

**EI – 582 / JOHN**

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**JAMES JOHN**

**BIRTH DATE: JUNE 17, 1928**

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**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PhD**

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**GREECE, 1933**

**AGE 5**

**PASSAGE ON: NOT MENTIONED**

**PORT: NOT MENTIONED**

**RESIDENCES: GREECE, TELIHATI {ph} ALBANIAN TOWN  
USA, WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS**

LEVINE: This is December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1994. I'm here in Worcester, Massachusetts with James John, who came from what was technically an Albanian town, although it was Greek.

JOHN: Greek, right.

LEVINE: Right over the border. He came here in 1933 when he was five years old. Well, lets start at the beginning by you saying your birth date.

JOHN: June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1928.

LEVINE: And you were born in what town?

JOHN: Telihati, that's what they told me. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: Ok, can you spell that?

JOHN: I really can't, it's.....we'll get it later.

LEVINE: Ok, and say it again, Telihati?

JOHN: Telihati.

LEVINE: Telihati. And you were there the whole five years before you left?

JOHN: Right.

LEVINE: When you think back to Telihati, what is it that you remember about it?

JOHN: Most, well maybe I was about four years, there is several things. Getting a ride on a donkey, by my grandfather which I remember very well because my father was not there. Going to the mill, where the ox goes around with the stones, and crushing the corn to make cornmeal. I was looking forward to the ride to go down the hill. We were on a hill, I remember that well because when it rained, we used to look out in the waters rushing down by the house that we lived in. And that's why I know it was on a hill, and very rocky. And the other thing was we had a beautiful fig tree and I was always on a tree, and I was always getting heck, "come on down, get out of the tree" you know to pick, well I guess I never fell off it, maybe I did. I can't remember. Another thing I was told that, I don't remember doing this, a little bit, I think I do. But I almost set the house on fire, lighting a little fire in the back underneath the steps to go into the house. I was underneath there doing things. But one of the greatest things I remember, I'll never forget, my grandfather had a shepherd that used to go out with the sheep in the hills and then come back maybe weeks, months, I have no idea. But, I liked him an awful lot but my mother used to bring us food and put in on the table under the grapevine, cause she would not let him in the house. Because he lived with the sheep and he had fleas I guess. But I

would grab my dish and run and sit down and eat with him. My mother would holler to, she wouldn't come after me, she wouldn't go near him. But after it was all over, I remember being on her lap and she's picking fleas out of my hair. ( he laughs ) Those things you know, I can remember well over there. But that's about it, you know, some of the things I remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember any experiences with your grandfather?

JOHN: Most of the things I did was with my grandfather.

LEVINE: What kind of a person was he?

JOHN: Oh he, he was a big fellow too. He was a six-footer. Oh very religious. Even in church he was, I don't know what you would call it. A deacon like. So he was well known. And I remember he used to sew leather and make slippers and shoes for us to wear. And, that's about it that I can remember there to be honest with you.

LEVINE: How about your grandmother? Do you remember her?

JOHN: No, I do not remember my grandmother. No it's amazing. I just cannot picture her. I know my mother was there, yes. I know my grandfather was like my father lets say because he was not there. Oh and the one thing when my father did come, I'll never forget it. They were telling me that's your father, and they were in a big room.

LEVINE: And where was this?

JOHN: In Greece. When he came to pick us all up to come to the United States. And not knowing my father, you know, they're telling me that's your

father go over there and they almost had to force me. I was a little afraid; I had never seen him before. But finally I did, and the way he would. I remember this the first time I had ever heard a wristwatch. He would say well come here, you want to hear something? I'd put it to my ear, then I got to like him naturally and I sat with him. That was the first time that I saw my father. And it's the wristwatch, I remember. I'd never heard a watch tick. Evidently we didn't have one up there. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: How about your mother? What do you remember about her in the Old Country?

JOHN: No, just as a mother. You know feeding me and things like that. But, I'll be honest with you it was my grandfather that I can remember more because he would take me out. In other words to do the things that I would like to do. Because women I believe, which my mother told me, they had to go out into the fields and work out in the corn and what not. They had to work, so. And so did my father. But my grandfather I guess used to take me along with him to do this and that.

LEVINE: Do you remember any food that you particularly liked?

JOHN: Yeah, what to do call it? Stali. Well it's mostly cornmeal. Of course you would butcher a lamb. He had a lot of lamb there, there was a shepherd he had out there. But it was mostly mush of some kind that we ate. And vegetables during the summer, and everything else.

LEVINE: How about the house? What do you remember about the house where you lived?

JOHN: Stone, brick, cement. I believe. Square windows, something about because I used to look out the window. But as far as rooms and everything, no I can't remember.

LEVINE: How about cooking, or water?

JOHN: Water? Well, I know that. I know we had an outhouse, I guess everybody had, it wasn't just us. That's about it really,

LEVINE: Did you play with other children? Do you remember?

JOHN: You know, I can't remember that too much. And if I did, that person probably never came here and said gee I played with you, you know what I mean. So I can't remember other children, no I really can't.

LEVINE: Being a twin, was there anything particular to that that you recall?

JOHN: No, no. And actually I can't even remember my older brother, in the way of playing or whatever. Or even my sister. I really can't, I wish I could.

LEVINE: Do you remember coming to this country at all?

JOHN: Yes. Very well. I remember the boat. Cause I used to hang on the railing to look at the ocean. And they were always afraid. My mother was always there or father to hold on to me, because I don't know what kind of boat we came on to, but it could have been a banana boat lets say they say they used to call them.

LEVINE: You don't remember that name of it?

JOHN: Oh god no, no name.

LEVINE: So was it usual you think for the father to come back, and come back over here with the family?

JOHN: At that time I didn't know, but what I heard is a lot of times, maybe at that time a lot of the fathers came, if they had enough money to spend to go and then come back. But I know of an awful lot of people, Greek people especially, the father did stay here and then send for them.

LEVINE: That's mostly what I've heard.

JOHN: You know I'm guessing at that. I really never asked whether my father came, and came back with us on the boat. I can't remember that. Unless he came just came for a visit, and I just met him and then. I'm gonna have to ask myself. It's amazing I never asked that question, whether we all came together. But I just remember my father, when I was four at that time, about to be five I guess that I remember him for the first time. That was it.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else about the voyage?

JOHN: No. Only at the end, which really stands out in my mind. My sister and I were in a room, my parents left and we had to stay there. And they wouldn't let us out of the room.

LEVINE: This is at Ellis Island?

JOHN: Ellis Island. I believe it was. I didn't really know if it was on board ship or not. All I know is they left us, you have to stay, we'll be back, this and that. And the only way to stop us from crying, I guess we kept crying for the fellow to come again and do it. He used to whistle and the light would

go on. And it was amazing to see a light go on. He'd whistle again, and the light would go out. And I remember we could walk around, but I think they had a half a door or something, we just couldn't get out. I don't even know if there was a window for me to look out, if it was Ellis Island to see something else. I can't remember seeing anything but being in that room.

LEVINE: Do you remember how long you were there?

JOHN: No, I really don't know. I was told I got the measles.

LEVINE: Oh you had the measles.

JOHN: That's what they told me. As I grew up and I was saying, why you know, something I guess it was the measles. I don't know if it was something else. But we did stay there.

LEVINE: So you were there for a while?

JOHN: Yeah. Could have been a week. Could have been four, five days. But it was the first time that we were left alone as children, just two children. Not knowing the language.

LEVINE: Do you remember how you were treated?

JOHN: Oh, well we weren't, you know I can't even remember a doctor looking at us, things like that. It was just like here we are in this room. That was it, and we just don't forget that. It's the first, that experience, the separation that I ever had.

LEVINE: Then do you remember when you got let out and you met back up?

JOHN: No, you know it's funny I can't remember that. Only where we went to live, because there was a river in the back of this house. And I've seen it many times as I got older, looking my god did we live there? And there was a big brass mill there. Now I guess it's gone now too, but way back, this is in Taunton, Mass. And I remember I caught a lot of heck because I didn't want to wear shoes. And every time my father bought them I'd throw them away in the river. Finally I learned not to throw my shoes away. And school, I don't remember too much in the first grade. Mostly in the second. The reason why I remember is they kept us back in the second. The teacher liked us so much, you know two kids from Europe come, and we didn't understand the language completely to catch it right away. They threw us right into the first grade you know. And the reason why they kept us back is we didn't know how to read yet enough and everything. But as far as arithmetic I remember I used to go up on the chalkboard and add things together. Because that's universal you can add or do arithmetic. So, but as far as reading and writing very well we couldn't so we were kept back one year.

LEVINE: You remember your teacher?

JOHN: No.

LEVINE: You remember anything about learning the language that sticks out in your mind?

JOHN: They used to pick on us a lot. I guess, not pick on us to give us heck, but for us to get up and try to read, come up in front of the class and speak more. So I remember that they worked very hard in the second grade to make us do that. I guess the first grade we got away with a lot. Ok you don't understand, you know we'll promote you to the second grade. That stands out in my mind. And being in that school, I remember Landon was

running for President, forgot what year, but I must have been seven or eight years old.

LEVINE: 1934.

JOHN: Was it?

LEVINE: That's what your ?????

JOHN: See I can remember. Landon and people with signs, and what not, I remember that. And then I just grew up normally after getting along in school and everything else.

LEVINE: Was it a comfort having a sister right along with you through all this?

JOHN: Yeah, I mean we never had any trouble, we never argued. Kids probably do who knows, they still do today brother and sister but we get along very well.

LEVINE: And how did your mother like being here?

JOHN: She didn't mind, we did have relatives so they kept her happy lets say. We would come to Worcester to visit, and other towns and they would come visit us and this and that. But my mother, being an old European Greek woman let's say really stayed in the house because she had another child and another child. There ended up being six of us in the family and she was really a housewife in the house. She never went out to work. And that's why she never really learned how to speak English. And that's how we kept on speaking Greek because we had to talk Greek to her at home. But she does understand now, and speak. But as far as reading, my mother does not.

LEVINE: Did your father become a citizen?

JOHN: He was a citizen before he brought us to the United States. He became a citizen here. And, cause I was told this in school after, that at that year was probably one of the the last years where, because my father was a citizen we automatically became one. I didn't realize that until after I went to get my passport. And I never had a citizenship paper. Gee you were born overseas and you don't have citizenship papers? I said no, I went through school you know I'm with the school. Then it was the fellow from Boston from immigration something says well in case you didn't know it, he says you were automatically a citizen as soon as you stepped foot in this country. And that was in 1933 and I think they ended it in '34 or '35. Because there's a law after said that you had to live with your father which was a citizen for seven years, then you automatically became a citizen. So I really didn't realize I was a citizen right away. I was told just told that by the immigration after. So I got a passport and now I can go overseas. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: Now how about your mother. Did she keep up any customs that.....

JOHN: All of them, not some of them. All of them, and we keep them up too.

LEVINE: Like what things do you do that?

JOHN: Well our holidays are very important. Well we have an Easter, Christmas like everybody else. We're Greek Orthodox, it's very close to Catholic, there's just a difference between the Pope, and a few other things and dates sometimes are different. A name day is very important to us; we don't celebrate our birthday.

LEVINE: What is yours?

JOHN: June 17<sup>th</sup>. My name day is in, I believe in September. I forget the date, forget the date. St. James! So, and I was told that the custom is that's my day. That's my big day. And you are king of your household at that time. They prepare a big meal, and you invite people to come over to join you. Happy name day they tell you, you know what I mean. It's just a big day, a name day. It may sound foolish to some people, but it's more important than our regular birthday.

LEVINE: Uh huh. Is there something about the particular saint that if you're named after that saint...

JOHN: That's it. That saint, say when my name day comes up, is the saint's birthday.

LEVINE: Oh it's the saint's birthday I see.

JOHN: That's when he became a saint. Don't quote me, that it is his birthday, but I believe that's how we celebrate saints. Greek Orthodox really believe in their saints, and celebrate that day. So there's St. Nicholas, there's St. Christopher. All were named after saints. Even women.

LEVINE: Are named after....male saints?

JOHN: No, female. There is.....

LEVINE: Either way?

JOHN: Oh. Or close, sometimes you know they have the name if it's, it's hard to explain. Maybe I'll hope I find out someday. I got to ask Father about

that. But not all the women. But there is some oh yea. We have St. Irene, my wife's name is Irene. And there is a St. Irene. So way back then even women were made saints I guess.

LEVINE: Let's see, what else. Do you think the fact that you came here from Europe as a little boy, do you think that made a difference in your life? Or the way you are?

JOHN: No. I have to give that credit to....You know I can remember the small things like I told you about Greece. But once I was here, you know I'm an American. I went through school, played with all types of children. And all my friends are all types. But what we kept very sacred is our religion, and our customs, and what we liked to eat. It just stayed, because like I said, especially because of my mother. My father had to work everyday, not that my father observed every....we observed them very seriously, yes.

LEVINE: What did your father do once he came here?

JOHN: He is the restaurant business, he worked in a restaurant. That I can remember. What restaurant? A1 Restaurant in Taunton. I remember he was in partners I believe with someone at the time.

LEVINE: So you stayed in Taunton for how long before you came to Worcester?

JOHN: Let me see, I think '54 I came to Worcester. Around that year, '54.

LEVINE: Oh so you were already a man.

JOHN: Oh yes, yes, yes. I was married. I'd be twenty three, twenty four years old something like that when I came to Worcester. And I've been here since.

LEVINE: You were always within a Greek community when you were in this country?

JOHN: No, Taunton was not a big Greek community. But because of church we had to go to Fall River. And what few families we had, we were close with all the families, we all knew each other because we observed the holidays and so. And Worcester there's a big Greek community. And I had relatives here. And it's even bigger here because there is more Greek. It's not that I am that religious but I've been on the board here, the church, for so many years. I've got one more year and I'm retiring. So, my brother and my sister know a great deal of people of Greek descent. We know them personally because we see them all the time. And we do have dances and what not that we get together, so we do keep it up.

LEVINE: How did you meet your wife?

JOHN: Well, first she lived near me, near us. Oh I went to school specially with her brothers.

LEVINE: In Taunton?

JOHN: In Taunton. And I knew her, and I figured she was too young. You know at that age you can be two years older or three and you don't know. I went into the service, and when I got out of the service I went to visit her brother. And she was there, and she remembered me. I was like older. And that was it at that time. And then I met her down at the city one time, at the bus terminal to go home and we talked. So I went to get a date, and that was it. We went to the movies, and that's how it began.

LEVINE: Now was she also a Greek?

JOHN: No she was not. No, I married a non-Greek. That's what it is mostly today. We have more mixed marriages than we have....but it works out fine. We have no problem.

LEVINE: And then how about you? You finished school and then you went in the service?

JOHN: Yup, I did not go to college. It was war years at that time. The war was just over and I decided to go into the service just because of, to get the G.I. Bill of Rights when it gave us so much time in 1946. The last month was October I could remember that well. And that was one of the biggest volunteered armies they had because all the young fellows wanted to go into the service, to get the G.I. Bill of Rights to get job training after, or the government would help you. But my job training was I went right into the restaurant my father had, and I'm still in that business. I don't mind it, it's been very successful for me so. Turned out alright, everything turned out great.

LEVINE: Good. Well lets see, what would you say you are most proud of that you've done in your life?

JOHN: Well..... ( he laughs )

LEVINE: Big question.

JOHN: It is. To be honest with you, one of the first times I went in business was with my older brother Chris, and we had the best time. Going into business saying, gee that was quite a thing, you know. Why work for somebody all your life. We worked hard at it. We had to leave that business because they tore down the building, redevelopment so, I went to

work for someone else. But being in business, I missed it and I ended up buying one here in Worcester. Again, and it was a bar, and I rented next door. Then I bought a building next door, made it into a restaurant and right now it's a restaurant, a bar, a pizza house and a package store all in one. Because I bought it off the fellow who owned the package store. He just came up to me and said you're going to buy me out. Just like that, he says we'll take care of it and he did. It was very good and that's why I'm working seven days a week. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: Well it's a real accomplishment. How about any heroes? Have you ever had any lifetime heroes, either people you knew or people that you looked up to that were like public figures or anything like that?

JOHN: Well not one on particular, but there's, by meeting them here in this community, Greeks, lets say and everything. I'd admire even the lawyer who gave me a lot of good advice. Free advice which was great, Peter Bell. I can remember even the owners of these table top pies here, very big. You need to know them. And because of the nice things that he did and the donations, and that he did for the church here and the money. Everybody really loves that man. And he is a man that he will give and not saying like he wants anything in return.

LEVINE: This is Mr. Cotsidas?

JOHN: Cotsidas yes. And Mr. Tonawitz's had passed away. They were two great men said the lawyer. And then even other friends that I met through the Happer, a club that we have. The American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association. We give out scholarships and what not, we do. It's a non-profit organization. There were a lot of great, great people, all over the country because we have a national convention. So, I've been lucky. I've been, I know people in almost every state by going to the

convention. I've been going for over twenty years to the conventions. I enjoy them very much. So does my brother, we go together. My wife comes quite a few times. Sometimes she can't. So a lot of nice things happen. And I know a lot of good people that stick to my mind. You know it isn't just like one individual or two. Tony Cotsidas and Mr. Bell I'll always remember them because they've helped me with advice I mean, and the nice things they did. And then I try do some nice things as much as I can because of those two, three people.

LEVINE: Well it sounds like you really feel very much a part of Greek American.....

JOHN: Oh yes, yes. But I'm also involved in other American activities, belonging to other clubs. Don't get me wrong I help in political things sometimes. I mean it's not all Greek that I do don't get me wrong. I guess we're talking about where I was born and my Greek heritage but I'm more American than anything else.

LEVINE: I was just going to ask you that question. If you could divide yourself up between Greek and American.

JOHN: Oh I'm an American all the way. I mean I work towards that even, government, city, I'll help you know what I'm trying to say. This is it, this is where everything happened for me.

LEVINE: What do you think the importance to you is of having a Greek heritage?

JOHN: Didn't do me any harm, in my religion, in my children, in my grandchildren. I mean it's just been fine. Our heritage that we are, just like any others too, not just the Greeks, we really are a family and we will help one another out. If someone gets in a problem one of us was always

there to help in any way we could. If it had to do with a little money, yes. I'm not using the word money I mean but, family. Very close family. That was very important for me. That came to me by being Greek.

LEVINE: Ok, well is there anything else you can think of that has to do with coming to this country.

JOHN: No I would only be lying or trying to make up something else I'll be perfectly honest with you. Only those few things that I can remember well and that's about it.

LEVINE: Well that's great. Well thank you very much.

JOHN: You're welcome. And I enjoyed this very much. First time I really started from as young as I was and you're asking all these questions. It was very, very good. You know it comes back to me now all these things.

LEVINE: Oh good. Now you can remember all kinds of things even when you leave.

JOHN: Even more. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: Ok I'm talking with James John and it's December 7<sup>th</sup> 1994. And Mr. John came from Albania as a Greek person when he was five years old in 1933.

JOHN: Right.

LEVINE: Signing off.