

EI-237

DR. BURTON E. KANE

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DENTAL INTERN AT ELLIS, 1945

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, December 3, 1992.

I'm here at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in the recording studio with Dr. Burton Kane, who was a dental intern here at Ellis Island from May to September of 1945. Good afternoon, Dr. Kane.

KANE: Good afternoon.

SIGRIST: Could we start by you giving me your birth date, please, for the record?

KANE: My birth date is 8/26/21.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

KANE: In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

SIGRIST: Not so far away.

KANE: No.

SIGRIST: Let's, since we're basically interested in your adult life and what happened therein, why don't we start by you telling me a little bit about how you became interested in dentistry.

KANE: My father was one of the first plastic surgeons in Philadelphia, and a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. So despite my lousy grades in undergraduate school, I was being pushed into the medical school, and this was in '42 when the United States entered World War Two, and I went up to see the dean, and he says, "Well, young man, are you following in your father's footsteps?" And I said, "No, sir. I'm going across the street to the dental school." And he literally fell off his chair. He said, "Everyone is trying to stay out of the infantry, and you're walking out of here." He says, "That's unbelievable."

SIGRIST: And it, just kind of give me a thumbnail version of dental school and what that experience was like for you.

KANE: During the war, since we were technically army privates, we had a march on Sunday after working in

the clinic five days a week, and we used to drive the sergeants and the lieutenants crazy because we pooped out with our packs in a matter of a half hour. And they said, "Well, get up and march or we'll shoot you." And we said, "That's fine. Go ahead and shoot us." Which they said, "Boy, it's easier to go back to France than to put up with these kids."

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about some of, what did you find hardest when you were in dentistry school? What was the hardest thing for you to grasp onto?

KANE: The time element, because we had no vacations to speak of. There were no more summer vacations, and we were in dental school all day long, and we studied half the night. Then on Saturdays we had to march. So there was very little time, free time. And the whole course of four years, since there were no three-month summer vacations, was condensed into thirty-six, about thirty-nine months to rush us through so we could get shipped overseas.

SIGRIST: And that was the whole intention here to train dentists to function with the military overseas.

KANE: Exactly.

SIGRIST: I see. When you say you had to march, where did you do this? Was there a camp nearby or something, where the school was, or . . .

KANE: We marched on the football grounds, called the Palestra, at the University of Pennsylvania. I believe it was called Palestra, oh, Franklin Field, pardon me. Palestra was the cafeteria where we ate. Franklin Field, which still is being used for football games and sports and track. Is that the correct expression? Track and field.

SIGRIST: Track and field.

KANE: Track and field.

SIGRIST: Well, so how did you end up here at Ellis Island from there? What happened when that was finished?

KANE: When we graduated, the dean presented us with our diplomas and there was a lieutenant standing next to him saying, "Here's your orders, lieutenant." And we looked at him and we said, "Well, we got our diploma, keep your orders. We don't want them." And he looked at it, he says, "We'll see you Monday morning at the hospital in uniform, lieutenant." And, of course,

Monday morning we showed up at Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about that?

KANE: We didn't have much choice. It was that or take a gun and go to France.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you know anything about the operations that were going on at Ellis Island, or was this just sort of out of the blue for you?

KANE: Out of the blue.

SIGRIST: How many were there of you that ended up here?

KANE: Two of my classmates and myself from the dental school, and two or three from the medical school were all stationed here.

SIGRIST: What, under whose auspices were you? Were you Public Health Service?

KANE: The United States Public Health Service.

SIGRIST: I see. And so you would be serving the Coast Guard that was here?

KANE: The Coast Guard, the Merchant Marine, government employees and, more interesting, more interestingly to

you, we have to take care of emergencies for immigrants and prisoners of war. And that, there's a little story that may interest you with the prisoners of war. While on duty one day, a German prisoner of war was brought in with a loose cap on a lower six-year molar. And he took the cap off and handed it to me, and it was a stainless steel, not stainless, it was a steel shell, replacing a missing tooth on a bridge supported by the two neighboring teeth. And I looked at it and I said, "Well, you want the shell re-cemented so the tooth functions?" He said, "Yes, the shell had a capsule of cyanide or something in it which I was supposed to swallow if I was captured. But when I was captured I dumped the cyanide and decided not to swallow it." I thought that would be very interesting. So he wasn't a real good Nazi, or whatever. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, that is an interesting story. Tell me, just explain to me what you had to do here. What were your actual tasks here at Ellis Island.

KANE: My actual task was as a dentist to take care of the above-mentioned persons.

SIGRIST: And you were here as an intern?

KANE: As an intern.

SIGRIST: So who was your superior officer?

KANE: I was a junior dental officer with one stripe, and I had a senior dental officer with two-and-a-half stripes. And then we had various MD's of various ranks in the medical department.

SIGRIST: And where were the dental offices, as such, on the island?

KANE: They were in the three buildings to the left, which I believe was the hospital. As the ferryboat entered, it didn't dock where it did today, it docked straight ahead. There were three ports or inlets with the old small ferryboats.

SIGRIST: And how many dental offices were there?

KANE: There was only one office here with three or four chairs and two dentists.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the inside of that for me?

KANE: I cannot remember, sorry.

SIGRIST: I see. Were there also female dental assistants?

KANE: Sorry, there must have been two or more female dental assistants. One or two assisting, and one recording secretarial, bookwork.

SIGRIST: Now, did you live on the island?

KANE: There were no facilities for us on the island. I rented an apartment at 76th and Amsterdam, and took the subway to the ferry and took the ferry over in the morning and then back in the evening.

SIGRIST: What did the ferry look like?

KANE: I cannot remember that, I'm sorry.

SIGRIST: Okay. Well, tell me a little bit about, for instance, what were your hours here? What time did you have to get to work?

KANE: I believe we took an eight o'clock ferry. And then we left about four and got back to the Manhattan about four thirty or whatever time the ferry docked. We completed our daily tour of duty with the time on the ferry being included in required hours.

SIGRIST: And are we talking five days a week or more?

KANE: Five full days a week.

SIGRIST: Five full days a week. Um, for those of us who are strangers to the dental world and what goes on, can you sort of tell me maybe some more specific cases that you might remember of things that, the actual things that you were doing.

KANE: We did basic dentistry, minor surgery, fillings, cleanings, x-rays and examinations. And, as I mentioned before, the emergencies for the immigrants, the employees and the prisoners of war. For the Coast Guardsman, the Merchant Seamen and the government employees, their dentistry was a little more thorough. I cannot remember how extensive, whether they were entitled to porcelain or baked-on metal jackets, or dentures or partials, but all the basic treatment was included at no charge.

SIGRIST: And the Coast Guard people were living here at that time, yes? Do you remember that?

KANE: The Coast Guard had a facility. I believe it was in the middle, between the hospital and the immigration center.

SIGRIST: But they would come to your office . . .

KANE: That's correct.

SIGRIST: When they needed work done. Can you tell me where you ate lunch on the island?

KANE: We had a cafeteria, but I cannot remember where it was.

SIGRIST: How about any kind of, because you didn't live here this may not be applicable, but any kind of entertainment that was supplied for you, do you remember coming to the island for any specific events?

KANE: No. None of the doctors, to my knowledge, would put in, unless they were on duty after closing, would stay after clinic hours were over, with the exception, of course, of the ones who were on emergency call.

SIGRIST: Would you say that the dental facilities here on the island were state-of-the-art for the time, or were they primitive, or how would you rate them? What struck you when you came as being advanced or not advanced?

KANE: In my recollection they were state-of-the-art. They

were not antiquated. That was, of course, in the days of standup dentistry with a belt-driven drill for making holes in the teeth. There was none of the fancy air turbines, fancy suction, and it was much less comfortable for the patient because of the extremely relatively slow speed of the drill. So the patient's head would vibrate regardless of the degree of pain, and hopefully there was none with the local anesthetic.

SIGRIST: And what did you use for anesthetic at that time?

KANE: We used lidocaine, commonly called Novocaine, with epinephrine, commonly called adrenalin. And that produced good local anesthesia in the region one was operating on.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any other, you spoke of the German gentleman, do you remember any other cases that stick out in your mind, or any, perhaps an emergency that you were called upon to act in?

KANE: No. But I do remember that the merchant seamen, they would bring us a bottle of imported liquor from Europe. Somehow they'd get a dental appointment much sooner than other people.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about . . .

KANE: Or silk stocking from Europe.

SIGRIST: Sure. Of course, at that time those were precious commodities.

KANE: Exactly.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what you were aware of of the other goings-on on the island, or where you were allowed to go and not allowed to go.

KANE: We were permitted to go to any part of the island. I made a couple visits to the immigration center out of curiosity because my parents' heritage.

SIGRIST: And where did your parents come from?

KANE: My parents came from Kiev about 1898, and they were children at that time, so they came with their parents.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the immigration facility while you were here, of those occasional visits? What struck you?

KANE: The vastness of the halls, and the emptiness when

there no human beings in it. It was awesome.

SIGRIST: Were there a lot of people at that time?

KANE: There were not a lot of people at the time because this was during the war, so a lot of the rooms were vacant. My other trips were to assist with, quote, "shock therapy" in the psychiatric wards. Shock is a common term for electroconvulsive therapy, ECT, electroconvulsive therapy. Because there was, there were no tranquilizers at that time. So when these soldiers back, a very frequent treatment to get them out of their shell shock, or whatever you prefer to call it, or depression, was to tie them down, put the electrodes on their heads and give them a very light "electrocution." And it helped quite a bit. To what degree, I cannot tell you. That was a very depressing experience.

SIGRIST: Why would you be called on to assist them?

KANE: If we were not busy and they were shorthanded, they felt we were certainly available, and it was true.

SIGRIST: Was there a nursing staff whose job it was to . . .

KANE: Yes.

SIGRIST: Were they male nurses, female nurses?

KANE: At that time most nurses were female.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the facility where the shock was given?

KANE: Very barren, cold tables with straps.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where on the island that was?

KANE: That was behind the hospital, over toward New Jersey, I believe. Those smaller buildings.

SIGRIST: Was this a fairly recent, common occurrence on the island. Was this going on a lot during the forties?

KANE: After all, the sooner a soldier could be rehabilitated, he could be transferred to active duty or to another appropriate facility. Or, if he couldn't be, then to another hospital for further treatment.

SIGRIST: Had the war ended during your term here?

KANE: Yes. Was it not August 15th?

SIGRIST: I'm not exactly sure. That's why I asked.

KANE: That's your department. (Mr. Sigrist laughs) I believe V-J Day was August 15th or September 15th.

SIGRIST: I just, I don't know offhand.

KANE: It was August 15th. And shortly thereafter I was transferred to the Staten Island Marine Hospital.

SIGRIST: While you were here at Ellis, were you ever sent out to other places other than Ellis to assist in some way.

KANE: No, sir.

SIGRIST: Not to Governor's Island at all?

KANE: Never to Governor's Island.

SIGRIST: Let me also ask you about your wife, because she certainly also has a connection to Ellis Island. Why don't you start by telling me what your wife's name was and her birth date, and then tell us why she ended up in Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Her name was Irene Sabo, S-A-B-O, and that is an abbreviation, I believe, of the Hungarian S-Z-A-B-O. She was inspecting bomber sites for Hoover Vacuum Cleaner Company in North Canton, Ohio prior to going

into nursing.

SIGRIST: What do you mean by bomber sites?

KANE: These were instruments which would help the B-29's and the other planes more accurately locate their sites to be bombed in Europe. And she was in a closed sterile or sterile room for accuracy, and there she would examine them before they would be shipped out to the planes. And the opportunity to get in the United States Government Nurses Cadet Corps came up, and she decided this would be to her liking. The pay was terrific. You got room and board and fifteen dollars a month. And she was enrolled in Massillon State Hospital in Massillon, Ohio.

SIGRIST: Do you know how to spell Massillon?

KANE: M-A-S-S-I-L-L-O-N.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

KANE: Where she spent one year or a year-and-a-half, and then she rotated to various other hospitals so she could experience the different categories of nursing. Her last station, I believe, was Ellis Island, and this is where I met her.

SIGRIST: When did she arrive at Ellis?

KANE: In the spring of '45.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me a little bit about what some of her duties were when she was on the island, specifically?

KANE: No, because I did not, other than to assist with the shock therapy, go back to the nurse's quarters or the hospital.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me how you met her at Ellis Island.

KANE: It was in the cafeteria.

SIGRIST: And did she stay here as long as you stayed here, or did you leave first?

KANE: I believe I left first because the dental department was closed up very soon after V-J Day.

SIGRIST: Do you remember her ever speaking of any things that stuck out in her mind, maybe specific cases that had really made an impression with her, or maybe talking about what it was like living on the island? Any kind of information that you might remember that she might

have said.

KANE: Sorry, I can't remember a thing about that.

SIGRIST: Okay. Do you remember, did you ever get in trouble while you were here? Did you ever, or do you remember somebody who was punished for some reason, and how did they do that?

KANE: Not at all. My dental C.O. was very cooperative. He was not a, quote, "regular."

SIGRIST: Do you remember his name?

KANE: I did until a couple of years ago.

SIGRIST: I see.

KANE: And he practiced in one of the Orange, quote, "communities" here in New Jersey, and the name is gone. I should have written it down.

SIGRIST: Was the dental staff all fairly young?

KANE: You mean as far as the doctors in the dental staff, or just the two of us?

SIGRIST: Yes, the doctors. I guess what I'm, my question is, the staff in general, was it young here, the medical

staff? The doctors, the interns . . .

KANE: Obviously the interns were young, yes. And most of the doctors were middle-aged.

SIGRIST: I was just wondering if Ellis Island was always just kind of a passing point for people, that no one really stayed here any great length of time.

KANE: I don't know.

SIGRIST: Did you like working at Ellis Island?

KANE: It was my first experience out of dental school, so I have nothing to compare it with.

SIGRIST: What about living on Amsterdam Avenue and having to come all the way out here?

KANE: In the summer with the uniforms it was quite uncomfortable in the subway.

SIGRIST: Can you describe your uniform for me?

KANE: It was the khaki officer's uniform with the black epaulets and the cap, and of course a khaki shirt and black tie.

SIGRIST: And you would put that on before you left to come to

work.

KANE: Correct.

SIGRIST: Did anything ever happen in the subway because you were in uniform? Of course, I suppose in the war years that wasn't such an unusual sight.

KANE: Not a thing, no.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little bit, then, about how you got off of Ellis Island. You said that everything sort of shut down after the war was over.

KANE: I was transferred to the United States Marine Hospital in Stapleton, Staten Island where there were interns quarters, so there was no more per diem, so to speak. And I had to live, being single, in the intern's quarters, which was quite a change from the freedom of living in Manhattan. And there we had a large clinic. There were six or seven interns. And we all had chairs in a row, and there were three doctors in the dental clinic other than the interns. One's name was Singleton. He had two stripes, which made him a lieutenant senior grade in Coast Guard terms. Then there was Dr. Morse. Singleton must have been in his

late twenties, Morse must have been in his late forties. He had three stripes, which made him a commander. He was second-in-charge. And the chief was Dr. Jackson, Jackson, pardon me, with four stripes. He was the dental chief. And, of course, most of the time he did the book work and kept track of everything. We had one full-time hygienist, and there were six or seven dental assistants. And we kept regular hours, from eight to four-thirty, with time off for lunch.

SIGRIST: So this obviously was a much larger operation than Ellis Island.

KANE: Much larger.

SIGRIST: How long were you at Stapleton?

KANE: From whenever I was transferred there, September 15th, '45, until I finished my internship in July '46 and became a Lieutenant JG and stayed there about another month until I was transferred to the Coast Guard.

SIGRIST: I see. While you were at Staten Island, did you ever have reason to come to Ellis Island for any . . .

KANE: Not again.

SIGRIST: Not again. What about the Statue of Liberty? When you were working at Ellis Island, or even when you were working in Staten Island, did you ever go to the Statue of Liberty for any reason?

KANE: I did not, because in 1938 or '39 I came to the Statue of Liberty and at that time it was open all the way up to the top. So, as a child, I just ran all the way up into the torch and wandered around. That, as you remember, was closed. Then it was closed further down.

SIGRIST: Right. Well, before we leave Ellis Island let me just, is there anything else that you can remember that you'd want to tell us about the experience, being here, or just sort of a general summing up of your experience here? Did you learn a lot when you were here? It was sort of your first time of putting everything into practice, yes?

KANE: Not to my knowledge or remembrance did I learn a lot of dentistry here. It was mostly how, as I was told many times, "You're an officer first and a doctor second," which was certainly a shock after putting in eight years of school to prepare for this. Of course,

that was not enforced in the medical corps as it was in the infantry.

SIGRIST: Would you say that the atmosphere was lax here?

KANE: Definitely lax compared to the infantry. More like "M.A.S.H."

SIGRIST: You know, did it have that kind of frivolous atmosphere, too?

KANE: Not to that extent, because we weren't under the severe pressure, but we certainly didn't have the restrictions that the infantry did.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, we have three minutes left, if you can just kind of get me through the rest of your life up to now in three minutes, maybe the rest of your dental career.

KANE: In the Coast Guard I was assigned to a mobile dental unit which covered the Mississippi, the Great Lake and the tributaries of the Mississippi, Ohio, Tennessee, the others. The mobile dental unit was an army 6 X 6 trucks, 6 X 6 truck with fifteen gears, and the back of it was converted to a dental operatory. And we had a chair and a unit, a x-ray and a light and cabinets.

And I was assigned what was called then a pharmacist mate. Today they're called hospital corpsmen. And we would cover the buoy tender stations. Buoys are the lighted cylinders in the water in various colors that warned boats to stay away from those areas and helped guide them to port. My pharmacist mate and I went from buoy tender station, which was obviously a Coast Guard station, up and down the lakes and the Mississippi, servicing the personnel there. Again, doing basic dentistry as much as we could in a unit like that. And that was an interesting experience because we put so many miles a month traveling. In the winter, of course, we were south along the Mississippi. In the summertime we covered the Great Lakes, and saw a lot of the country that way. But after a year I got tired of the traveling. It was too much living out of a suitcase and bunking wherever you could.

SIGRIST: Well, it's, you've certainly done some very interesting things. That especially, actually. Really sort of having to learn, fly by the seat of your pants, you know, in a situation like that. Well, Dr. Kane, I want to thank you for taking some time out

to come out during your, because I know you're here in town for the convention, but telling us about Ellis Island. We've never interviewed a dentist at Ellis Island before, so certainly some very interesting information. I want to thank you.

KANE: My pleasure.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service with Dr. Burton Kane, and today is December 3, 1992.