

EI-1161

GABRIEL PANAGIOUSOULIS

BIRTH DATE: NOVEMBER 21, 1933

INTERVIEW DATE: APRIL 26, 2000

RUNNING TIME:

INTERVIEWER: GEORGE TSELOS

RECORDING ENGINEER:

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: IRENE MELIDONEAS

REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL

GREECE

CEPHALONIA

APRIL 4, 1951

LIBERTY

TSELOS:

This is George Tselos the archivist at the Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island Immigration Museum. Today is Wednesday April 26, 2000. We're here in the recording studio in the Ellis Island Museum and we're here today for an interview with Mr. Gabriel Panagiousoulis, who was born in Greece and was briefly detained at Ellis Island in the early 1950's and then eventually after being deported returned to the United States years later and has been living here with his family for 30 years now. So we'd like to talk to Mr. Panagiousoulis about his life experiences and with that, um Mr. Panagiousoulis can you please tell me when you were born and where you were born in Greece.

PANAGIOUSOULIS: I was born in the island of Cephalonia, Greece, the western part of Greece in November 21, 1933. And when I reach the age of 16 years old at the village, at the island everybody whos- whos having an idea to come to America to capture the American dream, that was after the Second World War in 1950s, at the beginning of 1950s.

TSELOS: Could you tell us a little about what you remember about life on the island uh that's a fairly large island isn't it?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: It's a large island, it's about 80,000 inhabitants. In the island we have plenty of agricultural forces... because of the war, the food is very limited and the only opportunity was for the new generation to emigrate, I mean for the best- for the better life. So everybody was trying get out of the island, to go anyplace they think was better and one of the places we went to was America. America was the dream, for the older people, for the older families to send somebody- a son in America, so it was a big thing- a big deal to have someone in America because it was a way of security for themselves when they reach the old age. The son from America will help them out. So, and he will have a better future than the ones remaining at the island.

TSELOS: Tell me a little about your family. What did your father do for a living? How many brothers and sisters did you have, that sort of thing.

PANAGIOUSOULIS: My family...I have a father, mother, brother and sister. My father, he used to work in a, before the war, before 1940, he used to work in Albania as an agent for a shipping company. He was an educated person. When he came back to Greece because of the war, he used to work on the community as a secretary. My mother, she was a homemaker, she was actually a seamstress, doing clothes. My brother and sister, they were younger than me, they were going to school, nothing else. The situation when I left my village because we have no income from nothing. The island was uh; the quality of the soil was very poor. We could not survive. Somebody has to go out, so everybody had the decision that for me as first-born child to get a job to go- to look for a better life for myself and for themselves, left behind.

TSELOS: Did the Germans occupy the island during World War II?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Yes. Yes, first there were the Italians. They occupy the island for about, I think about two and a half years

and then they came, the Germans. They threw the Italians out and they killed the other Italians on the island. And they occupy the island until up to 1944-45. And then we have a civil war between left and between right, and right. So its offer a lot for about 10 years of occupation, of five years of foreign occupation and the other years from civil war between Greeks.

TSELOS: Was there any actual fighting between the left and the right on the island?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Uh it was... it was plenty of fighting, but not as, the fighting was between sporadic group of people from left and right and then they would hide in the mountains. And then they come back and kill a couple of them and go back into the mountains, but left and right. So it was something, which went on from day and night for, up to 1949.

TSELOS: This was, this fighting even occurred on the island of Cephalonia?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: On the island there were plenty of, I will tell you, left sympathizers who would hide into the mountains and the government what they did, they took the whole population in certain camps and they closed all the

water fountains from the village and they closed all the houses and they capture the left sympathizers or the left, the guerillas or whatever you can call them. That was at the end of 1949, that's the time I left the island to go to Athens. I stayed one year and then I got a ship to come to America, as a sailor.

TSELOS: Had you had any experience on ships before that, fishing or anything like that?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: No, not at all, not at all. I was too young for that and I was too afraid to go to the sea because of the, so many things happening between, from the occupying forces and after that from the Greeks, the guerillas or the rights and left.

TSELOS: When you got this first job on the ship, did the ship...where did the ship go?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: It goes direct from the island of Crete, Greece to Baltimore, Maryland. A twenty-one day trip; I still remember that.

TSELOS: This was a freighter?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: That was a Liberty.

TSELOS: Oh a Liberty?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: A Liberty. An American made boat, ten thousand tons.

TSELOS: And then after Baltimore... did you get off at Baltimore?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: No, no, no. I stayed on the boat for about 6 months. I went down to South America, Brazil then I went to, back to the United States. Then I went back to France, Belgium and then we took cargo from Belgium to San Pedro, California. Then I decided to jump the ship in Los Angeles, San Pedro.

TSELOS: I see. Can you describe you life in the months after you left the ship?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: (Pause) Ugh. I was... excited to find the American; uh I mean to find the American dream the way they described it in the village, the life in the United States. I stay about twenty days in Los Angeles. I have an uncle there, my mother's brother. He not working, not

doing anything, and I feel kind of solitary, you know... by myself. So I say I'm going to New York to get my, my luck in New York City. So then on April 4, 1951 I came to New York City, which I have some relatives from my father. I went to them, I stayed at their apartment for two to three days then they rent a room for me in a family, an Irish family. And they found a job for me as a dishwasher in a restaurant. I was kind of, uh...slim built person, not, and kind of, my way of thinking was, I can say naïve or innocent and it cost me a lot, to, to...get on the way, on the way of the American life. I have to work ten hours a day, six days a week, one day every Sunday off, I speak no English at all and I have no friends. The older, I mean my uncle, who's an old man who cannot communicate together very well. So I feel like I was, uh...uh...I had something, solitary; you know...I cannot explain myself. It was very hard for me and I stay about six months. Then on November 3, 1951, it was a Saturday, the immigration officers, they got me. You know, they came into the restaurant and asked for my papers, I say I don't have any. So they arrest me, they put me _____, used to be there and at the same night, they transported me to Ellis Island. Now there's one thing, when they arrest me, I don't know what to say so I asked my boss, he was a Greek also, what do I tell them, he says tell them the truth, then I told the officers can I phone my uncle to ask him if he can help me, they say yes, so I call my uncle I say what should I tell to the officers he says "tell the truth and if they are people that can

understand then they, I presume they will arrest you and then I would have to put a bail for you, usually its five hundred dollars and you can go back to the ships or you can go back to Greece.” So when they arrest me, they put me in Ellis Island, in about three to four days there, was a court there and a judge.

TSELOS: That was here at the island, or...

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Here at the island. In the _____, it was only for a couple of hours, that's it. Here at the island. And they ask me one question, when you left Greece your purpose was to stay in the United States or just to go to the ships to work as a sailor, as a professional seamen. And I thought of the advice of my uncle, of the other Greeks here, of my bosses, and I thought about my family in Greece, my father especially. And I tell them yes my purpose was to stay in the United States, and they ask me again “did you like America?” I... for a moment I don't know what to say but after that I say yes, I like it. That was all. And I think because of that they refused bail for me. Because I found out later, the other people that were inside, who have the bail, they get bail they said “no I don't like America, I don't have...my purpose was not to stay in America, I get drunk and lost the ship and want to go back to Greece- to the ship.” So automatically they get bail, five hundred dollars, they give you a few

days free and you can go. But because of that, I think they penalize me. And then I stayed inside from November 3, 1951 up to February 28, 1952, four months. I pass New Years; I passed inside the Christmas and all those holidays. Now the life inside the prison was monotonous, it was...I can say when they dim your freedom you feel oppressed, you feel worthless. And once a month it was... or twice a month, some ships going from here went to Greece. So the officers, they say all Greeks go on line, there is a boat next week for Greece. Usually the lines were big, there was about fifty, sixty or seventy Greeks. So they select ten Greeks. one, two, three, four, five- deportation to Greece. One thing, I have no passport with me, I left it on the boat. That was actually my seamen's book and I have no papers, except an I.D. card, so plenty of shipping company, they were coming inside Ellis Island to pick up crew for their boats. Either the boats were not paying well or either the boats were going to trips that no professional seaman would go. So I begged two of them, or three...two persons, if they can take me with them because I don't have my seamen's book with me they refuse it. Umm...Mr. Williams, that was the guy from my island. He was friend of my father. He owns a boat, he used to own a boat, they called it Enos. And he promised me he would take me out no matter what, he did. He signed the papers and had a deal with the government that he's going to take me out and then I don't have the right to step into the United States, not even one foot outside of the ship for a

year, and then I have to reapply for admission...you know. So actually that thing he did and then I went to the boat, his ship. We sailed from New York to Cuba. And after about three years, not one year, I reapplied for admission in the United States, in 1955. I wanted to changed ships, I was three and a half years in same boat. And a favorable consideration came back, the answer, they give me permit. They called them D-2 in those years, small paper to get out for twenty nine days and to change boat; that happens. And then I changed another boat, I stayed inside the other boat for six years and then I came back in New Orleans. I changed again another boat and then, the boats they used to go between New Orleans and Central America, that was every fifteen days. And then I knew my wife down there, she was a girl and then became my wife and I established my family in Guatemala, Central America. Now that ship owner, who took me out from the Ellis Island, he was still a friend of mine. So he helped me, to immigrate to the United States, if I wanted, in 1970 and I say yes. He helped me with a lawyer, with the papers and we came with my family to live in the United States, 1970 in September...excuse me, September. Since then I've live...I've went back to the restaurants, captured the American dream, we can see.

TSELOS:

So when you were at Ellis Island, when you were detained for those four months...

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Yes...

TSELOS: Was there anything at all to do here? I mean did you have any reading materials or was there any entertainment or anything?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: It was...it was... reading material; we had it only from various religious people. One of the best organizers was the Church of ...Christian Science Church. Mary Baker was the founder. They used to come here every week; they used to give us newspapers. They had some articles in Greek language also. And they...we used to go for some place to pray and they used to bring us books, I mean American, in English language. Other than that there were some denominations, even the Greeks used to come here, they came twice actually. The Greek Church and the Catholics were very great, but the one who helped us a lot in providing reading material, it was the Church they call Christian Science monitor.

TSELOS: That's the Christian scientists, yea.

PANAGIOUSOULIS: From Boston. They bring the Christian Science Monitor, the newspaper. My English was very, very

poor. I could not read...very few things, but there was also some article in Greek language.

TSELOS: Were your relatives able to come out here to visit you?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: In order for the relatives to come here, I have to send them an invitation from...I have to ask the officers, the guard to give an invitation, sign the invitation and mail to my relatives and come here to see me. They came three times. One was Aleede, she baptized me actually by proxy. She came once, she gave me some clothes, you know...she told me, you know, take it easy...bla bla, you know. My uncle came twice, nothing else. But reading material, we don't have anything, except the American magazines. One other thing, we play cards, you know...you know...no money because we don't have any, just...uhh... kill the time. and there were actually, also many Greeks, I remember two persons specifically with the names, left sympathizers. Which they used to indoctrinate people, you know they tell you...bla bla bla bla, you know. And they were also a few more, which I don't know them. I only saw once, some one else, but all of them, they disappeared. They were sent to Poland. They were refusing to go to Greece, because in Greece, if they went they would've been killed, as refugees, political refugees. So they went to Poland, after that it was actually monotonous, quiet, what can

I say. But it was depressing.

TSELOS: Did the Greek Orthodox Church send anyone for Christmas, Orthodox Christmas services?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: They did, they did, they did. They did for Christmas, they did for New Years. They fill up the house. They came, they gave us some traditional Greek candy, they did, they did two, three times. Also they came, the Greek Maritime Commission, its like a consulate office, belongs to...for the seamen. But they were so, I can tell, close-minded, or they were so rightists. They thought because we were in jail, we were criminals. They sometimes refused to speak to us. I remember a name, if I remember well Kanakis, something similar like that. So we have no help from nobody. Because we were in jail, because we were economic refugees, because we want something better, they thought we were something out of this world and actually we were young kids. I was 17 years old, I became 18 on November 21, 1951.

TSELOS: When was the first time that you went back to Greece after your deportation?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: After twenty two years, in 1972. After I came here legally with my wife and my three daughters, then we

went back to Greece all together. After twenty two years, after I left Greece, I found my father dead, he was dead already. My mother, she was still alive, my sister, my brother. A long, long time.

TSELOS: Had you been in touch with them over the years?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Oh yes, after that yes, yes. I used to go to Greece every two years.

TSELOS: But I mean before that, during those twenty two years.

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Oh yes, by writing. Only by correspondence. That's it

TSELOS: And they remained...stayed living in Cephalonia?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: No, now the year 2000; my brother, he educated himself, he became a United Nations diplomat, still works in Rome, for an organization of the United Nations. My sister dies, my mother dies. So actually, this time I have no one in the island. My house, my father's house, its empty. That was the whole thing.

TSELOS: When you lived, when you began living in Guatemala, were there any other Greeks down there?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: In the whole country of Guatemala, there were twelve families, but I lived in the port city of Porto Barrios, Guatemala. Because, there were many ships coming in, and I speak Greek, and I speak the English I speak now, the same way actually and I learned Spanish well. So I became...I worked with the tourists, majority of the time, tourists and seamen. I offer them my services, I went to the places where the tourists wanted to see and I would make an average good living.

TSELOS: So during those years you were not actually on a ship most of the time.

PANAGIOUSOULIS: No, no, eight years I was not on the ship, I was in Guatemala.

TSELOS: As a kind of an interpreter...

PANAGIOUSOULIS: A kind of transporting tourists and seamen to see the tourist things of Guatemala, and the last year before I immigrated to the United States I was working...I left this port and went up to the city of Guatemala, which

has an altitude of 5,000 feet. And I became a manager for a factory and from them my friend called me if I wanted to come to the States, so okay lets start again.(Laughing) And I came legally with my wife and three children in the States. I came here for too many reasons. One of the reasons is to educate my kids, my three daughters, to get educated better or to get ahead in life, better than what they get in Central America and...

TSELOS: We're running to the end of the tape, let's stop. They'll put in a new tape and then we can start up again.

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Okay.

END OF SIDE A: BEGINNING OF SIDE B.

TSELOS: We're picking up the discussion again with Mr. Panagiousoulis at the point where he and his family returned to the United States in 1970. Could you tell us about your return and what you did after your return.

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Okay, yea, of course. At first I came by myself in July

1970 and my family came September 1970. In those two months, July and August, I came as a cook to work at a restaurant, as a Greek specialist cook actually from the boats, which I used to cook. I went to, in Philadelphia, I stay there for one week. It was difficult for me to readjust my life, reading the, especially the dubs of the waitresses, the orders. It was very, very difficult. So I decided, I say I'm going to work in a different environment, different restaurant, so I came to New York and I have a job in a different restaurant, which was a smaller a restaurant and I was verbally communicating with the waitress, which I understand very well. And I stay there.

TSELOS: Was this a Greek Restaurant?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: That is correct. And then my family came on. We were in an apartment in Washington Heights. My wife went to school. She became a beautician. She works in beauty parlor.

TSELOS: Was your wife Greek?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: She's Guatemala, from Guatemala. She's Spanish. and we live there for about ten years, in Washington Heights. I was working in restaurants and I change

sometimes from one restaurant to another because looking for a better pay. Whatever. And then we managed to buy a house, our own house, in Bronx, 1980's; which in still living inside. Then my daughter went to school. They...three of them, they are educated. They work...the three of them for the board of education of New York. The three of them are professors. And I have five grandchildren and I consider myself happy. Why I wanted to emphasize that thing, many people came to this country, in America, to capture the American dream, thinking about how to become rich or how to make more money; I am not one of them. I came here for a better way of life, for freedom of expression and to live. The American way of life... the American dream, not with the make money and save money and tie up your money and become an uncommunicative person. I came here to feel the freedom and the way... to express my self...the way I like it, the way I feel. And I think, at this point, I am a little bit different from the majority of the immigrants who came here to just make money.

TSELOS:

Did you involve yourself (clears throat), after you returned in 1970, in Greek community affairs, either church...

PANAGIOUSOULIS:

Here in the United States?

TSELOS: Right. Either church or civic organization.

PANAGIOUSOULIS: I am involved in those after...before I was involved in the community here as a displayed member of the church, a member of the community. I baptized my children in Greek Orthodox church, and everything...bla bla. After I retired, when I became 62 years of age because before I had no time to do anything, I became too much involved in the Greek literary society. I like to write, I have wrote four books already and one is printed...will be published next month. Its five in Greek language. And involved too much in reading and writing. I love that. I have freedom of myself to concentrate myself to write what I feel, what I think and the way I feel.

TSELOS: Now I know that one of your books is about your own life. What are the other three about?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: One of them, one of the books is about the way, first of all, the title of the book is Fifty Years Back. The way the life used to be in the village fifty years ago, in 1940's. the second book is about, it's called Amateurs at Sea. I write about some of the amateurs I had at sea, as a seaman, as a sailor. The first book is about the quest for a dream, or searching for a dream, it's my story to capture the American dream,

including the Ellis Island...my story in Ellis Island and sufferings and so, so, so. My fourth book they call it The Astronaut of the Tropics and in that fourth I write stories about the way people act and live in Central America from the point of view of a taxi driver.

TSELOS: Oh that's very interesting.

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Yes, its beautiful. And I call the astronaut, was a taxi driver actually.

TSELOS: Did you drive a taxi during those...

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Yes, yes.

TSELOS: Oh I see.

PANAGIOUSOULIS: And in my fifth book, which will be ready in about...perhaps in about the end of May 2000. It's about a collection of stories, one of the stories- I call him Stellios the Greek. His father dies in some place, some country, not the United States, in Central America. He send his soon back in Greece to claim his property and his rights as a Greek. And they...he finds out that in Greece it is not, in today's Greece, it's

not the Greece his father had tell him.

TSELOS: This is a fictional character or a real person?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Well it's actually half and half. He found out that because of religious mothers in Greece, they don't recognize his legality to be the son of his father because he was not married with, according with the Orthodox Greek rights. So complicated that story, and then I have a few more stories about ships, about seaman's life, about Canada, about France, all over the world. Its about a hundred sixty, a hundred seventy, a hundred ninety pages, I believe. All of them are in Greek. I have one in English, we call it The Uprooted, it's a combination every story of the stories, plus the experience in the Ellis Island and the American dream, its translated into English form Greek lady that speaks English, so the sentences sometimes, they look awkward, but you know, it's a Greek way of mine.

TSELOS: Do you find that sometimes people in this country are surprised that a someone with a Greek name and a Greek background speaks Spanish fluently?

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Oh yes, a lot of surprise, yes, yes, yes. Wherever I go. In fact when I came here to get _____

America, down in I think, in downtown Manhattan, I 12 - I forgot the name- Police Plaza, I believe. They ask me to answer the questions in Spanish. They don't believe it perhaps. They don't believe that I came from Guatemala, I don't know why. So they put in Spanish, they guy said in going to ask you in Spanish, I said fine with me, I have no problem with that.

TSELOS: That's interesting. And when you applied to become a citizen they did not hold it against you that you had been deported earlier.

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Not at all, not at all. I had...actually they investigated me in the consulate, but I have the paper from the Department of State that I was pardoned and they give me favor and consideration to my mother. And I have no problems at home. I explain to them, it was nothing. I was a naïve, innocent boy, I just came to work, I don't came to steal, I don't came to do nothing wrong. I came without papers because everybody told me "go capture the American dream, go to America. And you know 16 year old boy what kind of brain do I have? I have no logic, I say "Okay I'm going."

TSELOS: Well this has been very, very interesting and I am hoping that we'll be able to put copies of your books in our library.

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Oh yes, I will send it to you first.

TSELOS: Because your experiences, which you'll go into more detail there, would be a good edition. I'd like to thank you very much for taking the time to come here and to tell your story and to tell us about your experiences here on Ellis Island. So once again, thank you so much and we look forward to having you come back to visit us another time.

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to express my feelings and to make myself understood with my history of Ellis Island.

TSELOS: Well I'm very pleased you got in touch with us to let us know that you were available.

PANAGIOUSOULIS: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

TSELOS: Okay, this is George Tselos concluding this interview with Mr. Gabriel Panagiousoulis on the afternoon of

EI-1161/PANAGIOUSOULIS

Thursday...pardon me, Wednesday April 26, the year
2000 in the Ellis Island Oral History Recording Studio.