

**EI-649**

**DELAINÉ HELIOTIS**

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**PSYCHIATRIC AFFILIATION ON ELLIS ISLAND, SUMMER OF 1949  
AS PART OF HER EDUCATION AT NYU IN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY  
AGE: 20**

LEVINE: Today is August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1995, and I'm here at the Ellis Island Oral History studio, with Delaine, called Del, Heliotis—

HELIOTIS: Perfect!

LEVINE: [Laughs]—who worked here, in the Marine Hospital, in as far as Del can remember, July and August of 1949. Well, I'm delighted that you could come here today! So I'm most interested in anything you can remember about this. Let's start with your life prior to working here. Just give your birth date and where you were born for the tape.

HELIOTIS: Okay, I was born in Flushing, Long Island, and grew up in Great Neck, Long Island. I was born on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1929, so therefore I was twenty when I was here on Ellis Island. Prior to that, I was a student at New York University, and this was part of my education. I was training to be an occupational therapist, and we had various affiliations at various hospitals. And this one was the psychiatric affiliation, and we usually spent two to three months in each hospital. So these people in the U.S. Marine Hospital were all Merchant Mariners, actually, and some of them were foreign people. And I got to work with the psychiatric patients.

LEVINE: Was this your first psychiatric affiliation?

HELIOTIS: Yes, it was my first psychiatric affiliation.

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LEVINE: Uh-huh. Let me just ask you: where were you living when you were here, working at the Marine Hospital?

HELIOTIS: I was still living in Great Neck, Long Island, and I had to commute between three islands, from Long Island to Manhattan, and then over here to Ellis Island. So it was quite a trip, but I loved the boat trip back and forth!

LEVINE: Yeah, tell me where you left from?

HELIOTIS: I left from—Great Neck, you mean?

LEVINE: No, to come, to get to Ellis Island, to work.

HELIOTIS: Oh, from—well now, it's the Battery, I guess, is what we called it, yeah. And we got the ferry from there.

LEVINE: Did it run often? Do you remember?

HELIOTIS: It's so hard for me to say, because I came over early in the morning, and left after five in the evening. But I think they were running regularly, fairly regularly. A lot of staff and patients who were on leave took it as well.

LEVINE: How many patients, roughly, were in the Marine Hospital? Do you have any idea?

HELIOTIS: I'm not sure. I can only compare it to a hospital I worked in more recently, another federal hospital, and I would say easily, you know, a thousand, twelve hundred. All those buildings were filled with patients, all of the buildings over there.

LEVINE: And they were Merchant Marines?

HELIOTIS: Yes, exactly. It's kind of interesting, because people used all kinds of nautical terms, the patients. You know, I learned not to say go upstairs. We all went "topside". And you know, they'd say, "Time to "soogee" the decks" [laughs]. And you didn't look at the Queen Elizabeth coming through and saying, "Look at the nice boat," you know. It was [laughs] . . . You were killed for that!

LEVINE: Well now, what would you say, when you say there were over a thousand, these were medical patients, and psychiatric?

HELIOTIS: Yes, it was general medical and surgical, and psychiatric, but I worked particularly with the psychiatric patients, because that was my area of study at the time.

LEVINE: Well now how many of those would you say there were, roughly?

HELIOTIS: Oh, all together in the hospital I really couldn't tell you, but I would certainly say, you know, at least a hundred. I really can't tell you! I did go into one ward, which was the criminally (laughs) insane ward, and I would go in, my little twenty-year-old self, and people would be unlocking doors and bars and things. And I'd go in and say, "Good morning!" [Laughs] And may I tell one little anecdote?

LEVINE: Absolutely.

HELIOTIS: I had just been newly engaged to my Greek fiancé, later to become my husband, and I was learning a little bit of Greek very slowly. And there was a Greek patient in the ward for the criminally insane. And so I would see him in the morning, as I was walking past on the outside. He'd be staring out of the window with this kind of, [laughs] kind of grim stare—very intense. And I would say to him as I went past, "kalimera", which is good day, or good morning. And then I'd say, "efharisto para poli", which I thought was saying, you know, something like, "I hope you're feeling well." What I was saying was: "thank you very much." And I'm sure, you know, I thought, "Poor man," you know, "He looks so confused." And he was saying, "What is she thanking me for?" in his head, I'm sure [laughs].

LEVINE: Well what were your duties here?

HELIOTIS: I kind of hate to say it, but most of it—it was the old days, and they were still having O.T.'s in some places, that's occupational therapists, during artsy-craftsy work, you know, in certain things. And for the psychiatric patients, all they did was have us go around and have them make little things. I was interested mainly in orthopedics, although I like psychiatric work, and it got much more complex later on. But at this time, it was really craft work. It was no orthopedic work, no really stuff that was really scientific.

LEVINE: Did you have a supervisor whose name you remember?

HELIOTIS: Oh, yes! I have blocked her name out [they laugh] because we all had such a grand time, the students and the supervisor. And at the end, I got a B for my affiliation, and I ended up getting A's in all of my others, and I had never been informed that I was doing anything wrong, you know. And she just said, "Well, you weren't up to snuff." She was very imprecise as to why I got the B. And I have blocked her name from my memory! I just, you know, I can see her face [laughs] in my mind, but I can't remember her name.

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LEVINE: How about other people who worked here with you? Do you remember any names?

HELIOTIS: I can't remember any names at all. It was really for such a short time, relatively short. I've really thought about it, but I can't remember their names. I suppose somewhere, you know, I could look up at least the name of the Director. But maybe it's just as well that I don't mention her name [laughs].

LEVINE: Well, could you describe where on Ellis Island you were and anything about the setting of where you were working?

HELIOTIS: I'd be glad to. When I would first arrive in the morning, I loved it! I loved coming in to this little dock, and walking in. And I just remember walking to the left. On my right were the ruins of the Immigration Center. And to the left, I would walk between some buildings, and then walk to the far end. Now, it's called Island Three now, is that right? I just know that I worked in a building—what direction would that be? Would it be—I don't know. At any rate, as I told you before, in my, my—the main work place had many, many windows all across the one wall, and we could look out and see the Statue of Liberty. And we could see the big ships coming in. It seems to me that—

LEVINE: I think it's south. It's south of here.

HELIOTIS: Oh, south, okay. Yeah, so it was the furthest south. And the building looked a little bit different from the other buildings, as I recall, in that it had so many windows. And seeing the ships coming in, the big ships coming in from overseas, you know, they had just crossed the Atlantic, and we'd see the fire boats coming out and spraying water in the air and tooting their horns. And there was just something exciting happening in the harbor all the time! And it was beautiful in the sunshine, and in the rain, and all kinds of weather. I really—I loved being here! And I loved walking along and fighting the pigeons [laughs].

LEVINE: They were here, then, too, huh?

HELIOTIS: Oh, my goodness, yes. I'm sure the great great great grandchildren of those pigeons are still running around here. But, and then at lunch time I did a forbidden thing many times, and I would walk back to the center near the dock, and I would walk into the ruins of the immigration building. And there were big signs, you know: you weren't supposed to go in, because it was dangerous. But you know, I just heard the whispers of the people who passed through. I could feel their spirits, I really did! And I could feel, you know, the joy and the pain and the apprehension, because my husband was an immigrant, and he had come over right after World War

Two. And at the time he left, the Civil War was going on in Greece, and I know what he went through coming over as an immigrant. So I had a great feeling for that. I couldn't stay away from it, and I think in the film that they show currently now, they show pictures of some of the ruins. And you know, I would say, "Oh, I swear I saw that rocking chair, or you know, something lying there in the dust," in those old films. Let's see, I'm trying to think.

LEVINE: Was that—when you say you went back, you went into this main building that is now restored?

HELIOTIS: Yes, yes. As I say, absolutely forbidden, but I couldn't stay away. I know I climbed over things (she laughs) and went in.

LEVINE: Alone?

HELIOTIS: All by myself, yeah. Well, I didn't want to tell anybody I was doing it [laughs].

LEVINE: I see. Well, tell me about what's right opposite the ferry slip now, which is what we call Island Two. Was that an operating—were those buildings operative at that time?

HELIOTIS: Yes.

LEVINE: And so everything but this part, where the main building is--?

HELIOTIS: Exactly, where the main building is.

LEVINE: --was going on as a hospital?

HELIOTIS: Yes, as I recall. As I say it's forty-six years ago, which seems impossible. But certainly all those buildings, and I forget how many there are. You probably know that. They formed a circle or an oval. They were all in operation as a U.S. Marine Hospital.

LEVINE: Were people living on the island at this time?

HELIOTIS: As far as I know, no, but I could be wrong. There may have been some residences that I wasn't aware of.

LEVINE: Well, they would have been on the island, the part of the island that you were working on.

HELIOTIS: Really? Yeah, probably there were. In fact, probably part of the hospital may have had dormitories for nurses, for staff. I wouldn't be surprised. I

have one memory [laughs]. Since they were—and I'm certainly not putting down psychiatric patients. I enjoyed working with psychiatric patients very much. But we had a very interesting softball game every now and then, outside. We'd go into a fenced-in area. I think I found it; I think I saw it once when I came over here and snuck around there [laughs]. And you know, nobody followed any rules of baseball at all, not that I'm a great baseball fan but you know, I knew they were doing things wrong. And suddenly, one of the patients who had been very friendly with me, suddenly slipped a rope around my two hands, and tied it very tightly, and sort of pulled me off into a corner, and nobody noticed this. So he's , you know, kind of grinning, saying, "What do you think of that?" So I tried to be very—

LEVINE: You mean, you were, like, on the field?

HELIOTIS: Yeah, I was on the field with the patients. We were playing, you know, ball with these patients, and it was all males. I don't know whether they had any—I doubt that they had female patients at that time. So he took me off in this corner [laughs], and I, you know, I just instinctively knew not to get hysterical at all. And I said, "That's a beautiful knot, but I bet you don't know how to untie it." And he said, "I'm in the Merchant Marine. Of course I know!" And I said, "No, I don't think you can." So, he fell for my little ruse [laughs] and untied it! So I moved quickly and firmly to, you know, to a more central part of the field.

LEVINE: Wow.

HELIOTIS: I had one other experience. Going back on the ferry, at the end of the day one day, were a few patients who had a pass for the day or the week or whatever, to go home and see family. And there was a great big guy that I used to see. I'll always remember his name was Eddy. And he suddenly said, "How would you like to be thrown into the harbor?" (She laughs.) And he—at that time, I could be picked up; he couldn't do it now. But he picked me up, and sort of held me half way over the edge. And I just tried to stay cool. I couldn't even swim, and I was scared to death! But then he put me back down. And I reported him the next day, but everybody got a good laugh out of it, but nobody seemed too disturbed. I was! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Did you see, encounter him, ever after that?

HELIOTIS: Oh, yes. He did all kinds of threatening things, with a big smile on his face. He would do it only to me; I don't know why.

LEVINE: He liked you [laughs]!

HELIOTIS: Yeah, he was showing affection for me [laughs].

LEVINE: What were the kinds of problems that these Merchant Marines had? Can you say anything about that?

HELIOTIS: You know, I can't remember. You know, I'm sure I looked through their charts, and so on. But most of these men had exhibited some kind of irrational behavior on ships, and it probably had to be pretty bad to be hospitalized for it. I mean, it's the same sort of thing that you see in VA hospitals with some of the old patients there, and you know that they may have had something latent, and suddenly just went off the deep end. I think there were a lot of paranoid schizophrenics at the time. Oh, I know there were a number of depressives. In fact, [laughs] the nicest ones were the depressives; they were very sweet and kind, you know, and kind of sad. And I don't think they had the sort of drugs that we have nowadays, antidepressive medication. But they were very nice. For some reason, I remember a tall, dark-haired young man, and his name was Ferris. I assume that was his last name. And he was very clever; he was half Cherokee. He was a delightful man to work with, but he had— apparently he had tried to commit suicide a number of times, so he was hospitalized. But I always feel psychiatric patients are just a little more human than the rest of us. They suffer with human failings and human difficulties.

LEVINE: Well, do you remember any kinds of treatment that were being offered to them?

HELIOTIS: I know they were using electroshock therapy.

LEVINE: Do you have any recollections?

HELIOTIS: Yes! [Laughs] A very strong recollection! It was really primitive in those days. I mean, they've come back to it a little bit now, but first of all they don't use the kind of voltage that they used in those days. And I was walking down a hall one day in an unfamiliar building, and a nurse rushed out of a room and said, "Come in and help us hold down this patient." And this was my . . . I didn't know what she was even asking me to do, and this was my first introduction to electroshock therapy. And this poor man was terrified! I mean, who wouldn't be? Now, you know, people are sedated and so on, but you know. So there were six people holding this guy down, you know, to strap him down, and then shoot I don't know how much electricity into him, and I—it was a very frightening experience for me you know. I saw his spine arching, and you know, like an epileptic—

LEVINE: Like a convulsion.

HELIOTIS: Exactly. And of course, these people then lost their memory for, oh gosh, many days after that! And I saw this in other hospitals, too, at that time. And apparently, certainly the way they were doing it then, people did have some brain damage. I mean, I guess it's better than, you know, being a bad depressive, or whatever, you know, or being violent. But it was a very, to me anyway, barbarous treatment. But I certainly got a quick initiation into it, yeah. It was something! [Laughs]

LEVINE: So they really didn't have the psychotropic drugs at that point?

HELIOTIS: No, they really didn't. Years later, I think the first one that I remember coming out was Thorazine, and then you'd see patients lying around in halls, you know, just asleep because they were so overmedicated.

LEVINE: This is after?

HELIOTIS: This is after Ellis Island. I don't remember now. As I say, I could certainly be wrong; I was just a young student and I certainly didn't know everything that was going on. But I don't recall their giving those drugs. They've come a long way in the pharmaceutical profession, as far as these drugs go.

LEVINE: Well did you . . . well, you must have socialized with patients while you were doing crafts, or whatever?

HELIOTIS: Or playing softball! Oh yes, well, as you see, I enjoy chatting [laughs], and yes.

LEVINE: Yeah. And would they talk to you about their issues and their problems?

HELIOTIS: Most of them were responsive. Obviously, I wasn't going to discuss their illnesses with them, but I would try to talk about family or their experiences on the ships, which I was honestly interested in, you know, going through a storm at sea, or something.

LEVINE: Just as—of the population as a whole, which you probably didn't have much to do with before that, was there anything about them, as a group, that sticks in your mind, that kind of characterizes them?

HELIOTIS: Now, are you talking about psychiatric--?

LEVINE: Psychiatric Merchant Marines.

HELIOTIS: Um [laughs], they all looked sort of tanned and weather-beaten! I know you're thinking about personality. No, I can't really think of anything that stands out. I can't really differentiate them, you know. They were human

beings. But one, they all loved the sea, obviously, because to the best of my knowledge, nobody was ever drafted into the Merchant Marine. And of course, this was 1949, so it wasn't that long after World War Two. So a lot of these young men and older men had stories to tell. I can't remember any specific stories, but they were very frightening, you know. They would go on convoys across the Atlantic, you know, bringing things to England. Certainly prior to our entrance into the war, they worked with the Lend/Lease program, you know, getting equipment and supplies over to the English, so they had some very dangerous experiences. Some of them had ships blown up underneath them. So it was, you know, it was quite an experience. And I'm old enough now so that when I say the war, (she laughs) that's the war I'm talking about, World War Two.

LEVINE: Were some of their psychiatric problems the result of trauma during--?

HELIOTIS: War related? I can't tell you that. I'm sure that some of these things probably exacerbated. Usually—not always—but usually there's something, a basic problem, to begin with. I saw this in other VA hospitals, you know, people who had been in the war, that they may have had certain latent problems, but this would, you know, just bring it all to the surface with some of the horrors they saw and lived through.

LEVINE: Yeah. Now, you said they were different ethnic groups represented?

HELIOTIS: Yes, and I never understood how the law handled it, federal law handled it. But there, as I told you, there was a Greek (she laughs) there, whom I befuddled. I probably threw him, you know, backwards in his illness. But no, there were people from all over the place, a lot of Norwegians, a lot of Dutch.

LEVINE: And they were speaking their native language?

HELIOTIS: Yeah, some of them did. But most of them spoke English, I think, because they probably had to. You know I don't know why they . . . how they could be in the US Merchant Marine; I have no idea. And I'm sorry I didn't research that, but I [unclear].

LEVINE: Well, no, that's not—somebody else (laughs) can research that.

HELIOTIS: But it was very interesting, and I've always liked foreign languages, and I do a little better in Greek than I did at that time. But I enjoyed talking to them, and asking them certain words in their language, which I think everybody appreciates, you know, hearing something in their own language. And I tried to get it straight [laughs] and not confuse it.

LEVINE: So how did—what kind of an effect did you think the experience had on you, looking back on it? Do you think it was a--?

HELIOTIS: Oh, well, it was, first of all, an unforgettable one, to be working on Ellis Island. I mean, Ellis Island, of course, was very famous, at that time. Immigrants, obviously, were not going through at that time. I forget what the year is where they stopped processing immigrants.

LEVINE: Well, it was open 'til '54, but—

HELIOTIS: Yeah, I know the [unclear]. I have a friend, I think I mentioned to you, and I'm trying to get in touch with him, who was in the US Coast Guard, and stationed here in 1953.

LEVINE: But we do occasionally get people who came through here after World War Two, and for some reason were detained, because of medical or papers were not in order.

HELIOTIS: Yeah, legal problems, yeah. I was fascinated, for one thing, by—you know, to have this experience of dealing with people from many different countries. From my childhood I was interested in language and in foreign countries. I hated geography and history (she laughs) in school! I don't know why. I like to blame it all on the teachers, but it was probably my closed mind. But since that time, and when I started to meet various people, I was fascinated by it. So I like to hear these stories, and also about life on the sea. I mean, it was like opening a lot of new books, and learning new things. And it—well, I have very vivid, vivid memories of it. And as I say, coming in every morning was sheer pleasure. It was. . .you know, nobody enjoyed going to work as much as I did, at that time.

LEVINE: How would you describe yourself as a twenty year old, getting on the Ellis Island boat every morning?

HELIOTIS: Enthusiastic. It's hard, you know, it's hard to separate myself as a sixty-six year old from the twenty-year-old, mentally [laughs]. I liked the work I was doing very much.

LEVINE: This was really your initiation into the work world?

HELIOTIS: I had—no, I had one affiliation prior to that, at the Hospital for Special Surgery, and that was orthopedics. I had gone to college, NYU, in 1946, and after two years you could start your affiliations. So what I did was compress five years of work that included affiliations, into four. I just went straight through. And immediately after finishing in 1950, then I got my first paying job as an Occupational Therapist. I think the enormous sum of forty dollars a week [laughs]!

LEVINE: And how did your first job compare with what you did here, for this affiliation?

HELIOTIS: There were similarities because I worked in a big city hospital, Seaview Hospital, on Staten Island. And it was, again, it was a big hospital with many, many buildings, and people from all over the place. But while I was there at Seaview, they discovered the medication to halt the TB, and all of a sudden they started closing down buildings. But as far as comparing it, (pauses) I don't know. It's very similar. It's just working with different people. I tend to view each individual, you know, for themselves. At least my director in my first job was a little more open and kind with me than the one that I had on Ellis Island. Not that she was unkind to me; I just suddenly got hit at the end with being told my work was not quite up to snuff [laughs].

LEVINE: Mm-hm. Well, it must have been something of a man's world here, in New York.

HELIOTIS: Oh, yes. Oh well, all over it was a man's world, really [laughs]. I remember, too, that it was my first experience, that when a doctor walked into the room, you stood up. You always stood up, you know, and rushed to get him a cup of coffee if he wanted it. So, that was very different. Yes, it was all men, and I don't even know if there were women in the Merchant Marine. There may very well have been; I have no idea. But I only saw male patients. And there were male and female occupational therapists—not in Ellis Island when I was working here, but you know, in other places. And there are more and more. I think it's still predominantly a women's occupation, not that it's supposed to be, but it is.

LEVINE: Mm-hm. Do you know why you went into it?

HELIOTIS: [Laughs] Yes, well, as a child I always wanted to be a nurse. I had gone to have my tonsils out when I was eleven, and strangely enough, I thought it was the neatest thing to work in a hospital, you know. So I kept reading books; I loved to read. And one day my mother brought home a fictional book, I think it was: Sue Barton, Occupational Therapist. I started reading it, and I thought, "Oh, this sounds like just the sort of thing I would really like to do," because it was working with patients, and doing things that were therapeutic for them. But it just seemed to be a little bit more my kind of thing. Incidentally, I'm not an occupational therapist now. I'm still working, but I have an entirely different profession. I became an accountant! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, wow!

HELIOTIS: Well, my late husband was an accountant, and he became increasingly ill, and I started working more and more with him, until I quit my job as an occupational therapist and worked full time with him. And after he died, I suddenly said, "I'm not going to throw away this practice." And I know this doesn't relate to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: That's fine, that's fine.

HELIOTIS: But anyway, I went back to school. So now, I'm a Licensed Public Accountant. Not a CPA, but I'm licensed in the state of New Jersey, and I have (laughs) an accounting practice. But I still miss the medical world, too. I loved it. I loved, you know, going for the consultations, and seeing patients getting better or patients with strokes who were renewed by all our activities. So I really liked it very, very much.

LEVINE: Is there anything else you could say in closing about this period of time when you were here?

HELIOTIS: This period of time?

LEVINE: For you?

HELIOTIS: Well, I just—for me, you know, this sounds sort of foolish, but I just remember it as a very sunny time. It just—I remember it was sunshine and blue skies. I suppose I was very much in love with a man that I married eventually you know. But I liked doing it; I was finally getting out and doing the kind of work I wanted to do here. And this was such an ideal place! I think to be able to look out and see the Statue of Liberty on one side, and the New York sky line on the other side is heaven! [Laughs] I happen to love New York very, very much. So, that was great!

LEVINE: Well, that's a perfect place to end! Thank you. I'm speaking with Del Heliotis, who came and worked in Ellis Island in July and August of 1949 in the Marine Hospital. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, here at the studio at Ellis Island, on August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1995, signing off.

**END OF INTERVIEW**