—with a 94. That was pretty good. But in the English, I—they had a senior essay contest. I said, "What is that?" So Mr. Rankin was awfully nice, one of—I think the best teacher I ever had in my entire life, that fellow. Sympathetic, nice personality. He says, "What is this essay contest?" "Write anything about your story that you wrote—write it down the way you know it." So I wrote it. I never had the—the [unclear]. I—I got a prize.

LEVINE: What did you write about?

KOKKINS: It was an essay about the story, my home island something. Very—I don't know what the story was. But the prize was the best improvement in English.

LEVINE: Wow.

KOKKINS: And it was a book, the—"The Life of Edward Buck," which I still have someplace. "The Life of Edward Buck." Who was this Edward Buck? He was an immigrant Dutch boy. He came to this country and eventually—apparently, he was a good-looking Dutchman and eventually he got—he was married to the daughter of the owner of the "Saturday Evening Post." [chuckles] Big shot. His son—this fellow's son became president of Harvard later. Anyway, I had that book, senior

essay contest. Okay. Very good. I didn't realize I was so good. I said, "What do we do next?" And he says, "Well, next you have to take the college entrance exam." Mr. Rankin was pushing me. So they were giving one at Columbia Gym, four-days-exam or three-days-exam. A lot—a lot of people. Anyway, I took the exam and I took ancient history, French. What else?

LEVINE: Did you have to take English?

KOKKINS: French—oh, yes.

LEVINE: English?

KOKKINS: Yes, and also English and—and mathematics, algebra. So I took those. When the results came out a couple weeks later, I passed all of them but I got an "F" in English. "F." Said to Mr. Rankin again—I said, "What do you do?" "Take the summer courses here in elementary chemistry and—and plane geometry, and brush up again in the English and take it again in September." I did that. I took the—again, I passed both but I got another "F" in English. This was bad. And also, I got a letter from the assistant director of admissions of Columbia telling me that, "We're very sorry. It wasn't good enough for Columbia," and they suggested try somewhere else. That was the end of me. I didn't know what to do. That's the reason, because I had the job, the only job I could make a living. So I took the bull by the horns and I wrote them a letter and I told them my situation. And I told them that the only way out for me was to take it again and again until I enter Columbia. You know, I never—I thought that was the end. But he sent me a letter. He says, "I admire your courage but, although you are not fit for Columbia, but why don't you come and see me?" So I did. He was a veteran of the First World War with one leg. He was going around in crutches. Then when I sat there he says to me, "Do you want to enter Columbia?" I said, "Yes, sir." [unclear] said, "Well, I'll do for you." He took a piece of paper. He said, "I'm going to write here three courses in English composition that you take them in the Columbia extension. And if you pass these courses with "C" or better, come here. I'll get you into Columbia. What do you think of that?" I said, "That's wonderful." And that's exactly what I did. And that's how I entered Columbia [chuckles] in the middle of 1925. That's how I entered.

LEVINE: What—how did you get in your mind that you wanted to go to Columbia?

KOKKINS: Well, because I was impressed with the campus for Columbia, just big, impressive. And I heard in the meantime—oh, I heard another fellow from the island who was getting his master's at Columbia in sociology, a

very good, young man. But he and another compatriot said, "Why don't you go to City College?" Which was free. I went there and I saw the—the boys were badly dressed and noisy and all that, and I was very discouraged. I didn't like the atmosphere. And I said to my friend that was getting his master's—I said, "I'm going to stay at Columbia no matter what. I don't want to go there." That's how I made it.

LEVINE: And just to catch up a little. How long did you stay in Pittsburgh before you went to New York?

KOKKINS: Sixteen months. I felt that I was—I really did. I don't want to use these big words. I thought I had claustrophobia. I couldn't get it into my blood that I was 500 miles away from the ocean. I felt I was hemmed in. I didn't feel comfortable. I wanted to get away from there. And I wrote to my other cousin in New York [unclear]. And he got me a job there as an officer's waiter and I came because I just couldn't stand this. And the city was dark and cloudy always, the smoke. It didn't attract me. And when I left, I said, "I'll never come back to the city again." And I never did. [chuckles]

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

KOKKINS: That's how I left.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds like you knew your own mind and you—

KOKKINS: Oh—

LEVINE: —acted on it.

KOKKINS: Yes. That I—I inherited that from my mother.

LEVINE: Oh?

KOKKINS: Oh, yes. I had made up my mind. And I—this cousin, George, was working as a waiter.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: He and another fellow decided to quit and open a restaurant by themselves in Brooklyn. And they invited me to be a partner. I only had collected up about six, seven hundred dollars, you know. And I said, "No, I'm going to go through—be a professional man." "Why?" He says, "You can make money." I said, "When you become 60 years old

you may have more money but when I be—60 years old, I'm still young and my profession will stay with me all my life. So I lent him my \$600 and I went to Columbia.

LEVINE: Oh, wonderful.

KOKKINS: Oh, I had—I—that I had no doubt about in myself.

LEVINE: And then you graduated from Columbia?

KOKKINS: Yes, I graduated from Columbia while I was working. I had no—I didn't know anybody to help me. But at that time, every time I was short of a little money, I used to apply for a student loan. All these years, I had accumulated a student loan. [chuckles] And when I was—you know, Columbia at that time had the combined courses. They call it now the core.

LEVINE: Okay, we're resuming—from Columbia.

KOKKINS: Yes.

LEVINE: And—

KOKKINS: Well, in—after the third year, I wasn't making enough money, because I used to work Saturdays and Sundays, no vacations. And I think to collect enough money to pay my—but I lived in the dormitories all this time, because I had no place to—other place to be. I find it more convenient and I didn't take all of the courses. But because I lived in the dormitories and I had no place to go, I used to take summer courses to fill in, because I couldn't take all the courses at that.

LEVINE: I see.

KOKKINS: Every year, I used to take a summer course. And—and that's how I was able to make—and I lived in the dormitories and the rent was very reasonable, and I lived very frugally. [chuckles] But then I had a friend who was a Russian, was working as a bricklayer. He was a student also.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: And he was making union wages and he told me how much, \$14 a day. That was a lot of money for me. So I went and learned how to be a bricklayer in a school. There was an Irishman had a—ran a school. And I learned how to be a bricklayer but I didn't stay there very long because I almost fell off the scaffold. So I got scared and I gave it up.

And then I worked off and on in banquets, this and that, all kinds of jobs, any restaurant that you can imagine. [chuckles] And I used to get student loans. Anyway, by the time I—as I mentioned to you that Columbia had the six—

LEVINE: Oh, the core. The core.

KOKKINS: Core.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: Columbia was the first institution in the United States to explore that, which was organized [clears throat] at the request of the federal government after the war, the First World War, when they found out that the educational background of the Army was so different [several words unclear]. And they asked Columbia to get this thing pulled together into a course to make a professional—professional men, because before that time, Harvard and Yale and Princeton used to attract the rich people, who didn't have to make a living afterwards. And they would have taken dilettante courses but they—you didn't get real professional engineers, chemists, architects, lawyers and so forth that didn't have it. There was chaotic situation. So the head of committee by John Dewey, the famous John Dewey—a big committee of outstanding Columbia professors, who created this com—combined courses with a core. The first two years, you are in college getting culture things, a broad education. But then when the third year—you go into your professional school gradually and you become. And they—every year they had a syllabus to tell you exactly what you are taking. They started in 1921. I was—entered in 1925. I have the—the—the fourth edition syllabus.

LEVINE: Okay, careful. You have the microphone on. You want me to take it off?

KOKKINS: [unclear].

LEVINE: Oh.

KOKKINS: This is the syllabus, fourth edition.

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh.

KOKKINS: Here, they tell you that day what books to read, what pages of that book and so forth. And this is the bible.

LEVINE: Yes. I—I know about that. Yes.

KOKKINS: You didn't pass this course, you—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KOKKINS: —didn't go anywhere. They asked you to leave. This is it.

LEVINE: Wow. Uh-huh. You chose well when you chose Columbia.

KOKKINS: I swear by Columbia.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: There is the Columbia alumni in there.

LEVINE: Ah.

KOKKINS: Anyhow—

LEVINE: So when did you decide then that you were interested in architecture as a profession?

KOKKINS: Oh.

LEVINE: Whoops.

KOKKINS: Well, at the—at that time, I don't know exactly—before even I went to college, I didn't know what to do. I figured out—my mother always told me that I was going to be either a lawyer or a doctor. A doctor, I had no ambition. But my uncle was a lawyer and he was a very successful lawyer and a big shot. But I figured out, in the United States, to be a lawyer you have to know the language. You have to know the background. You don't know people who have a client [unclear] be beyond. It wasn't the right thing for me to do. So—but down on the island we had—my father was a carpenter, a builder, and everybody in town were famous stone masons. They were known be so—so maybe I fit in that. I was used to building drywalls and terraces and so on. And that's how I made it. I think that's how I made it. And—and it sounded well. Architecton [PH]. You see, chief carpenter. Architecton—tehton [PH] is a carpenter. So that's how I decided. And I began to love it after that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So—

KOKKINS: And in the fifth year—in the summer of the fifth year—no, in the fifth year, I had to take more courses to catch up with the others. And I needed some more money. So I made an application to the—to get

another student loan for about \$220. But I—the secretary of the dean was a very nice—Lila Vonteshmussen [PH], a big lady and so forth, but the nicest person on earth. She used to give me little jobs to post the [unclear] for the monthly exhibit board, and they used to judge them, make a dollar an hour. When the professors in the day school used to go out, have an evening course for—[unclear] exams for the—for the night school, and they didn't want to stay, they used to ask me to go there and distribute the papers and watch them, that they did it, and collect the papers. And they used to pay me a dollar an hour. She was very nice to me that way. And she was a lovely old lady, Lila Vonteschmussen. Anyhow, I had made this last application in my fifth year. I needed very badly about \$220. And on the top floor of the building, the Avery [PH] Hall, is all drafting boards for the students to do their work. She came one afternoon. It's a big room and she came straight to my desk. She says, "Mr. Kokkins, I have some good news for you." I said, "What is it?" She says, "You know that application you made a few weeks ago?" I said, "Yes. Did they approve it?" "Oh," she says. "They did better than that. They decided—the faculty decided to give it to you as a scholarship." [chuckles] That's the only scholarship I got in my life. That was it.

LEVINE: Wow! Well, you must have felt happy. [chuckles]

KOKKINS: Anyway, but in the last year I had enough courses accumulated. I got a summer job with a very outstanding architect in New York. And the chief—the—the chief partner next to the old boss was a Columbia man. And he hired me right there and then. And he got me as an assistant, his assistant. And I had a job that lasted afterwards. Anyhow, when I graduated and got as—I graduated as an architect, 1930. I had a job when, next morning, I went—next Monday, I went back to my job for another two years, because we're doing—[clears throat] they had the big penitentiary of the United States in Pennsylvania, Northeastern Penitentiary. We—the firm designed it but I was the chief assistant with all the little detail work. And it was a big prison for a thousand—it's a thousand acres property, very—one of the most important jails of the government. And the—and the water tower—you know, have to—water tower because it's a big area over there, water on. The—the—the old man, the chief, Mr. Hopkins, says, "I wanted that tower to look like the—the—the tower of—of the—of the—of the tower in Siena in Italy, exactly." [chuckles] So I went to [unclear], did exactly like the Siena tower. And that's the only tower in the United States that looks exactly like the Siena—[chuckles] Siena [unclear] tower.

LEVINE: Were—were there some innovative things about designing a prison at that point or not?

KOKKINS: Well, this a lot to do with the whole philosophy of prisoners and prison terms, whether there's a high security, middle security, lower security, how you manage it. It's very complicated. He published a book, the only book that was in existence at that time about the design of prisons. He was a pioneer in the design of prison, Mr. Hopkins.

LEVINE: Hopkins, uh-huh.

KOKKINS: Hopkins, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: And—and then the governor of the state of New York was Franklin Roosevelt. And you know, to create work because of the Depression, he had the State of New York build two state prisons, which we got. I mean, the office got.

LEVINE: I see.

KOKKINS: And I worked in there. So I—the—the work lasted another three years.

LEVINE: I see.

KOKKINS: And then in 1932 everybody was fired. Everybody lost their job, including me. [chuckles] That's when I went to Greece.

LEVINE: Oh, so you went back to Greece?

KOKKINS: I went back to Greece. As a matter of fact, I had my name changed back to the Kokkinides. My—so that I'd be recognizable over there. And I almost was able to—to get a connection in prisons in Greece. But it didn't work out very well and I had to come back.

LEVINE: You—you—when you went to Greece, you thought you might actually stay there as an architect.

KOKKINS: Yes, I—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: As a matter of fact, I got to know a few people there, and big people, naturally, and that. There's a lawyer who studied in Germany and we used to [unclear]. And one day, Selos [PH] send me a copy of the New York magazines—the "New York Times" magazine section, who has a big story about the prison in—in Pennsylvania. And he sends in to me. And I got it and I was showing it to that fellow. I said, "Look where I

used to work on.” “Oh,” he says. “You know about prisons?” He says, “I know the chief of the prisons in the Department of Justice and I’d like you to go and meet him.” From there. Selos send me that. So I went to see him, introduced me to an older man there, because at that time the city of Athens was planning to build a huge municipal prison. And they had a competition already fixed. Anyway, the gentleman there was trying to tell me, “Oh, you came from New York. Oh.” The year before he was a delegate in an international meeting in Prague about prisons, and he represented Greece. And there, this book introduced as the best book on prisons. He started talking about the book and so forth. And I was listening. And I had a letter in my pocket from Mr. Hopkins, very flowery letter telling me that I was the best. And—and I says, “You don’t know English but this is a letter from Mr. Hopkins. Did you know him? Says here it’s my boss. You know, the book that you have in there? You know those drawings in there? I made them.” Which is true. He says, “Why, it’s amazing.” [unclear]. From then on I had—he used to take me to his apartment for lunch and ask me questions about how they designed prisons. I became a prison expert. [chuckles] Finally, they wanted me to stay there but—but I had to change my citizenship to be a government official in the prison division of Greece in the Department of Justice. I says, “That’s where we’re stuck. I don’t give up my citizenship in the United States for this.” And I came back.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, could you tell, just k—I know it’s got to be a thumbnail sketch, but the highlights of your career as an architect?

KOKKINS: Very highlights.

LEVINE: Yeah, [unclear].

KOKKINS: I’ll give you the book. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Yeah, okay. Well, we’ll refer then to the book for—for the things that you designed and [unclear].

KOKKINS: Well, as I mentioned to you earlier, that I was—had to qualify for—for home relief and get the WPA job. When I got the WPA job, that’s very little work. The whole thing was disorganized. I didn’t know what to do. It was a division of the Department of Purchase making warehouses for—for the hospitals and things like that. But there wasn’t enough work to do. There were 50, 60 people. They were all older than me and we didn’t have enough work to do. And I got scared because I didn’t want to lose my ability. And I kept on inventing this and that and the politician, Jack O’Connor [PH] was an Irishman, was the head. He used to take the studies and submit them to Hugh Johnson, who was the big boss, the general, that were doing other things. And I said,

“Would you allow me a couple days a week in the morning to go to school that I had in mind?” He said yes. So he allowed me to go and I—[unclear] helped me on there. I went to NYU, had graduate courses in the history of art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And the—the teachers were all refugees from Germany. They couldn’t even talk well. And I took courses in the history of art, graduate courses, so would get a Ph.D. or something, because I had already a number of advanced courses. But after a while, I was a little discouraged. I said I wasn’t so sure that I would make a good teacher. But in the meantime, the city of New York was—had—the ranks of the professionals were depleted because [unclear]. They declare an exam for architect, grade 4, the top classified. And the whole United States was in New York at the time looking for a job because of Moses [PH]. And I decided to take that exam. And, well, I found out in the big armory that another 650 men took that exam from all over the country.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KOKKINS: I took the exam. It was a whole day or two days; I don’t remember now. And a couple weeks later the results came out. Only 24 passed it and I was the 22<sup>nd</sup>. See? So I’ll get a civil service job and—and the minimum for that was 3,260—3,260 a year, which was more than twice the amount I was making in the—for the WPA. [chuckles] And a permanent job. So I was certified for the Board of Education to go. And I went there but I didn’t want the Board of Education because it was a reputation there are too many politics involved, and I didn’t like it. So I told the lady, an Irish lady, “I really don’t want to get a job with the Board of Education.” “Oh, my boy. Don’t say that. If you say that, then take your file and put it in the bottom. It’ll take a long time because—before your name comes up again.” I said, “What should I say?” “Say, ‘insufficient salary.’ And then stay there and you’ll get the next one.” So I did. “Insufficient salary.” Okay. So a couple weeks later a certifies of the Board of Water Supply, the oldest board in the city. So I went there and what I see there are 30, 40 old—old men and middle-aged men in there. And they’re quietly [unclear]. I said, “This is like a morgue.” I says—so I go to the person in charge of there. I said, “I’m sorry but this is insufficient salary.” [chuckles] And then I was certified to the Department of Parks for doing [unclear] projects. I mean real projects, and that’s where I landed. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Wow. Now, when did you meet your wife?

KOKKINS: Oh, during this time after I came back from Greece, I lived in International House. And there was a fellow there. We—but I know this girl sitting on a couch. And while I was talking, because I’m a talker, she used to look at me and then go down like this. I noticed this. She

was looking at me but at the same time pretending that she was reading. Anyway, a couple days later, she leave the International House. There was another German boy—friend of mine from my waiter days from the Hotel Astor. [chuckles] He came there, says, “Can we find some people to play bridge?” Because I—I knew how to play bridge. I says—we had another guy who was an American boy, only he was a [unclear]. And he went up in the International House [unclear] fourth. But I saw this girl over there with a book. She was studying. And I asked this fellow, asked her to—she says, “I’m sorry.” She refused. Well, from knowing how she was looking at me, I said—so I went and talked to her. I—“Would you do me a favor and come and join us? Because I have a friend.” And she did. And we played bridge. Next week or so, my German friend was not a member of the thing. He was a nice looking German. He says, “You know. That girl called me again and she wants to play bridge in the International House.” But he was not a member. But she says, “But please, don’t bring that Greek again.” [laughs] And he told her, “He is the only one who lives there. I—I can’t.” Says, “He’s a friend of mine. And besides, I can’t go in there without him. Get another”—so she brought another girl with her and we played bridge. Now, this other girl is the one who became later my wife. [laughter]

LEVINE: I see. Now, what was her name and her maiden name?

KOKKINS: Her name was Esther Posselt—P-O-S-S-E-L-T. She was from a Lutheran family, third generation. Her father was a prominent Lutheran minister in Albany.

LEVINE: Oh.

KOKKINS: But he was also a trustee in Wagner College in Staten Island.

LEVINE: Huh.

KOKKINS: And she had three brothers. Two of them were Lutheran ministers and the other—the younger one was studying to be a chemist. But her grandfather was also a—a Lutheran minister trying to convert the Zulus in South Africa. And she had others—a lot of Lutheran ministers.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KOKKINS: And—and I was not really very religious in there. And I asked her about her religion. “Oh,” she says. “I have religion up to here,” she says. [laughter] “Please don’t mention it.” [laughs] She was very—she was an honor student from—from a college—Russell Sage in New York. And she also had a master’s from Columbia in—in scientific works and

doing research work in New York State's Neurological Institute with the Columbia Medical School, doing the research in various human ailments. And she was very, very good. Just very intelligent, very well educated and had terrific character. She fitted me. But I didn't have enough [unclear]. I used to—oh, while I was with the WPA, that wasn't enough for me to live. So I had a friend who was assistant manager of the Teacher's College Cafeteria. He was a good Greek fellow, a friend, Nemus [PH]. I said, "Nemus, I need"—even before I got the WPA job—"I'm starving. I have to have a job." He said, "What kind of a job?" Says, "[unclear] to clean the tables and so forth?" "I don't care what it is as long as I can eat." So he gave me a job, the cafeteria, to go there on Sunday mornings at six o'clock and clean the place, the big cafeteria, but beautiful cooking. Was the best in Columbia. And I used to work till—from six till two. At noon, I used to—we used to collect the tapes, and clean the floors, and put the salt shakers and the ice cream and the sugar bowls and everything else. And—but at noon, when the cafeteria opened, I was behind a curtain where people used to bring their trays and send them down to the dumbwaiter, and then have another dinner and go home. But I got a card there, like, quarters and dimes and so forth, that entitled me for \$1.75 a day for the rest of the week. And every time I wanted to have dinner, they used to punch me—punch it. And that's how I treated my girlfriend, from that card. [laughter]

LEVINE: So then when were you married?

KOKKINS: Well, then, after I got the civil service job—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KOKKINS: —and I was confirmed, I told Esther. I said, "Now we can get married." So we got married. Three or four months after that, we got married.

LEVINE: And—and you had two children?

KOKKINS: Two children.

LEVINE: And their names?

KOKKINS: Steven, that's the first one, my son, who is a friend of George's. They were—[chuckles] grew up as the same—George was a year older. And then my daughter, who was three years younger, Joan. She—oh, Steven went to Columbia, magna cum laude and Phi Beta. He got a B—BA from college and also BS from sciences. And then he went to MIT. He got a master's at MIT in engineering. But he has a—never once in his entire life, he missed the honor roll. Not even a semester.

Not once. Yes. He has the richest vocabulary in English I ever came across anybody, my son. I'm very proud of him.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KOKKINS: And he's an expert in jet engine designs. Jet engines for the Air Force with the GE. They make the [unclear] for the [unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KOKKINS: And—and he's a wonderful—he's not a young man anymore. My daughter went to the Rhode Island School of Design. And she was an honor student. And they had a system at that time. The honor students, they had a school in Rome where they finished their last year. And that's where she went for the last year in Rome, but graduated at Rhode Island up in—in—

LEVINE: Providence.

KOKKINS: —Providence.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KOKKINS: And she graduated from there and she went into graphic designs. And she used to work for advertising firms. And she married and then got a divorce, and then her—my lawyer advised her to go to California because it would get a divorce easier there at the time. She went there. She got a divorce and then she found another young man and married him. [laughs] And she had two children. Her daughter graduated last June from Tufts with cum laude. And the other boy—the boy is younger. He is now a sophomore in Rhode Island School of Design trying to be an artist or an architect or something. And my son is working some big companies. They do advanced research for the government. It's financed by the government but it's a private— [unclear] future things about it, the airports and things like that. I don't know exactly what it is. But my daughter now is a trustee of the Rhode Island School of Design. So she's a big shot in there now.

LEVINE: Good.

KOKKINS: She called me last night. The president of Rhode Island is over there now and they have a big group over on the West Coast, alumni of the Rhode Island School. And she is the big shot. She gets them all together. [chuckles] She's an organizer.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, do you think the fact that you came to this country as a young man and—and made your life here, do you think that experience of what you had to go through to get yourself in the position that you did—do you think that—how do you think that affected your personality, your character, your—

KOKKINS: Well, I don't know. I think the—the fact that I didn't have anybody to rely on forced me to make my own decisions. And I never—I never remember to be desperate. I never remember [unclear] was defeated. I didn't know where—I always looked for another way around it. I never arrive at the feeling that I didn't have a way out. Some people call it optimism but it was a matter of necessity, you see? Necessity creates—all inventions are matters of necessity. I mean, I don't know how to explain it but I never lost my—my hope that I find a way around it some—what'd you call it? I don't know what you call it.

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B]

LEVINE: —or accomplishments here?

KOKKINS: Well, I feel this way. And many times I talk to myself in the mirror. After all, I came to this country first. I grew in a place like that, which in the United States, we'll call it the bare, bare, bare minimum. Bare minimum. And when you start from nothing, everything's an accomplishment. [chuckles] We didn't have enough money—I don't think we ate meat more than four or five times a year. Fish—they used to get the dried cod that came from Sweden or Norway. [chuckles] We ate vegetables that we grew ourselves. You had properties in the—the—we were [unclear] raisins, figs, fruit. We had all of that, oranges, but no money. When—I remember [clears throat] I used to team up with the boy that became a professor later. He was the son of the priest. We used to go around and Christmas carols—singing Christmas carols to every town. And we'd get nickels and dimes. And I collected maybe the equivalent of about four or five dollars going around all the [unclear] all night. I used to give it to my mother, because I knew we didn't have enough money to buy things like rice, sugar. We didn't have—we [unclear] produce it. And I never kept anything for myself.

LEVINE: Do you think because you were the boy and that your father was absent—do you think that put more—

KOKKINS: Well, I don't know because I—many times I ask myself that question. I never grew up from infancy to have a man in the house that you have to rely on and in the future. The only man was my Uncle George, my—

who was a lawyer somewhere else in another island. And he's the only one that used to give me a little present once in a while. But he [unclear]—I knew he loved me and I—loved me too. I knew that. And whenever he was around, I had some kind of a courage that there are somebody that w—would help me. That's the only man, my Uncle George. That's why I have his picture in here.

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh. In the [unclear].

KOKKINS: Because I had—I was very sentimental about my affection for him.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KOKKINS: This one here.

LEVINE: Oh.

KOKKINS: He's a big guy.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KOKKINS: [coughs] When I arrived in Athens on this boat from Rhodes the first time, it was—the Aegean was still infested with submarines. And we arrived the first—with another boy I convinced to come with me. We're starving to death. The—the Italians didn't give me—the last day—we had four days. It took us four days because this boat—sailboat. The sailboat was chock full of people, boys and women and children and everything. And we couldn't find a place to sit. And I asked the captain there if he could take us. He said he had no room except five cans for gasoline there. They could sit there. I said, "How long it take?" "Well, it's 200 miles." But it had an engine. "But what do you do when you want to go to the bathroom?" "Oh," he says. "If it is the light stuff, you turn around and do it over the thing. But if it is the heavy stuff, you go in front of the sailboat." It had the [several words unclear] in there and you held onto the chains with the deep sea underneath and you do your business. Well, it took us four days because the engine used to go off and couldn't fix it. And was calm. Anyhow, when we arrived, we're starving. And—and the next day, I had to go up to Athens to meet my uncle. And I did find him and had a nice furnished room, big furnished room. And when he show me the way I was dressed with short pants and big shoes—were three size bigger than my feet. And no hat, nothing. You know. He saw the picture there. He—he was shocked and he says, as though he was talking to himself, "Is that how my sister sent you here?" "Yeah." "Is that how?" he says. And he goes into a closet and he got an old suit. He was twice as big as I was. Black suit, shiny. You know, he had a—he was in—he was in exile; don't forget.

And he took that suit and me to a tailor that he knew in the neighborhood and told the tailor, "Make a suit out of that." So the tailor cut it up and turn inside out and he made a black suit. Seventeen-year-old in the class. The boys were all kinds of other things. I had a black suit, all—for a whole year. [laughs] A black suit.

LEVINE: Wow, wow. Well, is there anything that you would like to say, in closing, related to your coming here, and your life here and your thinking about it all?

KOKKINS: Well, anyway, I—when I decided to come back to the United States, I said to myself that this is God's country. This is where I'm going to stay for good. I had—make a final decision. Nobody could talk me out of that anymore. I said, "This is the place where I belong." S—

LEVINE: Maybe that's perfect place to end—

KOKKINS: Yes.

LEVINE: —the tape. That's—

KOKKINS: And I was lucky too because I was socially active up in New York in the Greek community. And in Greek community, New York, was very organized. All the professionals and so forth were in New York. And they had a professional club. Doctors and—and lawyers who came from the Old Country to make a living among the immigrants in here.

LEVINE: Oh.

KOKKINS: And they had a—well, while I was at Columbia we organized a fraternity of our own in there. And every one of these became a pretty well known professional. Anyhow, when I got married, I was a member of this professional club in New York. And they had elections. I didn't attend. My wife says, "Why don't you go to the—to the club? They have elections down there—to see some of your friends?" So, "Maybe you're right. I'll go there." I didn't have anything in mind. So I went. They had elections. And—and the people—a lawyer, a very distinguished lawyer was the president—had somebody else to be can—candidate. But there are a lot of engineers from MIT out of—came to New York and they didn't like him. So they forced me to—to go for presidency and I was elected president following this man. This man, Mr. Laddas [PH], was the president. He was a Ph.D. from Harvard and probably one of the most distinguished Greek lawyers in the United States to this day.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KOKKINS: He was probably the best expert in the country in the question of copyrights and trademarks and—and intellectual property. And we became very close friends. And back in 1940, there was no law in the United States to protect copyrights and trademarks, especially the moving picture people used to take stories and make movies without paying anything for it. Well, he—he [unclear]. The government asked Professor Shotwell [PH] from Columbia, a very distinguished man and president of the Carnegie Foundation for International Education and Peace, to draft a new law. Well, he drafted Steve to help him draw the legislation and [unclear] that. He was—and became—he became the chief editor of the “Law Journal” for trademarks and intellectual property for years. And he was—also became the chief counsel of Coca-Cola in the United States and the rest of the world. The chief counsel. Very powerful guy. And we became very close. Anyway, I—when my son was born, I thought [chuckles]—I asked him to be the best—what do you call them—the—the godfather. I didn’t like the name of my father because I always was bitter against my father. So I named him Steven because—after him.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KOKKINS: Steven Laddas. He was an outstanding brain. He was a—he was a workaholic, but an unusual guy, really.

LEVINE: Can you say any more about the Greek Professional Club?

KOKKINS: Oh, the Professional Club. When I was the president, it was 20 years after the organization of this club. And the first president was George Papanikalow [PH], the man who created the PAPs [PH] test. He was the first president. And we gave a big affair for him in the St. Moritz [PH] Hotel in his honor.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KOKKINS: George Papa—became—he was an older man than me. But because I was the president, he became the honorary—big affair for him. We became very close. My wife, especially, with his wife, and he was like a old time friend. And he was an awfully kind man, very nice man. And I had asked the—another professor—he was professor in the philosophy of Harvard School of Philosophy—came and gave the—the address.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

KOKKINS: See, for him and Steven Laddas—for George Papanikalow. And at that time, also, the World's Fair was going on, the first World's Fair. And I was—the Department of Parks that were in charge of the World's Fair.

LEVINE: Oh.

KOKKINS: And I had a lot to do with it, myself, later on. And I got to spread out [unclear]. I got to know a little—a few people. [chuckles] And—and I remember one time there was a Greek conductor in America, Demetri Metropolis [PH]. I don't know if you ever heard the name.

LEVINE: Yes.

KOKKINS: He was the conductor of the New York Symphony.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KOKKINS: And he was very famous conductor. And we—I invited him to come and be our guest in an affair we organized in the St. Moritz Hotel up in upper floors. And we had about a hundred people there for Metropolis. And I knew the owner of the hotel. He was Greek and he allowed us to have an office in there. And Metropolis told me that he had problem with his stomach. And he was wondering whether we could arrange to have a little lighter food for him, rather than steak that we have. I says, "I'll go down and I'll try." I went down to the first floor. I knew the owner—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KOKKINS: —Gregory Taylor—"If you could fix us something for him." He was a famous man. And as I was going down, the door opens. Who comes in? The Greek ambassador of the United States. I forget his name now. I had met him before. But I knew him. I knew him personally. I didn't have any [unclear] contact [chuckles] with him. I knew him through Laddas. The Greek ambassadors every time came from Washington to New York, always stopped in the—stayed in Laddas' apartment. That's how I got to know him. And to be polite, I told him that we are giving an affair upstairs for Mr. Metropolis. And I said, "If you have the time or [unclear], you'd be welcome. I'd be very honored to have you there." "Oh, I'd be very glad to." So I go up with him. [chuckles] So, being the president—I'm not [unclear] but I was the president.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KOKKINS: Metropolis on this side, ambassador—or the ambassador on this side. And naturally, I had to introduce. Metropolis gave a very nice address in there. And then after he was finished, I asked the ambassador. I said, “Could—would you mind—would you like to say a few words to the people?” “Oh, I’d be very glad to.” So he gets up. He was about my size, a little bit taller. And he goes like this in his pocket and he gets a written speech in there for the occasion. He had it all prepared. How did he know that?

LEVINE: [chuckles]

KOKKINS: He heard it probably from newspaper that—he came there with the idea but I never knew anything about it. And he took that thing out and he read it in there. I was amazed.

LEVINE: Wow. Wow. So this—this professional club still continues?

KOKKINS: Huh?

LEVINE: This professional—Greek Professional Club still goes on?

KOKKINS: What—it has gone on for quite a while. We’re going to have—I did a lot of [unclear]. I was their president for two years. And we’re going to have a building of our own. It’s a long story. But later on, the Italians invaded Greece. And the Greek [unclear] was organized for Greece, because when the Greeks defeated the Italians and they throw the Italian Army in the sea, every newspaper in the United States had headlines big—as big as you can get, “Small Greeks Defeats the [unclear].” It was a big thing. And the Greek [unclear] were organized. They had 500 chapters all over the United States, the big—they got together to help Greece. And everybody—and we emptied our treasury. We gave everything we had, about 6, \$7,000. Everybody did.

LEVINE: Hmm.

KOKKINS: It was like a wave [unclear] at that time. And Mr. Skooters [PH] was the president of this. But Mr. Laddas had a—another idea. But you have this thing here. I want to show you something over there but I have to move. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Shall we—we’ll have to pause a minute. [tape off/on]  
We’re—we’re resuming now. We’re going to close off because there’s just so much that—

KOKKINS: Well, I—

LEVINE: —you've been involved—

KOKKINS: I am fortunate that all my life has practically—I had my health. Because before I got married, I didn't have anybody and so forth. And I think that has something to do with it, that I was healthy, physically healthy, and that, I'm very fortunate and very thankful for that. And—and I had a few breaks in life in New York with the buildings that [unclear]. The value of these buildings today could be close to a quarter of a billion dollars.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KOKKINS: And I feel I should be very proud of it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

KOKKINS: I made enough for myself and I don't complain about it. I made money for a lot of others. But it was a great stimulant for me to feel that I was able, comparatively speaking, of what I came and what I was. And I'm very happy. I—I think if—I'm happy with myself. That's—I—I saw the—the retired archbishop of North and South America a couple weeks ago, and he was asking me the same question. And I told him, "Sometimes I'm not very religious. But when I'm alone, especially in my bed," I says, "I have no reason to complain about anything. And I thank the Almighty." And [unclear] I have no reason to complain now. I'm very content because I think I did as good as I could.

LEVINE: Okay. I want to thank you, Mr. Kokkins. It's been a wonderful interview. I know—I'd love to interview you more and I'd love to have a section in our Ellis Island library of the work that you've been involved in. It's—it's—it's wonderful. And I thank you so much.

KOKKINS: Well—and I said to my children, "I did all I could." I—I know my children are fairly independent and [unclear]. What else you want in life? And I'm reaching now—a couple of weeks ago when I walk in the morning along the [unclear] there, and I know another old man and we talk. And we became friends. And he knows a few people and I do, casual acquaintances. And there's a fellow who says, "You know who this man is?" Me—introduced me. He says, "Can you guess how old he is?" Well, he looks at me and he says, "I don't know." He says to me, "How old are you?" Well, I said—I wanted to put it in a little more—I said, "A couple months ago"—it was, say, three months ago—"I was exactly 98 years old. But now I am traveling in my 99<sup>th</sup> year." And when I heard myself, that 99, I got scared. I says, "I couldn't believe it." I said, "What am I talking about? Ninety-nine, you know." It's true. I had a sort of a slight shock that I heard the word 99 on myself. I

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couldn't believe it for a moment. But that's how it is. So one of these days it'll be [chuckles] God knows what. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [laughs]

KOKKINS: Maybe there'll be no 99 or no hundred either. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Wow.

KOKKINS: Anyhow, I don't care. Even if I drop dead now, I feel happy.

LEVINE: Okay. I want to close here and thank you so much. This is Janet Levine signing off for the National Park Service.

[END OF INTERVIEW]