

EI-584
PERICLES LABOVITES
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ALBANIA, 1920
AGE 5

SHIP: "THE PANNONIA"
PORT: PATRA
RESIDENCES:
 ALBANIA: THOUVIANI, EPIRUS
 US: WORCESTER, MA; JAMESTOWN, NY

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. It's December 8, 1994. I'm here with Pericles Labovites who came from Greece in 1920 when he was five years old. Well, I'm very happy to be here, and after we talk about your life and coming to this country, then we can talk about the book you're working on about the Greeks coming to Worcester.

LABOVITES: Right.

LEVINE: Well, I'm very happy to have a chance to talk to you.

LABOVITES: Thank you for inviting me.

LEVINE: Oh. A pleasure. Okay. Let's start at the beginning. If you could tell me your birth date.

LABOVITES: My birthday, I was born in March 28, 1920, in, uh . . .

LEVINE: Not, wait, 19 . . .

LABOVITES: I'm sorry, 1915.

LEVINE: Okay. Yeah? And where were you born?

LABOVITES: I was born in, at the present time it's in Albania, even at that time it was Albania, but that -- political frictions there, in the northern part of Greece, in a town called Thouviani, which is in Epirus, in the state of Epirus, E-P-I-R-U-S.

LEVINE: Could you spell the town, the name of the town?

LABOVITES: Yes. T-H-O-U-V-I-A-N-I, Thouviani.

LEVINE: Thouviani.

LABOVITES: Right.

LEVINE: Okay. Thouviani. Did you, and you were in Thouviani up until the time you left?

LABOVITES: That's right.

LEVINE: Okay. What do you, do you remember anything, I know you were very young, but do you remember anything about the village? It was a village.

LABOVITES: Yes, I remember. Because I was there last 1938, just before the war started. '39 the war started in Europe. I was there for about four months there, visiting.

LEVINE: I see. Well, did you remember things from when you were a little boy?

?????

LEVINE: What was it?

LABOVITES: Well, the towns, the, uh, at that . . .

LEVINE: You can describe it a little bit.

LABOVITES:: A town was a, this town was about a hundred, oh, I'd say about, close to about eighty-nine to ninety families in the town, mostly farmers. The town was situated between two mountains, squeezed in between two mountains, and that was the reason why it was called Thouviani, from Thou, duo, and ?????, which means mountain. It was, and that's the reason it got its name Thouviani. Uh, I remember it, uh, pleasant memories, of course. But, of course, I was very young.

LEVINE: Did you have grandparents that were living there when you were . . .

LABOVITES: Yes, oh, yes. They were there up until they died. I came here, my - my - my aunt adopted me. I left all my folks there, my brothers there, my father, mother.

LEVINE: Wow. Do you remember your grandparents from where you were a little boy?

LABOVITES: I certainly do.

LEVINE: What do you remember, when you think about them?

LABOVITES: Well, of course, at that age, all pleasant memories. Uh, my father was a doctor. My brothers were doctors. I was more, well, right

at the present, the black sheep of the family, so-called. (he laughs)
I do remember them.

LEVINE: Do you remember doing anything? Do you remember them telling
you stories? Do you remember any activities that . . .

LABOVITES: No, well, we didn't, at that time there were not many
activities for the youth there at that time. I do remember patients
coming to my house - to my pa--. I do remember that, faintly, very
faintly.

LEVINE: Well, you must have been a well-to-do. I mean, you must have
been comfortable.

LABOVITES: Fairly.

LEVINE: Fairly.

LABOVITES: Fairly.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember the house you lived in?

LABOVITES: Yes, I certainly do. Oh, that I do remember.

LEVINE: Could you describe it?

LABOVITES: It was a two, two tenement house. White, of course, those
old houses, they were white, and, uh . . .

LEVINE: And what was it made out of?

LABOVITES: It was made out of white, usually white bricks, most of the
houses there. In fact, all the houses were white. And, uh, it was very
-- well, uh, especially in the summer when the sun shone there, you know,
bright. That I do remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember, like, the village, what it looked like if
you went . . .

LABOVITES: Yes. I think I would, well, I did see it last time, in 1938.
But even then when I went then I still recognized it a little.

LEVINE: And what was your mother's name?

LABOVITES: My mother's name was Harriet, in English. In Greek, Arati
[ph]. That I do remember.

LEVINE: And do you remember her maiden name?

LABOVITES: Yes. Her maiden name was Hetos, H-E-T-O-S.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

LABOVITES: My father's name is an old ancient Greek name, Telemachus [. He was the son of Odysseus you know, in the Odyssey. That - that I do remember.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So did you, uh, were you ever told any family stories?

LABOVITES: Uh, yes. Um, my grandfather used to tell me about his, my great-grandfather and so forth, great-grandmother, which is very interesting.

LEVINE: So, did you, what kind of a sense did you have of your family when you were a little boy? I mean, was there anything about it that . . .

LABOVITES: They were pretty well-to-do. They were pretty well-to-do as usually most of the doctors there at that time. I don't know about now, but at that time, at that time the doctors were well-known, were well-to-do people.

LEVINE: Do you remember any foods, any dishes that your mother or grandmother made that you liked when you were a little boy?

LABOVITES: I'll be very frank with you. I don't remember that.

LEVINE: You probably didn't go to school either, did you, before you came?

LABOVITES: No. No. I -- the first school I went was over here when I came here, to Worcester.

LEVINE: So you say you came, you came, who did you come here with?

LABOVITES: My aunt. She adopted me. She couldn't have children, so she adopted me and I came here with my uncle.

LEVINE: Wow. Now, this is your mother's sister, or your father's sister.

LABOVITES: No. Her husband was an uncle of mine, the brother of my father.

LEVINE: I see. So was that unusual?

LABOVITES: That was unusual. No, to my family it was, my older brother went to Germany to study medicine. My younger brother went to Italy. Uh, my other sister went to Greece from Albania and, uh, usually in, I happened to come here in the United States.

LEVINE: So, um, you were, you weren't the youngest.

LABOVITES: No, I was not the youngest.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What were your brothers and sisters' names?

LABOVITES: My brother's name, my sister's name, one was Persephone, all ancient Greek names. Persephone, Fiorlea [ph], and my brother's name was Peter, Petro, and Vasily, which, Bill it is, actually.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So when you were five years old were, were your brothers and sisters all there in Thouviani?

LABOVITES: They were all there. That's right. They were all there. Later they dispersed. Um, some went to Italy, some went to Greece. Uh, Yugoslavia. My younger brother went to Yugoslavia.

LEVINE: Why did everyone leave?

LABOVITES: Well, for their professional. They were, well, one was a doctor at the hospital, worked there. My younger brother, he went to Yugoslavia, and then he went to Italy. Because he - what -- he did, uh, he was educated in Italy.

LEVINE: Was there, there was not much future in Albania.

LABOVITES: No. No. Because of politics there. Usually for years and years, it's been going on, even at the present time.

LEVINE: So what was your aunt's name, the one that adopted you?

LABOVITES: I was very fortunate. I always say I had two mothers and one father. (he laughs) Vasiliky [ph].

LEVINE: And so, uh, um, how was it decided, do you remember anything about the preparations to leave, or . . .

LABOVITES: No, I don't. I I all I remember was leaving my home town, leaving for Greece to take the boat to America. That's faint.

LEVINE: What's your fondest memory of living in Albania? Do you, I know you're so young, it's hard to . . .

LABOVITES: Yes, it is very difficult to, uh, I don't know, I think my fondest memory was, I really do, going to church. Really odd, I don't know why I remember that all the time. My mother and my aunt that adopted me would take me Sundays, go to church every Sunday. That's about my fondest memory.

LEVINE: Do you remember what the church looked like at all?

LABOVITES: Yes, I do. Yes, I do. Because I, I saw it again when I went there in 1938.

LEVINE: What . . .

LABOVITES: It was, uh, it was the cathedral there and, uh, a small church, a very small church, I would say, hmm, seating capacity about, or

standing, because we never had seats there, about, I would say about a hundred and fifty or so.

LEVINE: And was it on the hillside?

LABOVITES: It was on the hillside. Everything was on the hillside, even the homes on the hillside.

LEVINE: Do you remember how people got around?

LABOVITES: Oh, yes, definitely, by foot, of course. Everybody. Uh, it was, uh, it was situated between two mountains, small mountains. And right in the middle of that was this town here.

LEVINE: Um, so when you, you left there, and where did you go to get the ship that brought you to the United States?

LABOVITES: To Greece. From there, we went to Greece, in Peloponnesius, in a -- in a city called Patra, P-A-T-R-A. That was the, uh, seaport for everybody leaving for the United States.

LEVINE: So this must have been your first time out of . . .

LABOVITES: The first time, that's right.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that?

LABOVITES: I do remember the ship, and I do remember first seeing the ocean. That I do, that's about my first memories.

LEVINE: Do you remember the name of the ship?

LABOVITES: Yes, I do. It was an Italian freighter, almost like a freighter, Panonia, P-A-N-O-N-I-A. That I do remember.

LEVINE: And were you in steerage? Were you . . .

LABOVITES: Definitely. I think all, all the immigrants that came at that time were all at the steerage, which was about, uh, two decks below the, uh, the top of the ship.

LEVINE: Can you remember that?

LABOVITES: Yes, I certainly do. I do remember it, because I remember the, the odor. It was, well, exactly, I think, which is steerage class.

LEVINE: Do you remember the food at all?

LABOVITES: Yes, I do. Most of the food where we had was spaghetti.

LEVINE: (she laughs) Uh-huh. And how about sleeping arrangements?

LABOVITES: We slept in bunks. No fancy beds or nothing, no . . .

LEVINE: Now, who were you with? You were with your aunt and your uncle?

LABOVITES: And my -- ny cousin, two other cousins, they came here.

LEVINE: Were they children?

LABOVITES: My uncle was here by the way. That's why we came here.

LEVINE: So, um, what was your father doing in Greece?

LABOVITES: He was a doctor, too.

LEVINE: Your father was a doctor, and then your . . .

LABOVITES: My two brothers, that's right.

LEVINE: So, um, was there anything that happened on the voyage that, uh, stands out in your mind?

LABOVITES: Well . . . (he laughs) The only thing that stands in my mind was the, uh, people being sick and vomiting, and the odor was terrible. That I do remember.

LEVINE: And so do you remember when the ship came into the New York Harbor?

LABOVITES: Yes, I do. That I do, faintly. I remember hustling and bustling. I remember different, other nationalities there, dressed in their wicker hats, and those black, long dresses. That I do remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember what your impression of Ellis Island was as a little boy?

LABOVITES: Not - not exactly, but I do remember other people telling me, too, that there -- most of them were, they looked at Ellis Island and looked at the Statue of Liberty with fear, and somewhat respect, of course. But more like, to some people it seemed like jail, and fear. They were afraid, of course, because if they didn't pass that physical examination, they'd have to go back again. And I think it happened to a lot of people like that.

LEVINE: Well, two percent, actually were sent back.

LABOVITES: I beg your pardon?

LEVINE: Two percent were sent back.

LABOVITES: Oh, is that right?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LABOVITES: Oh, they were sent back. That must have been terrible.

LEVINE: Yeah, very difficult for the families.

LABOVITES: Oh, gosh.

LEVINE: Whether to go back with them, or, yeah. Well, um, and do you remember your aunt during this trip? Do you remember anything she told you about America, or, uh . . .

LABOVITES: Well, no, really, I don't. I don't They were in awe of seeing the big buildings, seeing Ellis Island and, uh, in fact, I just found out, oh, about a month ago, I think, I never knew it before. And I just wrote it in the book that, I don't know, maybe you know about that, that Ellis Island was called Castingari [ph].

LEVINE: Oh, Castle Gardens.

LABOVITES: That, now, that - that -- that's right. The reason they called it Castingari was there was a hallway to be, they were examined, and it was called Castle Garden. They couldn't pronounce Castle Garden. These newly arrived immigrants, they couldn't pronounce Castle Gardens. Even now (he laughs) some of them cannot pronounce that. So Castle Garden became Castingari. And I was wondering all these years, why was it called Castingari? I thought perhaps there was a place there, that is the reason. Castle Garden became Castingari. Even nowadays when they talk in the Greek coffee houses, they say, "I was on the Castingari for two weeks, a week, three days." And I . . .

LEVINE: They really go back? In Greece, you mean?

LABOVITES: Yes. They would . . .

LEVINE: In . . .

LABOVITES: If they failed the exam, yes. In fact, I know two that went there, I mean, that came here. They didn't pass, or failed. I don't know what it was, for some sort of a sickness, and then they went back again.

LEVINE: And so you would have seen them in your little town, in Albania?

LABOVITES: Yes.

LEVINE: And they would have said that.

LABOVITES: And they would have said that. That was in 1938. But I never did ask why it was called Castingari.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, I can actually fill you in on that.

LABOVITES: I beg your pardon?

LEVINE: After we finish with the tape, I can tell you a little bit about Castle Garden.

LABOVITES: Is that right? I like - Oh, I'd like to hear about it.

LEVINE: Okay. Let's see. So let's say, now, when you left Ellis Island, where did you go with your aunt?

LABOVITES: I -- I think we took the -- train, of course, that's the only thing, the train. We took the train from the train. We came to Worcester. I don't remember it exactly, but I do remember people telling it took maybe nine or ten hours from New York to Worcester by train.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the train ride, or when you first got to Worcester, or . . .

LABOVITES: No, really, I don't.

LEVINE: How about the first few weeks or months. Anything stand out in your mind, or . . .

LABOVITES: No. The thing that stands out in my mind is when I went to grammar school.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Why don't you tell about that?

LABOVITES: Well, there was, how shall I say it? It's very strange. I couldn't speak the language. I went to a grammar school here in the city. Um, I didn't like it because I didn't know any English. I came home, I, I didn't want to go the next day. I had to go. That's about it. That's about what stands in my mind.

LEVINE: Were there other children from other countries in your school?

LABOVITES: Yes, there were, uh, yes - there were -- many of them were from Armenia, because, uh, we lived in a district where all the Armenians were. Armenians, Italians, I think they were all mostly foreigners, but mostly were Armenians. I'd say three-fourths of the students were Armenians.

LEVINE: Do you remember learning English, anything about that?

LABOVITES: Yes, in the beginning, yes, a little. I remember, I remember the teacher, a wonderful teacher, wonderful.

LEVINE: Do you remember her name?

LABOVITES: Yes. Miss Murphy, Irish. In fact, when I graduated from high school, ah, she was about eighty-five or ninety, I invite her to a graduation.

LEVINE: Why did you like her so much?

LABOVITES: Uh, she was very kind, very, very kind. Um, and another thing I remember, which it's quite coincidence nowadays, of a prayer.

Every morning she would say a prayer. She'd read the Old Testament and the New Testament. Very religious and, uh, gosh, oh, I would get some Jewish too, down there. In fact, she'd read something from the Old Testament because of the Jewish students there, the New Testament. And, uh, but she was very kind. That's our, in fact, she just passed away only about ten years ago, a hundred and ten years old.

LEVINE: Well, she must have been delighted that you invited her to your graduation?

LABOVITES: Oh, well, I was delighted, too. She was very nice.

LEVINE: Anything that you remember about early, your early time in Worcester? Anything about this city, uh, the community?

LABOVITES: Hmm.

LEVINE: Did you have other people in Worcester, that were living in Worcester, that you had known from the old country?

LABOVITES: Not me, no, but my, uh, my mother. Oh, my mother and my relatives, yes. A lot of relatives here.

LEVINE: Oh. So they were people that your aunt, or your mother, you were calling your aunt your mother because she adopted you?

LABOVITES: That's right. That's right. It was really odd. I call my mother, my aunt my mother, and I call her husband "uncle."

LEVINE: (laughs) Yeah.

LABOVITES: I had two mothers and one father.

LEVINE: So, uh, so they were, they knew people. Your . . .

LABOVITES: Yes, many of them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Do you remember anything about Worcester and how it was different from where you had come from?

LABOVITES: Yes, I do, I do. That I remember maybe three or four years later. We had two factions of Greeks at that time, because of politics in Greece. In fact, we had two churches. Once we had three churches in the city.

LEVINE: Three Greek churches?

LABOVITES: Yeah, because there was a schism, politics, again, of course. That I do remember. Um, I remember going by the coffee houses. We had three or four coffee houses at that time.

LEVINE: And what would they belike?

LABOVITES: A store was rented, some chairs were bought, playing cards were bought, some, the Turkish coffee, um, tables, Greek newspapers, um, pictures of some heroic Greek event on the walls, um, people, uh, people there reading the papers, uh, arguing politics, of course, as they usually do. That I do remember.

LEVINE: And who would be at these coffee houses?

LABOVITES: Adults.

LEVINE: Women, too, or just . . .

LABOVITES: No, no, no, no. No women at all. Even nowadays they have coffee houses, very few go there, women. But I do remember the coffee houses. I remember going to a Greek school. We had a Greek school, one of the churches.

LEVINE: This was in addition to public school, or . . .

LABOVITES: In, after public schools. Even now, like they had one here now, uh, public schools would get over about three o'clock in the afternoon, we'd go to Greek school from four to six. Reading, writing, um, some Greek religion. It was not a parochial school. Some Greek religion. Because the tea-- one of the teachers was the priest. Hmm, students, we had about fifteen, twenty students. That I do remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember the priest's name?

LABOVITES: Oh, yes, definitely. That was, the first Greek school was under a priest by Reverend Stavros, S-T-A-V-R-O-S. He couldn't speak English. He was dressed in a frock, the old ecclesiastical garb. And, in fact, he was called by the non-Greeks, the Greek Rasputin, because of his beard. He had one of those hats, church hats, ecclesiastical hats, and a black robe, all the time, at all occasions. That I do remember.

LEVINE: What was he like?

LABOVITES: Very short in stature, couldn't speak English, but everything Greek. Very strict.

LEVINE: So, um, do you think today you hold onto some customs that are strictly Greek?

LABOVITES: To be very frank with you, I think we all do. I think we all do. I don't know, I think maybe it's good and it's bad, both. It has its advantages and disadvantages. The advantages, I think, uh, say, custom of religion, with the language, to not lose the language, I honestly think so.

LEVINE: Well, how long did you stay in school there?

LABOVITES: At that time it was seven, six years, seven years. Um, up to the sixth grade, first, second, third. Later on, hmm, I continued Greek

school anyway because I went to a seminary to become a priest in Connecticut, but that helped me, this knowledge of Greek.

LEVINE: So had you decided to become a priest when you were . . .

LABOVITES: Oh, I went there. I went there to become a priest. I was there in my fourth year. I had one more year to go, and I left, joined the service.

LEVINE: Do you know what your thinking was, why you decided against it?

LABOVITES: You would ask -- you would ask that question, wouldn't you?

LEVINE: I don't want to get too personal.

LABOVITES: No. (he laughs) No, no, no, no. Um, my life here at the seminary, usually the bishop would want - want to be married before he's ordained, in the Greek Orthodox church. You cannot become, you cannot be ordained if you're single. You have to be married in the Greek church. So in my last year they would, they'd look around for a priest's wife. I didn't want to get married at that time, and that's one of the reasons.

LEVINE: Oh.

LABOVITES: It's good. They needed priests badly, and they wanted to ordain the students. But, oh, I was with two others, I think, that left at that time, because we didn't want to get married. They'd find a wife for you, which I was against, and that's one of the reasons. Um, a lot of good, able priests nowadays, that -- they were schoolmates of mine, but maybe I made the wrong, who knows.

LEVINE: Well, like, in other words, the, um, the school or the bishop, some, who would find the wives?

LABOVITES: You're absolutely right. Most - most of them, the -- the priests themselves and the bishop. Of course, the priests with a bishop, uh, the bishops, the priest would say, "Oh, in my - " oh, for instance, you're off in New Jersey, "I come from New Jersey, I know a young girl, she's very nice. I think she'd make a good priest's wife. The wife is good, she's very, she comes to church. The girl is good, she comes to church every Sunday, she's in the choir, I think she'd make a beautiful priest's wife." And there they are, a match was made.

LEVINE: Um, how about, uh, rituals? Are there any rituals that you still follow that are of Greek origin?

LABOVITES: What? What? Rituals, for instance, what?

LEVINE: Like maybe like around births or deaths or . . .

LABOVITES: Oh, baptisms and all that. Yes, we are supposed to follow them We have the sa-the seven sacraments that a Roman Catholic has,

baptisms, marriage, confessions and so forth and so forth. We, we are supposed to follow that, definitely.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: So then when you went into the service, what year was that?

LABOVITES: I went to the service forty, forty-two, forty-three.

LEVINE: So the war was on when you went in.

LABOVITES: Uh, yes. Well, war didn't start until '44. I mean, rather, United States.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you were . . .

LABOVITES: That was at two years, and I got out '45.

LEVINE: So did you see active service?

LABOVITES: Yes. I was overseas, yeah.

LEVINE: Where were you?

LABOVITES: I was in Europe, Germany. I was, in fact, in Germany, Italy, I was with Drapos [ph].

LEVINE: And did you feel like, um, the war left any, uh, either scars or attitudes, impressions about . . .

LABOVITES: Well, I - I don't know. I - I didn't mind it at all. I really didn't. I really didn't.

LEVINE: Hmm. What did you like about it? What was the positive side?

LABOVITES: The positive side was that I was with a good bunch of guys, number one. Number two, maybe I was wrong, maybe I'm wrong, I don't know. I think that there was a right thing to do. I think that was a right thing to do.

LEVINE: So then did you come back to Worcester when you were discharged?

LABOVITES: Yes, I came back to Worcester.

LEVINE: And then what?

LABOVITES: And then I could associate with the church, yeah. And still am. Uh-huh.

LEVINE: So what do you feel proud of having done in your life?

LABOVITES: I don't know if I'd done anything good.

LEVINE: What do you feel, maybe, grateful for? Maybe that's a better way of phrasing it.

LABOVITES: Well, I'm grateful for the family I have.

LEVINE: What is your, um, wife's name?

LABOVITES: Olympia. Uh-huh.

LEVINE: And did you meet her here in Worcester?

LABOVITES: No, I met her at, uh, New York. Because when I came here I, I went to graduate from, I graduated from Holy Cross anyway, before I went to the service, and then I went to Springfield College to get a physical education. I became a boy's physical director of the Boy's Club there in New York, upstate New York in a small town called Jamestown, New York. And then I, I came back to Worcester again. I met my wife there. Came here in '50, and then I became the physical director at the YMCA here, the Worcester YMCA. I was there for twenty-five years.

LEVINE: Oh. So did you retire from there?

LABOVITES: I retired there in '75, '77.

LEVINE: And what is your wife's name?

LABOVITES: Olympia.

LEVINE: Her maiden name?

LABOVITES: Kote. K-O-T-E.

LEVINE: And was she, was her family from . . .

LABOVITES: Yes.

LEVINE: The same area as you, or another . . .

LABOVITES: No, from Albania. She's Albanian, too. In fact, she couldn't speak a word of Greek. And when we married, came here, all my relatives, of course, Greeks, and she was among the Greek people, and she spoke Greek after that. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: And do you have children?

LABOVITES: Yes, I have.

LEVINE: What are their names?

LABOVITES: One is Telemachus, my father's name. And the other one is George -- ??????????

LEVINE: So you have grandchildren as well?

LABOVITES: Well, one expected now.

LEVINE: Oh, wonderful.

LABOVITES: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: Okay. Do you think the fact that you started out in Greece and that you came here as an immigrant, even though you were only five, do you think that affected your life in any way? Do you think the fact that you started out in one country and changed countries and stayed in this country, do you think that made a difference in the kind of person you are, or you became?

LABOVITES: I don't know. I really don't know. Did you find out differently?

LEVINE: I think a lot of people feel that it made a difference.

LABOVITES: I think so.

LEVINE: Being a part of another culture, and then . . .

LABOVITES: I think you appreciate it more. I think the appreciation is there. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I didn't come in this country.

LEVINE: What do you think would have happened?

LABOVITES: I don't know. I'm afraid to, I don't think I would have liked it.

LEVINE: But your family stayed, your father and, uh . . .

LABOVITES: Oh, no. They're all gone now, with the kids and two sisters in Greece.

LEVINE: Oh, your two sisters.

LABOVITES: Uh-huh. No, they're all gone now.

LEVINE: But they lived there for quite a while after you . . .

LABOVITES: Oh, yes, yes, yes. Uh-huh. They're all, all of them.

LEVINE: Huh. Um, well, is there anything else you can think of to say about your coming here, or your early time here in Worcester?

LABOVITES: I think, I would say that I'm very fortunate, yes.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, what led to your interest in writing this book about the early Greek immigrants? Why don't you tell me what's the, what's the main theme of the book?

LABOVITES: The theme of the book is just so, it's the history of the Greek, uh, immigrants in Worcester from 1892 to 1910. All the, all the immigrants that came at that time.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

LABOVITES: 18-- and that was, from 1892 to 1910, and also the history of St. Spyridon's church, from 1914 to 1952 when this church was built here. Uh, in other words, I, I have all the Greeks that came from, the first Greek was, I think it was in 1992 [sic].

LEVINE: 1892. Uh-huh.

LABOVITES: They were the first Greeks in the city. In fact, I think you must know one of them. The Vulsos [ph] girl? She wrote a book also, about four years ago. She worked for the department, I don't know what department. State Department, I think. And I got a lot of help from her.

LEVINE: Oh, wonderful. Tell me what led you to be interested in writing this?

LABOVITES: Well, they used to ask me. I -- I was interested myself who were the first Greeks, what did they do, why did they start in a restaurant business, why didn't they start in other business, who was the first priest in the city, where was the first church in the city, why did they have a church? And I - I - I - I , oh, it wasn't me that wrote this book. It was many others that helped me a lot.

LEVINE: But, uh, can you say sort of what in your research for the book, what kind of things, uh, have you discovered that are particularly of interest?

LABOVITES: Yes, yes. I can do that. I did discover many, many things that I never knew, unbelievable.

LEVINE: Can you mention a couple of things that you really, uh . . .

LABOVITES: Boy, now you could caught me right away. Yes, yes, I can. Why was the church called St. Spyridon, one. Why wasn't it St. James or St. Luke's or St. Thomas or so forth. Uh, what troubles, do we ha-- we had troubles with different priests because of political sides, you know, at that time. Uh, what else? Who was the, uh, the - the first president? Why, why - why the first Greek school? Why didn't we have a Greek school for, and the reason for it, you know what I mean? Surprise, I believe. And also I have the news here, the trivias. Did you know that, did you know that, did you know that?

LEVINE: And how have you gotten your information?

LABOVITES: Yes, that's a good question. The City Hall, Worcester City Hall, many people that helped me, Vulsos, Ms. Vulsos, Nick Gage [ph],

too, uh, the church office here, St. Spyridon, all about the Greeks, the priests.

LEVINE: Why was it named St. Spyridon, by the way? (she laughs)

LABOVITES: It was -- St. Spyridon is a saint in the island of Corfu in Greece. Corfu you know where it's at -- all right. And the, the saint itself there is preserved there in the Corfu. Corfu is an island across Epirus, Epirus. Most of the Greeks in the city here are from Epirus, so in 1914 when the church was named, they want to give it a name, because most of the people here are from the state of Epirus, so they named the saint of Corfu, who was St. Spyridon. And that's the reason they got the name St. Spyridon. Of course, if they was from, uh, Athens, they'd get another name there, the saint - famous there. In every city there's a saint there, and that's the reason it got the name St. Spyridon. And, etc., etc. That - that's one of the reasons.

LEVINE: So have you, uh, I guess the people who you're talking about, 1892 to 1910, are there any alive here in . . .

LABOVITES: That's a good question. From 1892, yes. We have quite a few, that were here. Well, one is Peter Bell. Uh, but we have a lot of their children here, a lot of them. I would say, hmm, first generation, second generation -- I'd say we have over sixty or seventy, believe it or not.

LEVINE: So you, so you've contacted this second generation, and whatever material they have.

LABOVITES: That's absolutely, that's absolutely right, second and third generation. But I had to get documents. In fact, I got a lot of documents, the passports, all the pa-- I got all the passports. In fact, I got some here, some of the passports that came here in 1904 from New York. Uh, what do you call, manifests?

LEVINE: The ship's manifests.

LABOVITES: Ship's manifests.

LEVINE: You have that, too?

LABOVITES: Yes, I have. I've got that. And the boats, the names of the boats, some of them, I never, I got all the boats that came, all the boats that came from Greece at that time, to New York. Oh, about eight, nine boats.

LEVINE: How long have you been working on this?

LABOVITES: Ten years. Exactly ten, twelve years.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds like a labor of love.

LABOVITES: I like it, I like it. But it - it -- it's really hard, though. Maybe you'd know a lot better than I would. I think I find now

more information now after I'm done than before. (Dr. Levine laughs)
Isn't it something?

LEVINE: Probably because you know so much more.

LABOVITES: I don't know.

LEVINE: As you hear and read . . .

LABOVITES: I've gone over it five times, and I've done it over again.
All, and additions, with additions.

LEVINE: So then are you hoping to publish this with a commercial
publisher? Is that the thing?

LABOVITES: Well, I'd like to publish it for the church, I mean, so, with
the help of many. Just about, uh, I would say about, about five or six
months ago I just finished. But I'm still adding.

LEVINE: What was it like for you, the process of . . .

LABOVITES: I loved it.

LEVINE: Finding this information?

LABOVITES: I loved it. Uh, most of the information I got was, of
course, through the church here, through City Hall, and also going to the
coffee houses. Uh, I was ridiculed a lot of times. But I think coffee
houses are great things. Some of these old timers that you have, they
think coffee houses are terrible. But, uh, the coffee houses, to these
immigrants, was a, going to like a Boy's Club or a YMCA. It was a
recreation. They had nothing else. What's, the recreation they had,
these immigrants?

They attended coffee houses among their - their compatriots.
They talked to them Greek. They couldn't do anything. Where could they
go? People don't realize that. Coffee houses are wonderful. And that's
where I got a lot of the information. Well-known Greeks in the city and,
uh, hmm, I think most of them I met there at the coffee houses. Of
course, they're all gone now. This is ten, fifteen --.

LEVINE: There's nothing left, no coffee houses?

LABOVITES: They got coffee houses, yes. They got, but not too many, not
too many now. Because, of course, they've got so many things now, TV's,
radios, movies.

LEVINE: Yeah. Um, can you say anything about Worcester as, as a, um,
as such a mix of immigrants from so many different countries?

LABOVITES: Yes. You're right, you're right. I don't know, I think most
of the, the majority, I think, I'm not sure, I think there used to be
between Irish and Swedish people in the city. Greeks definitely a
minority. Um, Greeks, uh, Albanians, Turkish, the minority. I think the

Irish were the first in the city of Worcester here. Uh, 18, well, of course, the English, of course, yes. But, I mean, not counting the English. In 19, uh, I would say 1840, '45 the Irish. 19 -- the Greeks, 19, 1890, '95. Most of the Greeks came here in 19, from 1900, 1920.

LEVINE: Well, um, is there anything else about the writing of your book that, that you can think of to mention?

LABOVITES: I don't know. I don't know what to say. What do you mean?

LEVINE: Well, are there certain, uh, maybe chapters or aspects that you're going to, that you're going to deal with?

LABOVITES: Yes, yes. Many chapters. Chapters in the, for instance, the habits, the customs. Um, at that time, not now, at that time These from 1910. Also up to 19, 1970 I got all the presidents from 1914 to 19, uh, what, last year. '93, '94, all the priests from 1914. How many, uh, how many churches we had here. This is the fourth church, the fifth church here. Uh, the Board of Directors, all of them. I think, uh, people like to read about that. But, as I said, I've got a lot of help. I was very fortunate. Very, very fortunate.

LEVINE: Well, I think it will be important to have all that documented, especially before everybody who has that information is gone.

LABOVITES: Yes, that's right. And I like to present it to the church as a gift. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: It's a beautiful gift.

LABOVITES: It will be nice. I hope so.

LEVINE: Have you had heroes in your life? Can you think of any people who have been . . .

LABOVITES: Yes.

LEVINE: People you've really looked up to and admired, maybe wanted to . . .

LABOVITES: Yes, I have. Yes, I have.

LEVINE: Can you think of any, either personal, people you knew, or maybe public figures, or . . .

LABOVITES: People that I knew, yes. Uh, a lot of them had been clergy, heroes to me. Um, a lot of them just plain ordinary people. I don't know if I should name some, but I don't know, I really don't know. But they have been heroes to me. Plain, ordinary people. Not well-known, plain, ordinary people. And, uh, I think all of us have some, plain, ordinary, some of them, nobody knows about them.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you know what the qualities are that made them, these plain people be heroic to you?

LABOVITES: Yes. The qualities, I would say, uh, in the plain language, regular, ordinary guys. People that helped people, definitely. Like maybe you have, some same thing.

LEVINE: And with St. Spyridon's church, can you, uh, sort of, um, summarize the role that's played in this community for the . . .

LABOVITES: Very, very big role. It's a small, at the beginning it was a small, small building in 1914. Uh, no woman at that time, all male, because there were no woman at that time. Woman didn't make their appearance here until, I would say, 1900. There were about, uh, up until 1900 I would say there are about a hundred Greeks in the city.

LEVINE: All male.

LABOVITES: All male. Very few, in the late 18, very, very few. Restaurant business, shoe factories, mill factories, restaurant business.

LEVINE: Why the restaurant business? Did you get any clues as to . . .

LABOVITES: Yes. I did an article on that especially. That's a beautiful question to ask. Why did the Greeks, usually when somebody mentions the fact that Greeks, right away you think of a restaurant. Maybe in New Jersey, too.

LEVINE: Yeah.

LABOVITES: They couldn't speak English. They couldn't read, they couldn't write. So what jobs could they get? Wash dishes, bus boys, floor cleaners, chefs, even though they couldn't read, chefs. What would they do, restaurant business? They knew the business from the bottom up. And later on they opened their own restaurants. I have a list here in Worcester, we have a Main Street and a Front Street here, two Main Streets in the city.

During the years 1950, 1920 to 1935 we had forty-eight big restaurants in the city, forty-eight restaurants in the city, between our streets. All restaurant business. Big-time restaurants. The biggest restaurants. Uh, now very few. They're another -- doctors, professional men, now, which is all right. But why restaurant? That's the reason. They couldn't get any, what could they do? Shoe factories, mill factories, pushcart, bananas, selling bananas.

LEVINE: Do you remember that?

LABOVITES: Yes, I do. Oh, 1920. Oh, yes. In fact, my two uncles, bananas. They had a pushcart. They pushed, they had a pushcart going down Main Street selling bananas, oranges, apples. Oh, yes, yes. I remember that. I'm willing to bet that you come from, what town you come from?

LEVINE: Well, when I grew up, you mean?

LABOVITES: Yes.

LEVINE: Jersey City was where I was born.

LABOVITES: Jersey City. I bet you got a lot of restaurants there. And some big ones. Oh, yes. And that's the reason. Now you don't see many now. You see some, yes. You see some. But not - not as many as before. Forty-five restaurants. Three or four, five nightclubs, in the 1930's, big nightclubs in the city. Of course, restaurants included in that.

LEVINE: Do you remember, speaking of bananas, had you ever seen bananas in Greece, or in Albania?

LABOVITES: No. I never saw a banana, even when I went there. It was four five years ago. Very few times you see bananas. Why do you ask that question? It's a good question. I never thought of it myself.

LEVINE: The reason is that people bring it up very often, about seeing their first banana in the United States.

LABOVITES: That's right. I never saw a banana before. You're right. That's a good question. Oh, of course, nowadays there must be a lot of bananas, but I don't think before. Bananas.

LEVINE: Um, is there anything else, uh, that, uh, who, who are you hoping will be the audience for your book when it's, when it's finished?

LABOVITES: I got an article on that, too. I would hope that a youth-- the young generation, to find out what their forefathers did, so some of them don't realize it, they don't know, really they don't. I would hope so. I would hope the younger generation.

LEVINE: Why do you think it's important for them to know that, to know what their, what their forefathers did?

LABOVITES: So they realize what, they'd appreciate it. I have a good article on that. It's not my own doing, the help of many on that. And I entitled it What We Owe To the United -- What We Greek Americans Owed, no, What We Greek Americans Owe to the United States. I think you're gonna like that. It's nice. I think that's very, very important.

LEVINE: Well, well, it sounds like, um, it's going to be very interesting reading, and certainly a real, a real gift to this community.

LABOVITES: That's what I like to do. I like to do that, yes.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, is there anything else that you would want to say?

LABOVITES: Well, I want to, I want to thank you very much for this interview.

LEVINE: Well, I want to thank you. It was most interesting,

LABOVITES: I'm glad.

LEVINE: and your tape will be on record at Ellis Island, and, of course, it's noted that this book will eventually be, be published so that a researcher can listen to your tape and then go to the book and find out the history of the Greek community in Worcester, Massachusetts.

LABOVITES: Thank you very much.

LEVINE: Thank you very -

LABOVITES: And not, it's not because of me. I wish this would be said that it's the people, other people that helped me a lot, a lot, a lot.

LEVINE: Well, you're very gracious about it.

LABOVITES: Thank you.

LEVINE: Thank you. I've been speaking with Pericles Labovites, and I'm here at St. Spyridon's Church in Worcester, Massachusetts on December 8, 1994. And this is Janet Levine, and I'm signing off.

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