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MARY APANOMITH

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Oral Historian's Note: Mrs. Apanomith is the wife of James Apanomith, EI-173. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of the Oral History Project, 2/2/1993.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here with Mary Apanomith, who is the wife of James Apanomith, who we have also interviewed. It's June 17th, 1992, and I'm here in Basking Ridge,

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New Jersey, at the Apanomith's home. Mrs. Apanomith was Mary Ayi . . . How do you pronounce your last name?

APANOMITH: Ayianis. A-Y-I-A-N-I-S.

LEVINE: Okay. And she was, in 1916 she came here at the age of fourteen. Okay. Well, why don't we, I'm very happy to be talking with you now, and I'd like to start by your birth date. Could you tell me your birth date.

APANOMITH: May 27, 1902.

LEVINE: Okay. And where were you born?

APANOMITH: In Volos, Greece.

LEVINE: And did you live in Volos until you left?

APANOMITH: Yes.

LEVINE: And what do you remember about Volos?

APANOMITH: Well, I went to school from seven years old. That's the time they started there. Till five years I finished the grammar school, is that what you call it. Then I went to high school. Before two years we left Greece and we came to America.

LEVINE: Now, who was living in your family when you were in Greece?

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APANOMITH: Just my mother and father.

LEVINE: And you?

APANOMITH: And me and my sister, two of us.

LEVINE: And what was your mother's name?

APANOMITH: Persephone.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

APANOMITH: I don't, Ganotis. G-A-N-O-T-I-S. Ganotis.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And your father's name?

APANOMITH: The father's? Ayianis.

LEVINE: His first name.

APANOMITH: His first, John.

LEVINE: And your sister's name?

APANOMITH: Julia.

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LEVINE: Julia. Okay. So were you the oldest, or were you the youngest?

APANOMITH: My sister was two years older.

LEVINE: Okay. What do you remember? Do you remember the house you lived in?

APANOMITH: Yes.

LEVINE: Could you describe it?

APANOMITH: Two-family house. Two floors, like you say, right? Downstairs dining room, and bathroom's upstairs. And the washing room outside, the laundry room outside the house in the yard. And the water, with the pump, bring the water in the house, you know. I used to do that. I had sore hands from, you know. (she laughs)

LEVINE: And what about your father? What did he do for work?

APANOMITH: My father had a store, like quilts, making suitcases and little trunks for travelling. Not heavy things, you know.

LEVINE: Were they leather, or were they cloth.

APANOMITH: What?

LEVINE: The trunks and the suitcases, were they made out of leather?

APANOMITH: No. Different materials like leather, or something hard, what they use, like pressed paper, you know. But small, just for travelling, not far away, or heavy things to put in, you know, light. And quilts, by hand. And suitcases. My father designing everything. But I had a man from Turkey to do the handiwork and the quilts. They're experienced from there, you see. And my father designed the trunks and the suitcases. And then across the street there was a Jewish family and a Jewish store, in a line, many Jewish people, when I was there. And they're born there, went to school, and they talk Greek and write Greek. So my father knew them from business, you know. And those people, the Jewish people, left for America, and they told my father, they says, "Now, we see the two girls you have." They says, "Why don't you come right back?" To my father, they said, "Why don't you come to America? It's nice. We open a factory in New York." So they were ready to take us in the factory, you see? Smart. So . . .

LEVINE: So did your father want to come to America?

APANOMITH: Oh, yes. He was waiting. He was waiting for the letter. Sure, sure. Still, he had nice business. We were middle-class. Not poor, you know. We all right. We're doing fine there. Very good. But all of a sudden these Jewish people write, you know, "Come, come, come." My father was ready. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Now, do you remember any foods that your mother made, that you particularly remember?

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APANOMITH: Oh, yes. String beans with lamb. Roast leg of lamb with the pasta, or the macaroni, or rice, or something different, you know. Really Greek, a little more spicy they use. But I don't do that now, you know what I mean. It's different now. I turned to American, you know.

LEVINE: Okay. Do you remember anything that you took with you when you came?

APANOMITH: Oh, just the clothes we had, you know, just very nice clothes, all handmade. We had the dressmaker all the time sewing by hand. They never use machines there over the years. Now it's different. All handmade. Beautiful clothes we used to wear. I remember that.

LEVINE: Can you describe some of the clothes that you used to wear there?

APANOMITH: No. We came here very nice with a plaid skirt and solid color top. Just what they're wearing now, the combinations like that. Oh, I had beautiful clothes. And my mother dressed very well. My father, he was, in Romania for quite, I don't know how many years he stayed there in Romania, he left young, like seventeen, you know. Then he came back and he married my mother. He was a very, very nice looking man. Tall, dressed number one.

LEVINE: What kind of, what was he like, as far as his personality?

APANOMITH: Well, dark eyes, and a little darker skin. Not too dark, you know. And

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not too white either. Like my complexion, you would say. Like that. Very wavy hair, tall, very handsome. A very handsome man.

LEVINE: Was he strict with you?

APANOMITH: Well, he was in the Greek way. Of course, we were raised in the Greek way from there. And when we came here, it was the same thing.

LEVINE: How would you say, what is the Greek way? When you say the Greek way, how do you explain that?

APANOMITH: The Greek way you can't talk to the people, you can't talk to the boys when you meet the boys, you know what I mean, or stand outside and talk. No, no. That's too low for us. No. And then what? I met this man. I was about eighteen, twenty when he met me. Then he came home, you know. He saw me. I was working. I forgot to tell you when I came from there. I went to school in America. My sister went to the shop, to the Jewish. They took her. She was older, sixteen, like. And then they put me to school, American school. I was too young, they say, for it. I went to school for two years. I couldn't understand a word of English. Only the arithmetic was the same. I said all right, but I couldn't understand anything. And they put me in the class with the people from Europe, from all over, Italian, Jewish, all nationalities. But the same class like me. Oh, it was so hard. I couldn't understand anything. Sometimes the teacher said to the boy, he was Jewish/Greek. Jewish/Greek. He talked to me Greek. He said, "This, and that means this. Love." The teacher put, "Love." I say, "What is

that?" He says, "Love." Explain to me in Greek. He says, "All right." Now, the next word, nest, I remember. N-E-S-T, that's nest, that's for the birds. I says, "All right." But, at the same time, that boy, he was in the back of me. Once in a while, I had long hair, braids, he used to pull them like a bell, he pulled my hair in the back and I started crying. I said, "Why they do that to me," you know. I wasn't used to that, to pull my hair like that. I didn't like it. The teacher saw him, what he was doing, and I start to cry. He took the boy out of the chair. He had a tie. He hold the tie, tight, to the neck, and he was twisting him around. He was fighting with him. The teacher was fighting. Then I felt bad, too, because, I says, he shouldn't do that, you know? Oh, my God. Then after a while, you know, one year, about a year and a half. Then I says but I don't think I like it there, because I was uncomfortable. And I couldn't learn anything because I wasn't thinking right, because I couldn't understand, I was mixed up. Then my sister and the Jewish man says, "Why don't you go with your sister to night school so the sister can learn something in American, you know?" Then we started going to night school. All right, that was short time. Then was about fifteen, something. Then I went to his factory with my sister to work for them. I was only about fifteen, fifteen, sixteen, a young girl. And I was thin, too. I was only ninety-five, a hundred pounds. If I was in Greece, I would never do that at that age.

LEVINE: What would you have done if you had stayed in Greece?

APANOMITH: Well, I always wanted to be a dressmaker, sewing. Till now, I am. And that was too much for me, working so young, clothes in the factory like

this.

LEVINE: Well, now, when you, did the man, the Jewish man who was in America, did he send money for you and your family to come?

APANOMITH: No. My father had money. We had a house. We had a store, you know. Sold everything, and we came, we had money then.

LEVINE: Your father and mother expected to stay here, or they thought they might go back?

APANOMITH: No. My father wanted to go back. He says, "After five years we were working, make a little money now, and go back." But we never did. After forty years I went to Greece. Once you come here you learn, you make a little money, you don't want to go back. All my relatives over there have nobody here except my girls and family, you know.

LEVINE: Well, what had you heard about America before you came here? Do you remember what you . . .

APANOMITH: America? Well, it was nice. Everybody said it's a different life. You're more free, you know. You do anything you want. The people don't care what you're doing, you know. They don't mind your business and watch you every day, what you're doing, where you're going. You know, like that. This is, it's more easier here. Well, for me is, I find it that way.

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LEVINE: And how about religion? Was religion a strong part of your childhood?

APANOMITH: Oh, yes, yes. My whole family, yes. Till now, every Sunday go to church. Help the church when they need something, sewing, make up things for the priests, for this and that, you know. I do that all the time.

LEVINE: So you had met your husband when you were still in Greece?

APANOMITH: No, in here.

LEVINE: You didn't know him from Greece at all?

APANOMITH: I was going to village for the summer, and I never saw him. I didn't know him, nothing. Only here I met him, then.

LEVINE: So you sold your house. Your mother and father sold your house.

APANOMITH: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And do you remember anything your mother or father took with them, or anything that you brought that you wanted to have?

APANOMITH: No. Just belongings, you know, the clothes and the quilts, or something like that. Blankets, something like that, that my mother had made, things, you know, like that. Not much.

LEVINE: Do you remember your luggage? What you brought?

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APANOMITH: Oh, all together, everything. All, very good clothes, dresses. All sheer wool with all handmade lace and embroidery and everything like that. All handmade shoes we used to wear, everything. All handmade. Nothing sewing quick on the machine, you know. Very little on the machine, but the rest, the dresses all handmade.

LEVINE: And then did you wear that kind of clothes that you wore in Greece when you came?

APANOMITH: When we came here, yes, yes. And little hats from France we used to buy in Greece. Beautiful hats from France. My father was across the street from the Jewish people, and they used to bring hats and trimmings and all that stuff. And my father, every time, came from France, anything you buy. Little handmade crocheted hats, straw hats. Oh, I don't forget. And felt hats. Oh, I was dressing beautiful. And my mother, too. Big hats, costumes. Beautiful, high necklines like that, with lace.

LEVINE: And so when you came then, do you remember leaving the village.

APANOMITH: You mean . . .

LEVINE: Leaving the village to come to the United States?

APANOMITH: Oh, no. I didn't care. Because I was in the city all the time.

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LEVINE: You were in the city.

APANOMITH: Yeah. Only in the summer maybe a month, and go back again. We start school, you know, that's all.

LEVINE: I see. So you left from Pireaus?

APANOMITH: Yes.

LEVINE: What ship? Do you remember the name of the ship that you came on?

APANOMITH: Well, not from Greece. From the Volos we went to Pireaus. I don't remember the names, though. Any boat we can take from there, every day, you know, with travelling. And then from Pireaus we stay at Athens for, I mean, they stayed the boat. We got Italian line from Pireaus, and we came to America. But the same time coming in to Italian boat, when we got to America here, we had the war. 1916, the war. The boat, everything in dark. No smoke on the boat, to see a light. Everything, they closed in. And rough weather. One night the window opened somehow and the water, the wave, came right in. We got all soaked and wet.

LEVINE: Were you in the bottom of the boat? Were you in the hold?

APANOMITH: Well, it's on the top, but not too high top, you see.

LEVINE: Were you in a cabin, or were you in sort of a big dormitory?

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APANOMITH: Yes. One space, another space like that, see.

LEVINE: And what was that like, being in . . .

APANOMITH: Oh, I didn't like that at all. No.

LEVINE: What do you remember about that?

APANOMITH: I don't know. I was so scared, you know, with that water. And then the darkness. It took, I don't know how many, seventeen days, before it come in, because it didn't come straight, you know. They were afraid for the war, and outside, more out, to come in. It took a long time.

LEVINE: You went from, you went to Naples first.

APANOMITH: Naples. And then we stayed in Naples about ten days because somebody on the boat, we came from Greece, had the measles, something. And they find out that we all have to be quarantined in Naples. And we stayed there ten days before we took the boat and came to America.

LEVINE: So you were on the boat in Naples for those ten days?

APANOMITH: No on the boat, outside the city. In the city, big space, like jails, say, like that. Closed in, and give the food and the tables like that. Like army.

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LEVINE: This was the steamship company that did this.

APANOMITH: The Italian line. And then the doctors watching, taking tests every day, see if we're all right, you know. Oh.

LEVINE: How did you feel?

APANOMITH: Terrible. I never liked that. And my mother felt very bad.

LEVINE: Why did she feel so bad?

APANOMITH: Because the woman was different in Volos. Outside the house, walk in and out. And then we went to New York. We lived on Allen Street, Canal Street, Grand Street, by the Jewish section. And all the Jewish families in there. But they were talking Greek, like us. And my mother was closed in in one little apartment like this, one room here, over there. She was very sick. We used to go out to school or working, you know, and my mother stayed there all day long. You see that?

LEVINE: So she was sorry she had moved to the United States.

APANOMITH: Oh, she was crying every day. We went out, and my father out, but she was every day in talking a little bit with the Jewish lady, Greek. But how much can you do but stay in one room. Not used to that.

LEVINE: So it wasn't nearly as nice as it had been.

APANOMITH: No. No, no, no.

LEVINE: Did your mother ever get used to the United States? Did she ever come to like it here or not.

APANOMITH: No. She didn't say anything about to go back or anything like that, no, because then we're always together then, you know. And stay in New York about eight years, then we came to Elizabeth. Of course, then I got engaged and got married about six months altogether, you know. And we got a house in Elizabeth, and we're different. A little bit more better than in New York.

LEVINE: How did your father like coming here? Did your father, was your father happy that he had come to the United States?

APANOMITH: Oh, yeah. He was all right, he didn't complain. My father never complained. He was working hard for the Jewish people again, because they find, the Jewish people find work for him. And then they took my sister in the place, and then I went and slaved.

LEVINE: Did your father work in that factory also?

APANOMITH: No, in trunks, in suitcases, like that. They find something for him, you see? Oh, yeah. They got the jobs ready before we came, sure. (she laughs) And then I went to work. I didn't like it there. They're giving me only three dollars a week. And I was so young girl, you know, thin.

Why is that, three dollars? Then I said to my sister, "I don't want to stay here. I'm going to look for another work." Then I began to read and write, you know, a little bit better. My sister didn't know much. And I was looking in the paper, which one is the better factory, the machine, what to do. I says, "Look, around the corner is another factory there." It's all the, a Jewish section. Then we went, a section making bedspreads with lace curtains, drapes, like that. I says, "All right, we stay here for a while, then we find again something different." (she laughs) I was moving my sister all the time. I was looking to make money, more, more, you know, and different things to do. Then I went to silk underwear, then I went to embroidery work, and then my sister got tired, she stayed in one place, and I was moving around. I went to the furs, making the furs, and minks, coats, for the Greek people, then, all right, that's the only line. And I went there, they put me on the machine. I never went before to doing anything like that, that machine. So they had pieces of fur with the hair, you know, mink. And they say, "Now you hold this, you hold the pieces, and you stitch. Close them together." I said, "Yes." I make one line with it, then I look at my hand, hair. And my nose, hair. It got black from the dye. I got up, and I says, "Goodbye." (she laughs) And that was the end of the furs. Then I went to nine factories before I got married. I look all over New York, then we came here. And then I says, "Well, I don't want to stay there no more." I travelled, I got married, and I went back to work in New York with my sister. I got married, then after a while she got married, and that was the end. Then I had children, after two years marriage. I had a girl, and in another two years another girl. Then, well, I worked then. After that, the girls went to junior high school. I went to work in

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making dresses. Sewing. It was so far from the house on the corner. Take the bus, five minutes, up in the center. I stayed there twenty years, twenty, more than twenty years. And I belonged to the union. You had to do that. All right. I was fine. I liked that. It was close to the house, and the girls in junior high, used to go home three, four o'clock, you know, and I was back about five. I used to cook at night and have the meal ready for the next day, wash at night and have the ready things for the next day. I didn't have an easy life at all.

LEVINE: Do you think, are there certain ways that you kept up, that you, Greek ways? Are there things that you learned in Greece as a girl that you keep up, kept up in your life here?

APANOMITH: In Greece I wasn't doing anything. Even my mother do washing. We had a gypsy people, gypsies over there. And the man and the woman, the man used to help my father deliver the suitcases, this and that, things. And bring the food home, the man. And his wife used to do the washing and cleaning for my mother. And I wasn't used to doing anything like that.

LEVINE: So when your mother came here, then she had to do that herself.

APANOMITH: Yes. See?

LEVINE: Yeah. Is there anything else that you can think of? Maybe something that your mother taught you or your father taught you, advice that they gave you? Do you remember any kind . . .

APANOMITH: My father was a very nice, my mother never touched me, to give me sometimes the hitting. Never. Talking all this nice way. Every Sunday we used to dress up and take us down to the boardwalk, big city, and everything outside. And they have movies outside, we sit down, drink, ice cream, this and that, and watch the movies, or the (Greek), how you call, the poppies? How you call? And that was nice, every Sunday we had to get down to the boardwalk. It's not the wood, it's cement, the whole, the way, the front of the city.

LEVINE: Is there anything else that you would like to say about becoming an American?

APANOMITH: No. I didn't think that, I wasn't old enough to stay there, and I wasn't old enough when we came here, you know what I mean? I was between. I left school there, half, I came here, I start school, I left again. I didn't finish anything. Not the Greek school, complete. I had three more years to go to high school. And then I came here, two years, it was nothing. By the time I learn A-B-C, I went out. See?

LEVINE: What are you proud of? What is it that you're proud of in your life? What makes you feel pride, that you've done?

APANOMITH: Nothing. I don't think, only, the one I miss because I didn't get the education. I wanted to become a nurse, at that school, you know. My father says, "No, you work and we go back to Greece." We never did, and we stayed there. After forty years in America, I went to Greece to

see my sister, she went there.

LEVINE: Would you have liked to have gone back to Greece earlier? Would you like it if you had moved back to Greece after?

APANOMITH: No. I didn't think that at all. After I had my girls I didn't want to go back. I wanted to educate my girls. Because my husband's money wasn't enough to do that, and the way I wanted to be dressed, the way I wanted to dress my children, because I was used to that, you see? And I says, "The girls have got to get an education. Not only high school, it's not enough." I said that.

LEVINE: Okay. Why don't you mention your daughters' names before we close. What are your daughters' names?

APANOMITH: My daughters' names? Persephone and Athena.

LEVINE: And they each have two children?

APANOMITH: Two.

LEVINE: Okay. And do you have great-grandchildren?

APANOMITH: Grandchildren, two and two. (off mike voice: Valerie)

APANOMITH: Oh, Valerie. Two, and two from the other daughter. And now I'm great-grandchildren, I have grand. Now, expecting another one, two. (she

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laughs)

LEVINE: Oh, that's wonderful. Okay. Well, we'll stop here, and I want to thank you very much. It was a very lovely story that you have to tell, and a very beautiful way of telling it.

APANOMITH: Not too much story, because I came with my parents, and I didn't have the life he had, you see? (referring to her husband) I was, with my parents it was different. He was alone, you know.

LEVINE: Well, thank you. This is Janet Levine signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW