

KECK-70/DASSA

KECK-70

GABRIEL DASSA

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AGE 18

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GUMB: This is Dana Gumb, and I'm speaking with Mr. Gabe Dassa on the 25th day of October, 1985. We're beginning this interview at 5:12. We're about to interview Mr. Dassa about his immigration experience from Greece in the year 1920. All right, Mr. Dassa, if we could begin with where and when you were born?

DASSA: I was born in Salonika in 1901. My father was a carpenter and, uh, you know, when I was about three months old they went, he went to Alexandria, Egypt. He was there five years. Then he came back to Salonika, took the whole family, and we all went to Alexandria, Egypt. And then we came back in 1908,

back in Salonika.

GUMB: Uh, and, uh, uh, what was life, what was life like there in Salonika?

DASSA: Well, it, it was, at the time of, of independence of Turkey. In fact in Turkish they used to call it the Holiett. It doesn't mean anything to you because it's in Turkish, the independence, and it was a lot of flags in the street and all that. But I don't remember much of it because I was only eight years old.

GUMB: Uh, by independence, what do you mean, the Turkish state was . . .

DASSA: Turkey and Greece, they always had, I can never remember any special time that they weren't at war. Always, it was either the Turks with the Greeks or the Albanians or Bulgarians, Serbia. In fact, a Balkanic war. It was in 1912. That's when the Greeks came in Salonika.

GUMB: So at the time when you were living there Salonika was part of . . .

DASSA: When I was born in Turkey, and when I came back from

Alexandria it was still Turkey. Then, first it was the Taro Turkish (?) War in 1909 or 1910, I don't remember much of it. But in 1912, I remember very well, it used to be the Turks on one side and the Greeks and Bulgarian Serbians on the other. All the three powers came in Salonika. But the Greeks were more, and in fact, they had a war in the city itself in 1912. And the Greeks won, and the Serbians went back. But the Bulgarians were stubborn people. They wouldn't go. And, and almost all of them got killed that night there.

GUMB: Salonika is now part of Greece?

DASSA: It's Greece.

GUMB: So, uh, uh . . .

DASSA: We Jews, we go, we turn our flags, you know, we go where our bread is buttered, like. So, when, when we went, when we came out of school that day, everybody's telling everybody, "Go home, go home and stay home, because it's going to be trouble tonight." And, in fact, there was. We heard shooting the whole night long, we didn't know what was going on.

GUMB: What day was this?

DASSA: Well, I can't remember exactly the day. It was in 1912.

GUMB: This was the war, the, uh . . .

DASSA: The Balkanic War.

GUMB: The Balkanic War.

DASSA: Yeah. It was, that was in 1912. But, as soon as we came out of school, everybody says, "Go home because there's going to be trouble tonight." Then as soon as it get dark, we heard shooting from all over. Because it used to be, Bulgarians they were in some schools in other buildings, and the whole night they were fighting. In the morning, as soon as it got cleared up, everybody started going out in the street and ask, "Who won? Who won?" "The Greeks." And we all hoisted the Greek flags.

GUMB: So, um, what did your, did you go to school in Salonika?

DASSA: Yes. I went, I, take that paper there.

GUMB: Okay. We'll look at it at the end.

GUMB: See, I went to a school they called Alliance Israeli Universal. It means Alliance Jewish Universal. It's like printers they sent all over the world wherever the Jews, the Jews are. And I went that school until, until I came in America.

GUMB: So, uh,uh, how old were you when, uh, when you came to America?

DASSA: Eighteen.

GUMB: Okay. So, uh, uh, uh, in Salonika, you went to school and then did you do, did you work in Salonika as well?

DASSA: Yes. See, the World War started in 1914, but Greece wasn't in it yet. But, uh, the allies started coming in Salonika because it was the main port. We, we had a big fight in 1917 that half of the city was razed. So our school, everything that was wood got burnt. But after a few months they declared a marshal law in Salonika because the whole city was burned. So the teachers had to go to be soldiers. So they opened up a few classes in the old school building. They put up, like, petitions for the windows and the doors, and some classes were there, but there was no teachers.

So we, even I was afraid that I was going to be drafted. So I went to work with a French military post office. So I worked there for a year or so. And then I, I made my ways to come to America.

GUMB: Were you still . . .

DASSA: I had a brother here, in America, so he sent for us.

GUMB: Were you still living with your family at this time?

DASSA: Yes. My father and mother and a younger sister.

GUMB: What had you heard about America while you were living in Europe?

DASSA: Well, everybody knows the city's paved with gold.  
( he laughs )

GUMB: Had you, you who had you heard that from?

DASSA: Well, it wasn't exactly like that, but they all said there were more opportunities in America to work, and you had jobs, and then you advance.

GUMB: Did, uh, people return from America and come back to Salonika?

DASSA: A few people. In fact, a family that knew my brother

from here, they came back to Salonika. And we came back in America and they were in the same boat with us.

GUMB: Okay. So, um, your family was living together when you decided to come to America.

DASSA: Yeah. My mother and father and my little sister, they could easily come. But the main, the main thing was me. I couldn't get out. I was seventeen, and at eighteen you had to go to be a soldier. And I didn't want to go to be a soldier, especially with the Greek army.

GUMB: So, so, uh, how did you get out?

DASSA: I showed you the passport. I had a cousin there that said the only way I can get out is if I go to France to continue my studies, and this is how I had that passport made out to go to France. So the same week that we went to get the, the trip to board the ship to go to France I heard from my cousin, and he said that he has a way of coming in America. So we went there, and he put the seat on the back of the passport that I can come to America. And then my father and mother and kid t, they went and took out their own passport.

And we all came together.

GUMB: I'm wondering, why America? You know, why, why did your, was it your brother that was here before?

DASSA: I had a brother here already.

GUMB: Why America, you know, why not France or, or some European country?

DASSA: Because my brother was here. I didn't know anybody in France. A lot of people went in France.

GUMB: Why did your brother come here?

DASSA: To escape military service also.

GUMB: Yeah. I'm wondering why he didn't go to some other European country or some other place.

DASSA: Well, you heard a lot of people coming to America. It's the land of opportunity, and plenty of our people came, especially from Greece and Turkey. Then in 1921 or, yeah, 1921, they didn't let anybody come here no more. In fact, my wife came here the last boat that was free and she was in Ellis Island for about three months until her brothers made ways of them to come out. But all the other people on that ship were sent

back.

GUMB: Well, as far as life back in, uh, uh, Salonika, were there some hardships there that made you want to leave other than the war? Were there other problems there?

DASSA: The main problem was that we didn't want to go in service, in military service. That was the main thing. And my father always tried to better himself. As I told you before, he went to Alexandria, he went to France. He was a carpenter, not a carpenter, a cabinet maker. He used to design his own furniture, and he used to build it. He went to Paris, he didn't succeed, so he figured that in a it would be better.

GUMB: Were you free to worship in, uh, Salonika?

DASSA: Oh, yes. Very much.

GUMB: Okay. That wasn't a hardship at all.

DASSA: No.

GUMB: Okay. All right. Um . . .

DASSA: The worst part that came in Salonika was after Hitler came there. In fact, I have a letter there, it shows about what happened to Salonika with the Holocaust and

all that.

GUMB: Okay. All right. Well, you, you mentioned a little bit about, uh, having to get a passport, uh, in, uh, uh, Salonika, getting a passport. Where did you have, where did you have to go to get that? What other person, what other procedures did you have to go through to leave the country?

DASSA: First we had to go to, to City Hall, like. And from there, after they give you permission, then you had to go to the American counsel and get your visa. Because in order to come here you had to have somebody that, uh, would bring you here in a. And he was responsible for you. See, otherwise, you couldn't come here.

GUMB: Okay. And that was in the town, the City Hall, in the . . .

DASSA: In Salonika.

GUMB: Okay. Did you have to go to the American Consulate to get approval there?

DASSA: Yes. In fact, I have the paper here from the American Consulate.

GUMB: What were the procedures there? What kind of questions did they ask you there?

DASSA: They, they only had to see that we, we had, uh, clearance from the, from Greece. See, otherwise you couldn't go to the American consulate. You had to have clearance first, and then you get the clearance through the American consulate.

GUMB: Okay. So how did you get from Salonika to, uh, Marseilles, where you were going to continue your studies?

DASSA: No. Well, I didn't go to Marseilles because we changed the passports already.

GUMB: So the passport said you were going to Marseilles.

DASSA: Yeah. But when my cousin told us that he found a way to make me come to America, so he, he gave something to somebody and then . . .

GUMB: So you didn't have to go to France at all. So the vessel to the United States left from, from where?

DASSA: It was supposed to come to Salonika, but it was a very slow boat. It was from the Cunard line, but it only

had one engine. It was a very big boat. IT never came to Salonika. It went to the agency, they said it was going to go to Piraeus. It was a seaport also in Greece. Then he said, we were there, we went by train to Piraeus, and we stood there about eleven days, and we used to go to the agency every day to find out if it was going to come. So they always postponed it. So finally they said it was going to go to Patras, it was another seaport from Greece. And we waited, and we stood there five days, and finally the boat came. So we boarded the boat, and it stopped in Naples because it was the end of the First World War, and in Naples it was a lot of American boys that went to fight for Italy and, uh, in the meantime they got married there and they were coming here in a back with their wives and some with children.

GUMB: What class were you traveling on the boat?

DASSA: Steerage.

GUMB: What was that like?

DASSA: You can imagine a big hanger with bunk beds.

GUMB: Was it clean?

DASSA: Well, it wasn't bad. If you kept yourself clean it was clean.

GUMB: What was the food like on the ship?

DASSA: Well, the food I don't remember too much of it, but all I know is that they had those hard tacks, they call it, those.

GUMB: What sort of possessions were you carrying? Did you have a lot of luggage?

DASSA: Yes. Everything that we wanted. But we couldn't bring any furniture. Our personal goods, personal material, you know. Our clothes and all that.

GUMB: Were there any special possessions that the family wanted to, to bring to the new country?

DASSA: Well, I don't remember much.

GUMB: When you left, did you feel like you ever were going to return?

DASSA: No, I don't think so.

GUMB: Um, okay. How long was the voyage, do you remember?

DASSA: We left there at the end of February, Salonika. But

we, we stood there in, in Piraeus about eleven days, and five days in, in Patras. And, and it stopped in Naples and Gibraltar to take coal and, and, I think that from Gibraltar to here it took about twenty days.

GUMB: The whole family was traveling together?

DASSA: Yeah. But the women were in one section and the men in another.

GUMB: You said that you felt, the family felt like they were never returning.

DASSA: To turn back to Salonika?

GUMB: They were never going to return.

DASSA: No. I don't think so.

GUMB: And how did that feel? Was there some remorse or?

DASSA: No, no, b, we didn't have such, such a good life there. We only had an apartment that we rented. See, if we had our own home it's different.

GUMB: All right. Um, so, um, what, as the vessel was approaching land, approaching America, do you remember your first impressions?

DASSA: The, the only, no, I didn't have any. The only impression I had is my, my oldest brother, he passed away in Salonika. He had a friend over here and he sent him a picture of Atlantic City. Only.

GUMB: Okay.

DASSA: And then our ship docked on 14th Street, and we saw the factory of the crackers there, Nabisco.

GUMB: Oh, Nabisco.

DASSA: Yeah. It used to be right there.

GUMB: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

DASSA: Oh, yes. Of course.

GUMB: What were your feelings when you saw it?

DASSA: There's something new that everybody used to talk about.

GUMB: Oh, you had heard about it and . . .

DASSA: Yeah.

GUMB: Okay. So the boat docked at 14th Street. What was the first thing that happened after it docked?

DASSA: We had to wait for the ship to take us, for the ferryboat, like, that took us from the boat to Ellis Island.

GUMB: And what was the first thing that happened on Ellis Island?

DASSA: All we saw there was all bars, but we went first to a big room that was a lot of people. We had to go by next, and they asked you what language you speak.

GUMB: You had to go by what?

DASSA: You know, like . . .

GUMB: Nets?

DASSA: No, it wasn't a net, a line. We were all going through a line, and the men there were asking questions, uh, what language do we speak, and if you can read and write. That's all it was.

GUMB: What language could you use there?

DASSA: French. But, um, my father and mother didn't know French. We have a language of our own. They call it Ladino. It's a mixture of Spanish and Hebrew. Spanish characters, but, but, uh, but the words, you

can write it in Hebrew and it sounds like Spanish.

GUMB: Could you spell that? Ladino?

DASSA: L-A-D-I-N-O.

GUMB: Where does that language come from?

DASSA: From, uh, this. We are, we are Jews that tossed out from Spain in 1492. And they all went in all over. Some went to France and some went to Italy, some to Greece, and then the others went to Turkey. So the, see, this is all hearsay, because when they went to Turkey they said it's a lot of us, so there's plenty of room, and they opened the doors and we all landed there. In Salonika was the biggest city, in fact they all say that Salonika, it was the biggest Jewish city, like Jerusalem. About, the whole city was about eight hundred people, eight hundred thousand, and it was about six hundred thousand Jews. So you can imagine that. The whole city was Jewish. On a Friday afternoon the schools closed, and you couldn't buy anything else, Friday night or Saturday. And Saturday night the grocery stores opened, and Sunday it was like every other day.

GUMB: Okay. Getting back to Ellis Island, you mentioned that they, the officials asked you if you could read or write.

DASSA: Yeah.

GUMB: Was there any kind of test, or any way that . . .

DASSA: No. They gave, they had some books in every language that there is. So they, they showed me the French and I read it. My mother couldn't read or write. But my father told him Ladino, and he read it. It's like Hebrew characters but Spanish words.

GUMB: How about the writing? Was there some test in writing?

DASSA: No. They didn't ask us to write.

GUMB: I'm just, I'm curious what they had asked you to read?

DASSA: They had a book.

GUMB: Do you remember what it was?

DASSA: No. I couldn't remember that. After all, it's sixty-five years. ( he laughs )

GUMB: I just wonder what they would have picked, you know,

for somebody to read.

GUMB: Okay. Do you remember anything about the medical exams, what they, uh, looked for there?

DASSA: Well, they always looked at the eyes. First of all is the eyes. Even at the American consul, they always ask us if we have any glaucoma or something like that because, uh, if they don't give you the okay from the American consul, they won't let you come here. In fact, the reason that we, we, we got kept in Ellis Island for three days is on account of my sister. My sister was nine years old and she had a cold. And they wouldn't let her, they wouldn't let us out, but not my sister, and my mother won't let my sister alone, so we all stayed until she got better.

GUMB: Where did you stay? Where did they put you to sleep?

DASSA: They had, uh, like, uh, like I once, rooms . . .

GUMB: Was it one big room?

DASSA: No, no. It was more rooms with bunk beds of, of iron.

GUMB: Did the family stay together?

DASSA: No. Women separate and men separate.

GUMB: Um, okay. Where did they keep your sister?

DASSA: She was in a room like ours, but my mother was with her.

GUMB: Oh, she wasn't in a hospital, or . . .

DASSA: No, no. She only had a cold, or tonsillitis maybe, I don't know.

GUMB: What were the other people like that were in this room. You, I, you were all with a, you were in a big group, a big room with a lot of other people.

GUMB: We were, we had like a bedroom at night. In that daytime we all mingled together.

GUMB: What were the other people like in that group? What sort of other people were in the, being detained?

DASSA: From all, all over the world. There was Turks and Chinese and Hawaiians. In fact, my father met somebody from Hawaii, and they started talking Spanish.

GUMB: Hawaiian?

DASSA: Yeah.

GUMB: You said there were Chinese there, too?

DASSA: No, Chinese I don't remember.

GUMB: Okay. What sort of food did they give you? Do you remember anything about that?

DASSA: No, I can't remember.

GUMB: Do you remember having any unusual food there?

DASSA: No.

GUMB: Uh, basically how did they treat you? What sort of, did you feel like you were in a prison, or . . .

DASSA: No, but it was something new to us.

GUMB: Was there any, uh, concern on the part of your parents?

DASSA: No, no. We knew it was on account of my sister. So we were only there three days. So after three days my brother came and he took us out.

GUMB: Why did they release you after three days?

DASSA: Because my sister's cold was better.

GUMB: Okay. All right. Uh, okay. Uh, how much, do you have any idea how much money your parents brought?

DASSA: Uh, you had to have a thousand dollars. We didn't have any, even my brother didn't have any. He borrowed from a friend of his, and then when we were here we all worked together to pay the money back.

GUMB: Did they ask you if you had a thousand dollars?

DASSA: Yeah. You had to show either gold pieces or something, I don't know.

GUMB: The family didn't have any money, but the d who was already here came and showed the money.

DASSA: No. We had to show, I think.

GUMB: Oh, I see.

DASSA: Because he sent us the money in Salonika. I don't remember exactly how much it was, but I know that uncle of mine that I showed you the pictures, he sent some cousins of mine, three sisters from one, from one, uh, family, and two from another, and he gave them gold pieces. He supplied them with the gold money to come here in America.

GUMB: Okay. Did you have to exchange any money on Ellis Island, exchange Greek money for American money?

DASSA: No. I don't remember that much.

GUMB: Did you spend any, do you remember having to spend any money on Ellis Island?

DASSA: On the boat I remember, because there was a family over there that were here before, and they knew how the money was. In fact, they had money and they went in a canteen on the boat and they bought chewing gum. We never had that kind of chewing gum in Salonika, because the chewing gum there was another kind. It was not like this here. So they, because those boys were already American boys.

GUMB: Oh, this was American chewing gum?

DASSA: And they were running all over the world. And, strange as it seems, one of those boys, he got married with my sister.

GUMB: Okay. So, um, uh, how did you finally get the word that you could go? Do you remember, was there some official or something? How did, how did the, how did you get that word?

DASSA: The way I explained you that. I had a cousin of mine that used to work in City Hall, and my father went to him, and he told him that he could make the arrangements.

GUMB: Actually, I meant on Ellis Island.

DASSA: Oh, in Ellis Island, no. We waited for my brother to come and take us.

GUMB: Right. How did you get the word that you could leave, you know, that your sister was all right and that you could leave? Do you remember how you got that message?

DASSA: No, I wouldn't remember.

GUMB: Okay. Okay, um, okay, but, uh, where did you meet your brother? Was it all on Ellis Island?

DASSA: He came to pick us up. See, otherwise, they won't let, let us go. We didn't know how to take the ferry or, uh, what subway. In fact, the, he took us with the Second Avenue El. We never seen those things. And we got off on Rivington Street. We used to live on Rivington Street. We used to live on Rivington

Street. He used to live there, and he took an apartment for us, in the same house.

GUMB: Do you remember any other things that were especially strange about the new country when you first . . .

DASSA: Well, everything was new to us. We never saw pushcarts over there in Europe. So, in Orchard Street, it used to be, I don't know if you're familiar with the East Side, there used to be pushcarts there. Dry goods on one side, vegetables on the other.

GUMB: Um, did you start work, when you arrived, uh, did you start working, or did you go to school?

DASSA: Well, my brother, in one of his letters, he told me that he had a job waiting for me. So, I was still in school, and I took typewriting lessons, so he's got a job for me.

GUMB: This is the end of side one.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

GUMB: This is the beginning of side two.

DASSA: . . . day that I went there, take my clothes off, and

he gave me working clothes as a busboy, but first you've got to wear clothes to dust up the place and prepare everything. And then in the afternoon, for lunch, I had a busboy clothes, black pants and a white jacket. So, I thought I was gonna work in an office.

GUMB: Uh, how about your father? What kind of job did he get?

DASSA: He used to be a carpenter but, uh, over here everything comes all ready, the molding is in the windows and all that. And he's not used to that. He was a cabinet maker. See, over there in Salonika, you don't go in a lumberyard to get whatever you want. Over there you had to make everything handmade. He had all kinds of tools. He used to make bedroom sets and living room sets and all that and he couldn't work. Then my brother used to work extra in a, in a movie house selling candy. So he gave my father one of those jobs, but we couldn't speak English yet. In fact, I remember one occasion, about a month after we came here. My, uh, usually, we Jews circumcise the children and, uh, a cousin of mine in New Brunswick had a baby and it was going to be a circumcision. And he wanted my father to be the godfather, like. My

brother took him to New Brunswick and he left me here selling candy and ice cream in the movies. I couldn't speak English yet. So all he told me is, "Ice cream cone five cents, five cents ice cream cone." And strange as it seems, I finished a five gallon of ice cream all by myself. I took in twenty-five dollars. And it's a big job. And he had another kid that, it was an American boy, he was in charge of the candy.

GUMB: Did you have a hard time learning English?

DASSA: No, because at that time there was, there was a lot of boys like me that came from all over, and we all started going to night school. And like this we started to learn English. I knew everything but I only knew in French, writing and reading and arithmetic and all that.

GUMB: Did the family have any problem adjusting, like your mother or your father, the family group?

DASSA: No, because there was a lot of our people in the neighborhood over there, and we all started getting acquainted with them, and we had our own butchers and grocery stores.

GUMB: How many languages do you speak?

DASSA: None. French is the only language I studied. I know everything in French. English I only learned at night school and I, uh, I conformed what I know in French. In fact, I, I still make additions in French or subtractions and all that.

GUMB: Well, I mean, okay. But you've got knowledge of many languages.

DASSA: Yeah. Well, I can speak a little Greek, but I don't speak fluently. Turkish I didn't know anything because I wasn't long with them. See, over there in Europe they give you, the six hours of schooling we have, we had, rather was four in French, that we learn everything in French. Arithmetic, geography, algebra, history, everything. And one hour of Hebrew, and one hour the language of the country. When the Turks were there it was Turkish, and when the greeks came it had to be Greek. So I had to learn in Greek to read and write. And I used to but I don't use it, so I forgot it.

GUMB: Were there any customs that you brought form the, uh, old country, and that the family continued to practice

in the new country?

DASSA: Yes, especially with the food, the way we were used to. And we sill continue. But, uh, as time changed, we changed, too.

GUMB: Can you give an example of a dish that, uh, you remember especially in the old country and then came and brought here.

DASSA: Yeah. Friday we used to cook beans, but the beans we cooked was with sauteed onions and meat. And we cooked the beans for two or three hours, and they all liked that.

GUMB: How long did it take to feel like an American, and what did it take to feel like you were an American.

DASSA: Well, in, in, inside of a year I had it all down pat. In fact, when, uh, I don't remember if I told you that I used to work in the French military post office?

GUMB: Back in Salonika?

DASSA: Yeah. In Salonika. So I thought that as long as I know how to, to put the letters in, in the things, so

I was going to apply to work in the Post Office. Then I found out you have to be an American citizen. And American citizen takes five years. So my first job, take the first papers. And I took my first papers.

GUMB: What do you mean, your first papers?

DASSA: First citizenship papers.

GUMB: Oh, right.

DASSA: In order to become a citizen, you have to have the first paper, but you've got to wait five years first. So, instead of waiting the two years, and the first year I took, I took my first, it was nothing, read and writing and all that. I passed very easily.

GUMB: There was no hesitation in becoming a citizen.

DASSA: Nah, it was nothing. In fact, I helped, I helped my brother to become a citizen, and he was here before me. He was telling us a story that he had the first papers and it got burned someplace and, uh, he didn't have it. Then I was reading the, the things there that you can always renew that. So I went with him and, and, before they expired, it was a month before they expired. I made him get the first papers again,

and he applied for the second papers. In fact, I became a citizen before him.

GUMB: Okay. Um, all right. Do you have any feelings of how your life, how America, the reality of America, compared to what you expected back in Salonika?

DASSA: Well, I didn't expect much because I didn't have too much experience there of life. All I was there was in school, and from school I can't . . . But, uh, would realize how it is. In fact, we went for a visit in 1964 there, but everything was changed.

GUMB: So you really didn't have any experience before coming here.

DASSA: No.

GUMB: Do you have any idea what would have happened if you hadn't have come here, what would have happened if you were there?

DASSA: For all you know I would have landed in the Holocaust in Auschwitz or in the concentration camps.

GUMB: I don't think, was there any problem with your name on Ellis Island? There are a lot of people whose name

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was changed on Ellis Island.

DASSA: No, no. My name was Gabriel Dassa.

GUMB: A lot of times they were changed.

DASSA: Yeah, that's right. ( tape ends without slate )