

KECK-004

BRIGADIER THOMAS A. JOHNSON

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SALVATION ARMY SOCIAL WORKER AT ELLIS ISLAND

1930's

GUMB: This is tape number 004. This is Dana Gumb and I'm speaking with Mr. Thomas Johnson, a Brigadier in the Salvation Army, on the 23rd day of January, 1985. And we're beginning this interview at four minutes to eleven. We're about to interview Brigadier Johnson about his experiences as an immigration social worker.

Okay. Can we have a little background, Brigadier Johnson. Uh, let's first ask where and when were you born?

JOHNSON: I was born in London, England in, on February the 9th, 1899.

GUMB: And how did you get involved with the Salvation Army?

JOHNSON: Well, I was practically born in the Salvation Army.

My mother was a Salvationist in England in the early days of the Army and, uh, I, we came here to this country and continued. Well, in the beginning we went on a farm, in Pennsylvania, East, near Easton, and we didn't get to the Army for about two, three, four years, but after that we came back to Easton, Pennsylvania and joined the Army there, and that's where I came from, that place to the school in, in New York, where we graduated in 1920.

GUMB: So, how old were you when you first got . . .

JOHNSON: Here?

GUMB: . . . involved in the Salvation Army?

JOHNSON: Well, I would say I was, (to off-mike voice) shh, shh, shh, I would say that I was born in the Army. And I don't remember anything else except coming up through the ranks of the Sunday School and so on and so forth, all the way up. Until I became an officer and then, of course, I stayed with the officer, as an officer after that.

GUMB: Um, so what sort of training did you have to become an officer in the Army?

JOHNSON: Well, we, well, I've had all the training because of a young person, we have various organizations that help you, uh, school and, which is now located in Suffern, New York. Used to be in, up in the Bronx and we went there and we studied all the different things that the Army gave us, the Bible, and doing work for, uh, people that were, and we went visiting the different homes and so on to try and, you know, if we can help anybody and so on, and that's the way we went right up, up until we graduated, what we call being commissioned, which then makes you an ordained minister in the Salvation Army.

GUMB: And when was that, when, when was that?

JOHNSON: That was in 1920. That was in June, 21st, 1920.

GUMB: And then, uh, when did you first get involved in immigration work?

JOHNSON: Well, after I left, I after I left training I was brought into New York headquarters right after, well, I didn't there right away, I had to go to Philadelphia. The post that was open for me at that time was in, was in, somebody else was in it. And so I had to go to Philadelphia to help them clean up the

work that was down there. I was there for two or three months, then I came back to New York and they put me in the travel service, which was then the only place they could give me, and I worked on that till I became in the, in the immigration. And it was then, given immigration and travel service bureau.

GUMB: So, uh, then that was shortly after 1920 that you first . . .

JOHNSON: Yes, bout, about three months, three months after June. June, July, August, September, it could have been about September. September, yeah. I think it was.

GUMB: So why did you happen tog et into immigration? How did you happen to get into that kind of work?

JOHNSON: Well, I think it was because it was really, really dovetailed in with the travel, which was the one, I mentioned about Nelson. He was in travel. I wasn't in travel. I did travel, uh, travel work in connection with my immigration, but he just did travel and he thought, well, I was in the way of doing his work and that he should do the whole thing together, put it together.

GUMB: What did the travel department involve? What kind of . . .

JOHNSON: Well, that would be, that would be, um, travel of officers. Of course, anybody could, anybody could come in off the, off the street and come in and ask where the travel bureau and then find out whether we could do anything for them. But most of it was done for officers. The officers may be transferred to India or Africa or wherever you, all over the world, and I would have to, have to take care of, of their, their passports, getting their visas, and, uh, making their transportation arrangements. In the beginning it was all ships. Queen Elizabeth and the Queen Mary and other ships that went over there. And then, after that, or wherever they went, and then after that it was the aeroplanes, mostly aeroplanes. And, of course, that was dovetailed into the travel service because of how these things were done. I went to the, to the consulates and got the visas taken care and if there was any law of any kind, uh, in connection with that, I would have to find out what it is and, uh, tell them what they had to do and what they couldn't do, see?

GUMB: So, as an immigration officer, what were your first duties?

JOHNSON: Well, of course, of course what I had to do, uh, that, uh, that thing that you got, what date was that? 1964? No, 1946. Well, before that, we just went in as immigration, as representative for the Army, I wasn't a lawyer. I merely practiced law, but I wasn't a lawyer. But, uh, I, I had to go before the Immigration lawyers, they were all lawyers, the inspectors were all lawyers. And I had to go before them for the different things that had to be done. But first off I had to read up the Immigration law, which was, I don't know how many pages . . . A big, thick book with all the laws that they had. I had to be familiar with that and then, after I got familiar with it, well then I would start to use it and, and practice it. Until the time came when the Immigration decided that all lawyers and all representative from the different organizations would have to have a thing like you got there, a diploma, what do you call it, to show that they were able to work before the Immigration. Now, the thing that says the appeals on there is Tom, Tom Finicite, Finicain, I think it is,

was the head judge and he had his office down there in Washington. Well, that was the appeals, the Board of Appeals, as they call it. It wasn't a court, court, but it was just for Board of Appeals and then if you disagreed with a case that you had up there in New York, then you would ask for a chance to go before the Appeals Board and take care of the case as you thought it should be and most, most cases that I went down for they granted me my request and they allowed what was done, I think it was only about one case that I had that I didn't, I wasn't ale to take are of it. It wasn't my fault, it was the girls' fault. But that's how I did it and, of course, going as you go, step by step and year by year, of course, I got, I don't say profess, proficient, but I did get to know quite a lot.

GUMB: In the early years, do you remember when you first went to Ellis Island?

JOHNSON: I would say that I went to Ellis Island in, it must have been around 19, 19, well, it was before 1932, a few years before that. But that, of course, was only, you see, Ellis Island, they had all the hearing officers and that, they would all go over on the same

boat in the morning and stay there and take care of their cases. Then after that, the place they, they brought all the inspectors over to New York into the building they had down on Eighth Street and Christopher. And they went up, up, uh, up to Columbus Avenue, uh, just around Lincoln Center, and they had to, inspectors up there, the detention room was up on the top. Keeping them under lock and key. And then, they moved over, they moved to another place down on, down near, uh, down near the, the Lincoln Cen, the World, World Center. World, world (voice off mike) World Trade Center.

GUMB: Do you remember what Ellis Island looked like when you first went there?

JOHNSON: Oh, yeah, sure. I got that all in my mind's eye. It was dreary, it was the dreariest place you'd ever been in. And it wasn't, it didn't look like a prison or anything like that. But you went in, in the, on the boat which they had provided for you and then you got on the boat and when you got off the boat you went on a slip going in and you made a right turn to go to the Immigration. If you made a left turn, you went to the hospital, which was used with the, uh, for not only

immigrants could use that, too, if they got sick. And then you turn right and went into the, uh, around a ramp, uh, and then into the, into the Inspec, where the inspectors were and then, finally, you went and found your people. Most of them were all congregated in the Great Hall. The great, big Great Hall it's still there, I guess. It looks like it when I see it.

And get pictures of it. And around the Great Hall was a balcony. In the back of the balcony was the rooms that they slept in. And they came down.

GUMB: So, where would you go to meet your . . .

JOHNSON: Well, they would bring them out. They, they, I would have to wait there until they called the person by name and then they would come out into a, a small space that you had reserved for you where you could be, like private, to talk to them, and find out what their case is. With an inspector, of course. Naturally, it was finding out what, what this man said he was doing or was going to do. Uh, for instance, if he had been a criminal then he couldn't come in. And that, that stopped the case and if he had any other reason for getting here and he wasn't allowed, well, then, of course, that stopped the case. But if it was

something like he was going to come here and I found out in talking, 'cause I had the case over in New York, see, and then they would tell me, well you come to see about John Jones. Well, then, I would try to find out about him and if I found out eventually that he may have, may have had a, uh, a, an American, an American wife or American children, even if he didn't have the wife, he had American children, then, of course, that would take care of the case. The Inspector would say, dismissed, and, and that would, that would be the end of that.

GUMB: The person would be allowed to stay here?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes! They could come out, they would go back into the rooms, they could pick up their baggage and come on the boat with us, and go back to the, to the, uh, then, of course, if they needed information or some transportation or something like that to go where they were going, then we would have to see what we could do to help them out, you know, to get them where they were going.

GUMB: So it was a dreary place?

JOHNSON: Oh, very dreary, very dreary. And, uh . . .

GUMB: It was very crowded?

JOHNSON: Well, sometimes it was very crowded. They had thousands of people over there. But you wouldn't notice, when you walked around, you couldn't see them. The day we had the Staff Band over there from Headquarters for Christmas, that, we, the General Committee put in, put a big tree up, and we all provided, uh, what's-a-names, Christmas things for them, for the children and for the big people, too. And when the band started to play, you could hear that, because it would go up in that great big hall and mushroom out. (he laughs) I'm telling you, it's a wonder they didn't hear it on the, on the mainland. Yeah.

GUMB: Well, uh, how did you get involved in this (?)? How did people contact you?

JOHNSON: Well, sometimes they would come in to our office. And then, in other cases, the inspectors would say, I think we've got a good case here and we just want to have you come in on it and see whether, uh, you think that we can do, do what we want to do, see? And then we . . .

GUMB: Why did they call in the Salvation Army?

JOHNSON: Well, a lot of, a lot of, a lot of them would ask when they were over on Ellis Island that they wanted to have somebody, they had, they had lists. A list, a big list of all the agencies that would help them. And the Salvation Army was down at the bottom. But invariably, they would pick the Army and that's how we got into the case, because they'd say, well, we'd like to have somebody represent it, represent us and we see the Salvation Army is listed here and we'd like to have them. Well then, soon as that happened, well, then they, well, soon as they got on the phone they'd call me and say would I be willing to take the case and when could you come? Sometimes I had to go over right away because they were working on the case, over on the island. Till they got to New York. Then when they came to New York, I would, I would go up to the office in New York, wherever that was.

GUMB: Why did they pick the Salvation Army?

JOHNSON: Well, I, uh, don't know. The only thing I can say is, I was talking, I can give you an illustration of a case which would help you. I had a Jewish fella that

was, uh, that had been in prison in Chicago and, uh, he, he had taken a lot of money from people and they put him in jail. Well, then, he got out of jail and he came to New York. And he was living here with his wife. And then, all of a sudden, the court over in, in Chicago, said we want you to come over here to check on your case. So he went. And then, when he came back, he was all agitated because after he got here they picked him up and said, we're going to hold you, deport you. And he got all frustrated, so he came down to me. And it appeared that, when he went over to Chicago, he took the Michigan Central Railroad which goes through Canada. And because, because he was a criminal, or had been, he was not allowed to stay in this country, they would have to deport him right away. So that's where I got in and, and he, because the, uh, the inspector that was taking his case said to me, or said to him, well, how did you get in touch with the Salvation Army? Why didn't you go to a Jewish organization, or somebody else? Not using just that particular phrase, but that's what he said.

But anyway, if you want to eliminate that saying, you can, because I used a person's name, uh, you know, an, a sect, but if you can take that out, all right. But

anyway, uh, he asked, "Why did you go to the Salvation Army?" He says, "Well, because I trust the Salvation Army. Don't trust anybody else. And that's how he, I guess, came to us in the future. From that particular case. But, uh, I pleaded his case and said that the man didn't know that he was going through Canada, nobody told him, and eventually he, uh, he was given pre-examination, which they had in those days, where a man could go to Canada, take his passport up to Canada. We filled all his papers out here. I had to do all his paperwork for him. And then he would go to Canada and go to the Immigration, the, uh, the Consulate up there, and present his papers and then, if they were satisfied then they gave him a visa in his passport, and then came back to the border, presented his passport, and came into the country and he was legally here after that. It was something that was used a few years back, I can't tell you the years, but that was the thing, instead of send . . . It used to be that people, when they came from foreign countries, had to go back to their own home country. Which meant lots of money, some of them way out in the Near East, Far East, and so on. And down to Africa and places like that. And they had to spend the money

to get there. Maybe by the time they got there, they didn't have the money to come back. But, uh, so, they fixed this idea to go to Canada and that's how I did it. And I had to go with him, he was afraid to go. He says, I, I'm afraid. When I get back to the border, they may not let me in. I said they told you, I said, up there in the consulate that they can't stop you. If they want to stop you and they're going to stop you and send you through to the Immigration here, then the Immigration would stop you here and hold you if they couldn't, but they can't do that. I said, you got a passport and the passport says you're allowed to enter the country. So I went up with him and went to the consulate and went with him and came back again.

GUMB: So the (?), that fellow had to go down to Ellis Island to . . .

JOHNSON: No, he was here in the, in the, in, on the mainland. On the mainland. No, no, no, people were only held in Ellis Island that came in ships, mostly. But the only ones that were down there that had to go there over there was when they had to go see the inspectors. There was a case that they picked up here in New York, or wherever they got them. And they had to go there

because that's where they would, they would keep them, there was no other place they had.

GUMB: They would just go over there to see inspectors?

JOHNSON: See the inspector, yeah.

GUMB: Would they have to stay there, these people that were going to . . .

JOHNSON: Well, if they had anything against them, they would, yes, if they thought they had anything against them like this man I told you about. Yeah.

GUMB: Uh, usually what, what were the typical kind of problems that these, uh, people that could be deported had?

JOHNSON: Well, most of them, some of them, some of the cases were cases of, uh, of, uh, of doing things that they shouldn't have done in connection with their, getting their documents together. I had one girl that I had to go, that was the case I didn't, I didn't win at the Appeals. She, uh, she was from Jamaica. Her father was here in Brooklyn as a minister. And she came to see her father. And they picked her up. And, uh, I said, well, why not, I tried to tell the inspector,

she has her father here. I'm not sure whether she had anybody down in Jamaica or not. I don't think she did. But anyway, the inspector, no he says, we've, we've got to deport her. And, of course, the poor kid cried. She wasn't too young. And so finally I said, "Well, let's take the case to Washington, see what they say. They may, uh, be, you know, fell good when the girl went inside to the room and maybe cried and so on." I said, (he laughs) "Then maybe they'll, maybe they'll feel good you and give you a chance." But they didn't do that, they said no. The reason was this girl had taken somebody's, somebody's passport and birth certificate and used that to get the, get the passport. The name wasn't the same name as on that, on that what's his name. But they used it. Used that to get in the country. And because of that she couldn't stay here. She had to be deported. There was no other way out.

GUMB: What other sort of problems did people . . .

JOHNSON: Well . . .

GUMB: . . . people that were held on Ellis Island?

JOHNSON: Well, the people that were held. Well, most of the,

those would be would be people that were, that were, uh, would be, would be here in, in on the mainland and they were held up, probably had a criminal case or something like that. Or had, had, maybe had nobody in the country that they could depend on. You know, like father or mother or brothers or sisters or anyone else. They can't, couldn't go further than that. They couldn't go to aunts and uncles. They had to take their father or m or brothers or sisters. But if they had somebody like that that they could hook onto, then they were safe. But if they didn't, then we had to come in and see what we could do to, to help them out. Sometimes you couldn't do anything at all because they had nobody. And they say, well, you just have to go back home, that's all. And, and then, and then get you, and then get you and then get you when you got home, if you do go home, which is nothing else you can do. Then when you get home, uh, get, uh, get a visa and try and come in, if you can. Uh, now, if they were, if they were, uh, professional people or if they were people that had, had a good, a good, uh, working, working arrangement, like they were good carpenters or good plumbers or, things of that kind, then there were arrangements, if they arranged to come

in here when they went back and go tin touch with someone who could give them a job in that particular place, then they would certify that they were going to bring these people in, and that's where we would get in touch, and certify and get all the papers together so that they could come back. But they had to leave the country, they couldn't stay.

GUMB: Typically, how long would someone have to stay on Ellis Island?

JOHNSON: Well, they didn't stay very long. I mean, specially if they were going through to meet relatives in on the mainland. They wouldn't stay there very long. No.

GUMB: As far as your clients, the people that you counselled with problems . . .

JOHNSON: Well, they, they wouldn't stay, they didn't stay there too long because they, they, they closed that thing up and, and we had to change everything. We had a library on the, on the Island, which we had a woman working every day. And then, and then we had to give that up when the Island closed, of course. But, uh, we uh, we did . . .

GUMB: Where was the library located?

JOHNSON: The library was upstairs, upstairs over, over in a, another part of the building, beyond the Great Hall. Yeah. And then there was a room there that was left, with an organ and everything. Piano, whatever it was, that we used to have our Protestant services up there. And, and the Catholic services and the Jewish services. All used the same room. And we had to wait from one to the other. I waited till the, maybe the priest got through his service and then I came in and did mine.

GUMB: Uh, so there were some people spending some time there, if they needed a library.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, there were some there that, uh, too, went there for, for quite, quite some time. I can't tell you just how long, but I know they were there and, and . . .

GUMB: Were you involved in any cases where . . .

JOHNSON: No, those people that came mostly with ships and they held them. And I didn't have much to do with them, no.

GUMB: Did you ever have a meal on Ellis Island? Did you ever . . .

JOHNSON: OH, yes, yes, they had a restaurant there. Oh, sure.

GUMB: Was it good food?

JOHNSON: Yes, not bad. Not bad. I wouldn't say like my wife makes, but not bad. It wasn't bad, no. No.

GUMB: And then, of course, they had some accommodations there . . .

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, to sleep. Yes. Oh, oh, they had to, had to rest. Because they wouldn't let them go to the mainland. Once they got on the mainland, they disappeared and you wouldn't find them at all in New York City. (he laughs) Or anywhere else, if they got in a big city. Chicago, a place like that.

GUMB: Did the Salvation Army have an office there?

JOHNSON: No, we didn't have an office. We used, we used the library. I mean, if, if a man came up to the library and was asking questions, we would try to help him, naturally. But then we'd try to find out if he'd had a, uh, if he had a regular trial, a regular hearing.

We call them hearings, not trials. Hearings. If he had a hearing, uh, and he hadn't had it yet., then we wouldn't touch the case until he'd seen the Inspector and if the Inspector said, sometimes the inspectors called us in. You know, specially when they were up in, up in, up near Lincoln Center, these folks would call us in and, uh, and say, they call up down the office, can you come up. We got a case we think, a case that you, you could handle, or should handle. So I'd go right up there and they were in the hearing room and, and I'd go in and they'd tell me what the case was like. I'd look over the papers and if they thought we could help, okay.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

GUMB: This is the beginning of Side Two of an interview with Brigadier Thomas Johnson. You were discussing how you had to get money for some of your people . . .

JOHNSON: Yeah, if a, if a, if there were some that were going, you know, sometimes they'd say well, we'll reimburse you, but they never did. But, uh, we would, I'd take it up with the powers that be upstairs and ask if it

would be possible to take care of this person. And usually they would say yes, unless they were going too far away. Then I don't know, I don't know what I did then.

GUMB: Uh, but in, every Christmas, the Salvation Army would . . .

JOHNSON: No, it was just one, one year I was the chairman of the General Committee. They appointed me as chairman and on that Christmas I thought I'd really make a good Christmas and that's what I did. And, of course, the General Committee all joined in with me and helping me, cause I couldn't afford all the money to put that stuff, you know, to put in there. and that's what they did.

GUMB: So this was just a special Christmas.

JOHNSON: Well, that was only special. But I had the band over there one time in the summertime and they played inside there for Sunday morning church service, uh, but we had it outside and then I think, if I remember rightly, they went across to the, to the hospital, I couldn't think of the name. I'm gettin' old, I think I went to the hospital, they went to the hospital and,

and formed, formed, you know, outside and played out there for the patients in the hospital. Yeah. It was a good, it was, we had a good time.

GUMB: Who stayed at the hospital?

JOHNSON: Well, it was, it was (voice off mike) well, it was mostly, mostly, was I think they had some war veterans there, some, some veterans, if I'm not mistaken. I may not be, may not be right. But they would take any of the immigration people in and the immigrants if they got sick and they couldn't handle them over, over in the place, in the, in the rooms upstairs, well, then they'd take them over there where they could look after them.

GUMB: Uh, that General Committee that you mentioned . . .

JOHNSON: Yeah?

GUMB: Uh, what, when was that set up and what was the purpose of that group?

JOHNSON: Well, I think, the General Committee, because somebody was a Jew, read to me the list of the people in the 19, was it 1926 or something that were in there, well, it was, uh, formed early. I don't, I can't remember

the date, it must, it must've, it must've been before my time because when I, when I, uh, when I got into the immigration right away they came after me and said, we want you to join the Committee. So I can't really give you the, the exact, the exact time, the exact date.

GUMB: And the, uh, the General Committee on Immigrant Aide, uh, what was the purpose of the Committee?

JOHNSON: Well, they did the same thing I did, in other words, if, if somebody was an Italian, for instance, and they wanted somebody to speak to them in Italian, they'd pick out the Italian Welfare League, see? Uh, same as they would pick me out if they wanted me. But, uh, they had all different kinds, Slavic and different organizations, that could talk their language, Polish and different ones, and if they didn't have any, if they had somebody that they had to talk to that they didn't have the language, that that, ready, then they'd get 'em, uh, translator and they would translate in Mr. Brunetti what they were talking about. So, during the hearing there would be this translator taking down, uh, telling them everything that he said. And then they'd take care and put it on

their record.

GUMB: So, did the General Committee have an office there, on Ellis Island?

JOHNSON: No, no, no, no, they had their own offices. Everyone there had their own. I had mine and the Catholic Welfare was around 22nd Street, Park Avenue, Carl, uh, Carlozzi was up, oh, up, uptown a little ways and all of them had different offices all over the, over the city, and then we'd come together once a month and talk our business up as to what had happened, what we were doing, and how we'd come through on our cases and we're, how we were doing in on our cases, and so on, and if there was any, if we had any gripe with the, with the Immigration Authorities, uh, then somebody would make a committee of maybe three or four to go, see the head man and tell him we didn't like what this and that was being done, see? But we didn't have very many of those kind of things.

GUMB: And what was that thing, Carlozzi's?

JOHNSON: Carlozzi. C-A-R-L-O-Z-Z-I. Carlozzi. Carlozzi.

GUMB: And who is that?

JOHNSON: Huh?

GUMB: Who is Carlozzi?

JOHNSON: She is the director of the Inter, uh, Italian Welfare League.

GUMB: (?)

JOHNSON: No, she's probably retired, she may even be dead, I don't know. But I don't know where, where the Italian Welfare League is. If you can get them on the phone, they will tell you if she's still around, you can get her, because she would know more about, about this than I am, cause she was in longer than I was.

GUMB: Were there, uh, as far as other typical kid of cases that you would deal with, were there any kind of particular cases that you . . .

JOHNSON: No, I didn't handle those. No, no.

GUMB: Another, I don't know if you want to deal with this, but I'm just curious if you would deal with religion with the client, they would, you know, if you would discuss religion with them or how that was dealt . . .

JOHNSON: No, I, not specifically. They knew we were the

Salvation Army. They knew we were religious. If they raised the question, then we'd talk to them. But we didn't raise any questions if they were, if they were, if they were Protestant, we dealt with them on that arrangement. But we didn't say anything too much to them, and if we were, if they were Catholics, well, we would deal with them on the basis of their, of their case, not, not their religion, no. Because if they were, if they started that, we would say, well, we can help you some but we would prefer you to go to your own, your own church and your pastor would give you that information, see?

GUMB: Generally, uh, how would you characterize your relation with the Immigration and Naturalization Services inspectors? What kind of relationships?

JOHNSON: Very, very good. Very good. Very good. In fact, everybody in, that had to do with things, the inspectors on the, on the, what-do-you-call-it (voice off mike) on the piers that had to inspect the baggage, we had very good service. If I, I knew several of them there. If they, they used to walk around the pier to see if somebody was ready to have their inspection. And most every time, if I saw

somebody like that and I knew who he was, I remembered him. I'd call him over, and he'd come right over and do the inspection. And then, of course, I went, I went in the Immigration Room on, on the ship, right to the Immigration, from, because I had the person's name that had been sent to me by the, by our Immigration Office in London or wherever they were, came from, and that would be sent to me in advance. So I knew they were coming on, say, the Queen Elizabeth, such-and-such a date. And they were in the tourist section or whatever it was. So then I'd go up on board. We went up on the board, on ship, with the regular people that was there, uh, immigration inspectors and so on, we'd go right in, right up to the Grand Salon up on the top of the deck near, and we'd um, I'd go right in to the inspector and say, do you have John Jones on your list? And he would look it over. No, I don't, he might say. Well, then I'd say, do you, and I'd go to another inspector 'cause there'd be probably four or five inspectors in the one room. And I'd go to the other man and if he didn't have it I'd go to the others until I got to the right man and then I would say to the inspector, well, I'm coming, I'm here to arrange to get John Jones. And then he would say,

well, just a minute, is John Jones here? No, he says, we'll go down and get him. So then I had, to look through the, through the pier. Well, bring him up and then he would take care of him, take care of him for me. And sometimes those, those people were in tourist and they got through a good time, you know, as quick as we could get them through. You know.

GUMB: Were there ever any cases that you had where you felt that, uh, it was an unfair decision or where you had problems with the official decision?

JOHNSON: No, I couldn't say that I had anything like that. No, I'd, I'd had pretty good service from all of them. Of course, some of them would give me a hard time, saying, now you know you can't do this and you can't do that. So I'd say, well, let's, let's be, let's be, whatta ya, what's, what's the word, let's be helpful to these people, you know. That's not the word I want, but that's why I can't, I can't think of it. Uh, try to, you know, in other words if you can bend backwards to do something to help, you know. But, of course, if they had, uh, a thing that, they were bound by whatever they were, they were doing, well, then, of course, there was nothing we could do. You had to

take their, their decision.

GUMB: When you would sit in on a hearing, were you entitled to act as a lawyer?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, I could ask any questions. And the same way with the client. If the client was talking and I wanted to know something about what they were talking about, I would, I would ask the inspector could I speak to so-and-so? Yes, go ahead. So then I'd ask him, now, maybe, maybe you should please tell the inspector what he was talking about, trying to unravel that, you know. And I'd say, well now, you'd better speak to the inspector and tell him what you, what you really thought that was, you know, what, what was known. And then, of course, he'd talk to the inspector and maybe it would help, help out, and maybe it wouldn't. It would all depend. You see, the thing in this thing is that you really would have to have individual cases to be able to tell you what you could and couldn't do. You know? But, uh, I've got some cases that really would give you (he laughs) they were some cases I had. And, uh . . .

GUMB: Do you have examples for us?

JOHNSON: Oh, I have one, I have one, but I don't know whether I can find it. It's in there somewhere. Uh, what was it now? You remember that one that I used to have a good, good one I used to talk about? I can't, I can't remember it. (voice off mike) Oh, yes, yes, that's right. Yeah. That's right. I went out there, he was in jail, oh, excuse me . . .

GUMB: Go ahead.

JOHNSON: He was, he was in jail and the mother, the mother wanted to go out and see him and so I went out with her to Michigan City Prison and he was there and, and, and she went, she went, the head man of the prison allowed her to go in and put her arms around him and everything else and he said afterwards that that really shouldn't be allowed but, we did it because we felt it was good for her, for her as well as him. And then she finally came back. She wanted the governor to let him go and she, and of course they couldn't do anything. and uh, he'd, he'd murdered somebody and so then, i think he, well, I can't say what it was. I wouldn't say because I'm not sure. But, uh, he, eventually his case came up and they deported him because he'd had, because he was a criminal, criminal

and so on. When criminals are involved, you can't do a thing for them. That's, that's a regular thing in the gov, it was in the government at that time. I don't know what it is now, 'cause I don't know the law. But at that time, you, you couldn't do much about it. So they sent him back to England and I, I think he got married and then finally we, no, he didn't get married. We put him in the, our institution over there in London and I finally heard that he got despondent and drowned himself in the canal nearby. Yeah.

GUMB: Did he have to stop off in Ellis before being deported?

JOHNSON: No, I don't remember what, what happened to him because I think he was in jail when the mother came after me. And I didn't have anything to do with his case at all. I was only trying to help her, because she thought if she saw somebody in authority she might be able to get him out and take her back to England. Because she came from England, over here.

GUMB: When they did have criminals in Ellis Island, was there, what sort of security measures were there?

JOHNSON: Well, they were locked up. They were locked up. I can't tell you just where it was, but they were locked up. Same way when they come on the mainland, they were up in the top of the, uh, the Federal Detention place, up on the top of the buildings, and they couldn't come down, they couldn't, they couldn't go any further except on the roof. And if they got on the roof, that building was a tall roof, they'd crash down to the street and they'd be out of luck. So they couldn't, they couldn't get out.

GUMB: So when they were brought down in Ellis, uh, criminals were brought down to see, for you to see them, they were accompanied by police officers?

JOHNSON: No, just the, they were brought down by, by people from Ellis Island, the folks that were in there that were, you know, uh, they would be, uh, I'd guess you'd say uh, to look after these people. They'd bring them down to the room and then the inspector would, would, uh, would take care of it from then on. And, uh, see what could be done for this person.

GUMB: So were the people locked up, they were kept in one area in the . . .

JOHNSON: Oh, yeah, they were, they were, they weren't together,
no.

GUMB: You mean, the other people . . .

JOHNSON: So far as I know now, I, I didn't see the whole of the
place, but I think that's what, that's what happened.

I'm going back so far that my memory is, is not quite
clear on that. But I think that's what happened. I'm
not trying to, you know, do anything that would
interfere with this record that you're making but, uh,
if that's not correct, I don't know how you could get
it out of there unless you could take it out. But I
don't think it's, I don't think I'm too far off. But
as I say, it's so far back that I can't remember it
all.

GUMB: Well, moving up into the war years, uh, were there
special people held at Ellis Island during that
period?

JOHNSON: Well, the war years, what, what year are you talking
about?

GUMB: World War Two.

JOHNSON: That's 1940 . . .

GUMB: 1941?

JOHNSON: '41, '42, '45? Well, in that case, that was the Japs, wasn't it?

GUMB: Right.

JOHNSON: Yeah, well, in that case, what I did then, I was brought down to the courthouse in Foley Square and, uh, I, uh, had to wait for my turn and, uh, we went inside to the judge's chambers and he told us what he wanted to do and he said to me, I want you to take care of seventy Japanese and Italian immigrants who are on the Island, not on the Island, this was before the, before, we were, were off the Island then. But they weren't held, they weren't criminals being held, but they were, they were immigrants that they had to watch and so, they, well, I got seventy of them and they gave me these people to look after. Every week I had they had to come in to see me. Tell me where they'd been and so forth. And then, uh, and then eventually when the War was over they were discharged and nothing happened. Only one man went bad and that was a man who was a, uh, a German and they wanted him to go in the, in the service, would he, would he go in

the service. And he said yes, he'd go, and then of course they brought up the question would he serve anywhere? He said, well, I'll serve but I won't serve in Germany. And so they put him in jail. That's the only one, uh, that I lost. I don't know where he is now, naturally. He may be dead, as far as I know.

GUMB: But you didn't have any contact with any of the people held on Ellis Island during the war. Do you know those people who . . .

JOHNSON: No, no, no. Well, the war was before that. That was the First World War.

GUMB: I mean World War Two.

JOHNSON: Oh, no, World War Two, no. That was off of there then in '42, I'm sure of that. No, there weren't, there wasn't any immigration. It was still held, people coming in, uh, to go there, but it was mostly done by the main offices in New York. And then, when they picked a man up if, uh, if they would let him out on his own recognizance to come back for the hearing. Of course, if he didn't show up, then they go out looking for him. then when they put him, put him back, he'd go into detention because they wouldn't trust him,

see, until he could get his hearing taken care of.

GUMB: Now, one other question, I'm curious as to what boat you would take and where the boat would . . .

JOHNSON: Well, the boat, boat went, went from the Battery. The Battery across to the slip in Ellis Island. And it was only, it was a government boat, nobody else could get on. In other words, you couldn't go to, you couldn't go to Statue of Liberty. I don't know what they're going to do when they get the whole thing joined together, maybe they will. They'll probably have to, to have two or three boats. But, but that's all they did, was going in the slip, and then the people'd all get off the boat. Then everybody that was waiting to come back, that had had their hearings, would get on the same boat and go back to the pier in the, at the Battery, yeah.

GUMB: So, looking back at your experience as an immigration social worker, do you remember any particularly rewarding cases, or ones that were especially gratifying to you?

JOHNSON: Well, I can't say. Most, most all of them were, because whenever I got a case and I won the case, I

would feel very glad and I'd go back to the Island and tell my assistants, I had, uh, a girl who was born in Switzerland for my assistant, she was my translator. She could speak German and French. And Swiss, of course. And she used to do a lot of that work. She did the translation in my office. And I'd go back to her and, and the secretary that I had and tell them that we'd won the case, so-and-so, because the secretary would know the case because she was, you know, working on it, doing the typing and so on. But I'm glad I don't have to do the typing of this thing.

(he laughs) So long!

GUMB: This is the end of the interview with Brigadier Thomas Johnson.