

KECK-87

MARIA ALEXAKI

BIRTH DATE: APRIL 29, 1893

INTERVIEW DATE: NOVEMBER 27, 1985

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INTERVIEWER: NANCY DALLETT

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GREECE (BORN CRETE), 1920

AGE 27

SHIP NAME NOT RECALLED

DALLETT: My name is Nancy Dallett, and I'm speaking with Maria Alexaki on Tuesday--

ALEXAKI: Alexaki.

DALLETT: Alexkis.

ALEXAKI: Not HA-KEY, SA-KEY. A-L-E-X-A-K-I.

DALLETT: Okay. Alexaki. On Tuesday, November 27, 1985. We are beginning this interview at 3:30 PM and we are about to hear her immigration

story from Greece in 1920. This is the beginning of--

ALEXAKI: You want me to tell you when I was born and all that?

DALLETT: Yep. I'm going to ask you that in one moment. This is the beginning of Interview Number 87, side one. Tell me where you were born.

ALEXAKI: I, born in Island of Crete, if you ever heard about it.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. Yes.

ALEXAKI: And I was born 1893, April the 29th.

DALLETT: Tell me about your family in Crete.

ALEXAKI: My family, I only have a sister. She's already dead two years. I'm the only one lives from my family, except my children here.

DALLETT: What was the name of the village or the town?

ALEXAKI: The village, the village I was born, that's very far away from the city. They call it Kastelos, K-A-S-T-E-L-

O-S. You pronounce, you--

DALLETT; Kastelos.

ALEXAKI: Yes. That's the village I was born.

DALLETT: Okay. Tell me about that village.

ALEXAKI: Well, it's a small town. Uh, about a hundred homes, something. And I left that village when I was six years old. My, with my parents, of course, not myself. My father wants to go to the city, so I raise up in the city.

DALLETT: What was the name of the city where he went?

ALEXAKI: They call it Hanin, H-A-N-I-N.

DALLETT: Hanin.

ALEXAKI: Crete. Hanin, Crete. You put a Crete in.

DALLETT: Hanin, Crete. Okay. And why was it he wanted to leave Kastelos?

ALEXAKI: Of course, he wants to raise us in the city. Why we come to America, don't ask me that. Yes.

DALLETT: What did your father do?

ALEXAKI: My father did a lot of different work. When he would come, when he was in the village, he do the village work like anybody else because he had an awful lot of properties. Olive trees, uh, all that stuff you can have in the village to live with, because in the village you've got to have you own, you know. So, but now when we had to, we went to the city now and then. He, he had a little store and he became builder, he became, now you can, butcher now and then, and a few other things as well, so he could make a living. He was a good father, too. So I went to school there, but I don't, I only have, my school, it was just a public school. I mean, uh, we have a good school but, uh, it's all I, uh, I finish, the public school. So then I became seamstress. When I left in 1920 I, I, I didn't have no children then. My husband was here from 1912 to 1920.

DALLETT; Your husband was here in this country?

ALEXAKI: Yes, in this country for eight whole years.

DALLETT: What year were you married to him?

ALEXAKI: I told you 1911 we were married.

DALLETT: 1911.

ALEXAKI: February the 6th.

DALLETT: So you were married for how many months before he came to this country?

ALEXAKI: I tell you, sixteen months and a half.

DALLETT: Sixteen and a half months. And why was it that he came to this country?

ALEXAKI: Well everybody came to make a little more money and then to come back home. Those days the dollar was five drachmas in our money. So if you have a thousand dollars, you have five thousand of our money. And not only me, a lot of people, you know, from a lot of, all the countries, now, they're here. They come to make a little money, come back home to open up a little business or something. Well, we didn't make a lot. It was the same when he came. (She laughs.) So he came to stay here eight years and

he come back March. And he stay March, April, March, April, and May. And then he says, "I go back to America." I says, "What for?" And now, because I was by myself, I was with my parents, you know, all those eight years. And how 'bout going to be with me. He says, "Well, now you're going to come be, move, with me." I says, "How long we going to stay?" "Oh, for the four or five years." But he didn't tell me the truth, because if he was going to tell me the truth, we're not going to come back home, I wouldn't come. Because I had my home, my parents, I got my job, making my living. I don't have to come to America. But it happened. So, we came here, 1920, and 19-- Now it's sixty-five, and I'm still here.

DALLETT: How is it that you made that trip? Tell me what that was like, the trip?

ALEXAKI: Well, the trip, it was not pleasant because you were in a boat for twenty days, it's not pleasant, on the ocean.

DALLETT: Was it a big ship?

ALEXAKI: Not like today. Of course, it was run, in those days, you know, they didn't have the big ships.

DALLETT: Where did you leave from? Where did the, where was the

port hat the ship left from?

ALEXAKI: What?

DALLETT: Where was the port that you went to, the port city that, where the boat was?

ALEXAKI: We went to, we went to Ellis Island, that's all, when you come from, with the boat.

DALLETT: From Greece, I mean, in Greece where did you take off from? Was Hanin on the coast?

ALEXAKI: Yeah. I told you that.

DALLETT: It was on the coast. Okay.

ALEXAKI: We, we left the, uh, if I remember the beginning, about a couple of days, walked together. It was all month of July because we came, we left home, Crete, at the beginning of July. And we came to Parais a couple, a couple, about twenty-four hours, I think. And we stayed about, we left twelfth of July for New York. We come to New York, of course. The end we stayed, we just stayed a couple of days because I had to come to

Philadelphia because I had an uncle here. So I came for them, to stay here with them. So, I'm still here.

DALLETT: When you left, uh, Crete, you thought you would just be coming for four or five years, maybe?

ALEXAKI: That's what my husband told me.

DALLETT; So you said goodbye to your parents at that point.

ALEXAKI: Well my mother don't want me to leave the house, and she don't want me to come to America for anything. But I promise her, I told her what my husband told me, we're only going to stay four, five years, but he don't want to come back no more to the, uh, Greece. So I didn't have no children, and I still have my children, 1923 my daughter was born. That was fourteen years that we are married when I have. In 1924 I have my son. So I have two kids. Yeah, so--

DALLETT: Tell me what it was like when you, when you, uh, made that trip. What was the boat like?

ALEXAKI: Well, it's not my first time I be in boat because I be in Greece, you know. From, uh, from, uh, Crete to the

(Greek word), around the Crete, you know. Because the Crete, it's a very big island. And we, we travel, not all, not every day, now and then. So it was not new to me. It was new to me so many days, to the ocean, because it was not a joke. But I was, we had it nice. I mean, we didn't have no bad weather because it was July, you know. If it was March it's likely it's something bad.

DALLETT: And was it just you and your husband traveling or did you know anyone else who was, who was making that trip to New York?

ALEXAKI: My dear, that day there was seven hundred people, that boat.

DALLETT: Did you know those other people?

ALEXAKI: No, none of them, from different countries. Because, you know, it was war, '17 to '19. And they were afraid they going to, another war was going to come, so they took the first, on the boat, you have first, second, third, uh, rates. So that day, I remember, they said there was a lot of people, you're not supposed to take

that many, seven hundred was too many, but because they were afraid they were going to have another war, everybody wants to come to America. So we come the end of, uh, July. I remember it was Tuesday morning we reached the harbor and Ellis Island. I didn't know that they called it Ellis Island, I knew 'cause the guide. So we stay on the boat, we didn't come out, we did not come out of the boat. We stayed on the boat, Tuesday, Thursday.

DALLETT: Hmm. Why did you have to stay--

ALEXAKI: Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. I don't know. And then he, he took us around, somewhere else. Uh, two more days till it was Friday. Around, in Ellis Island, but a different--

DALLETT; Uh-huh. Still on the boat, though, all the time.

ALEXAKI: Oh, yeah. We didn't come off the boat those days, from Tuesday to Friday.

DALLETT: What did you do the whole time?

ALEXAKI: Well, we stay there, they feed us, they got to. We pay our, we didn't ask to go around here and there. They bring us to New York and they take us out on the boat. I don't know what it was., They said it was quarantine, for something. I don't remember what it was. Because I didn't, and I didn't speak English. So anyhow, we come up Friday. That I remember. And we went to New York to a man, he had an office, you know, for traveling people. So we come to him and he find us a room. We stayed the day there, was there Friday and Saturday. And then another man, he was engaged to a girl, he was here, I don't know how many years before, and he was working in Virginia in the mines. So he sent his picture to this girl back in Crete, engage with the picture. So she came with us. I met her at the boat. I didn't know the girl before. And she came the same time. So she was there with us. And he came the day the stopped, you know, that place we were, to see the girl. So, she stays with us until the day we come out. So that, he was going to get married, we're going to leave to come to Philadelphia, me and my husband. So then the other, the people from the, from Crete, we don't know them, but we know each other on the boat. Excuse me. So he says, "Look, I'm going to marry the girl and please, stay here to be in my wedding because in Virginia I didn't know anybody and not many people there, it's all mines. So now you people here--" We know the man, he had a restaurant and he was living upstairs, he said we would stay there. He would stay, the girl would stay there. So it would going to be honor to

me if you people stayed to be in my wedding, so we did. We stay, Saturday, Sunday, we was in a wedding, and we stay Monday, too, because we were shopping, doing little bit here, little bit there. And then we came to Philadelphia, in August, the beginning of August.

DALLETT: Okay. Before I ask you about what it was like when you were in Philadelphia, I just have a few questions about Ellis Island. Once you finally got off the boat--

ALEXAKI: Nothing.

DALLETT: --what happened at Ellis Island?

ALEXAKI: Nothing. We come out the boat and we go to the office, I told you that, to travel, the one you have to travel, went in this room, said to come here. We didn't stay to see nothing.

DALLETT: Did you have an examination on Ellis Island?

ALEXAKI: No. Uh, yeah, we passed through at the time when we was coming on. But they didn't do anything to us.

DALLETT: Medical examination, they looked into your eyes, or anything like that?

ALEXAKI: No, no, they look up in Hanin, for all those things. In Athens.

DALLETT: I see. Tell me, what did they look for in Athens, what was that like?

ALEXAKI: Where?

DALLETT: In Athens, a medical examination?

ALEXAKI: Oh, just like everywhere's else. They gave us a vaccine--

DALLETT: Vaccination?

ALEXAKI: Yeah. They give it, that's all. He doesn't do very much. Yeah. So we came here--

DALLETT: Did your, did they ask you any questions at Ellis Island, or did they--

ALEXAKI: No, no, no, no.

DALLETT: You just came right through.

ALEXAKI: We passed right through.

DALLETT: Do you remember anything about the building, the buildings at Ellis Island?

ALEXAKI: No, no, no. I know a little bit in New York, but I don't-- But, Washington, Washington Street, they called it, we stayed a couple of days. I didn't mind looking around.

DALLETT: But you don't remember anything about Ellis Island itself, the buildings there?

ALEXAKI: No.

DALLETT: Okay.

ALEXAKI: I don't remember nothing because it was on the boat all that week till the day we were coming in. We walk right out and walk to

Washington Street. Not Washington Avenue, Washington Street, they called it.

DALLETT: Washington Street.

ALEXAKI: Hmm.

DALLETT: And your husband, he already spoke some English by then, right?

ALEXAKI: Not very much, you know, sweetheart, those days the people, they didn't work in the restaurants, they didn't work in all kinds of businesses they got today. They worked in the fields making the rails for the trains, because they didn't have any trains. They worked out in the forest, was five dollars a week.

DALLETT: That's what your husband did between 19--

ALEXAKI: Yes, was five dollars a week. Italians, Roumanians, all kind of people. And every night there's somebody over them to stay all night, wake up, to watch the rest of them because from the, animals gonna, don't come and eat them. You understand what I mean?

DALLETT: Uh-huh.

ALEXAKI: Those big things, the bears and all.

DALLETT: Bears? Where, where was this that he would work in the fields for the railroad?

ALEXAKI: Oh, he did, in Chicago. It was, that was outside of Chicago. Was Ohio. He was a lot of different places. I never been in there. I was, I was the place in Philadelphia. I stay here. But he, he, did it all before I come, all those (?) places. You know, because they moved them from one place to another.

DALLETT: And he was making the railroad ties for the railroad tracks?

ALEXAKI: The rail, the rails, the rails. They're cleaning up the places to put the rails so that the trains to, to come by. Because all, don't you, don't you see the covered wagons? I saw it on television, I didn't see them real. But I see them, with the, with the mules, you know.

DALLETT: Right.

ALEXAKI: With the horses. Had them standing here, sometimes, they tell us, was from the, traveling from California to come here it took them three months. That's what they said, because if they don't come straight through, if they have any time, they find nice place to have the water and all that, they come out and stay there for a week or two, they're cooking there, they're eating there and everything. That's the life lead in America is, sometimes.

DALLETT; So that's what your husband did for eight years while you were, while you were--

ALEXAKI: Not all of it, no.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. What else did he do?

ALEXAKI: Well, he, he learned to be a cook. And he was, that's what he was, learned to be a cook. But he worked some, uh, long time, for those eight years, and that's not a short time. He worked long enough. So after he became a cook he was working in something, but it was not like today.

DALLETT: Right. By the time you came here, was he already a citizen, and American citizen?

ALEXAKI: No, no.

DALLETT: No.

ALEXAKI: He became after we came, he became-- Those days, it was not as hard a thing to come to America. They didn't ask you if you have papers or not. No. But he got his papers, yes, after, afterwards. Yeah. Those days you have to take your first papers, they worked. I don't know, remember how long, but then you've got to take, then you take to how they would, like today. Yes. But when I came, sweetheart, I don't think much of America.

DALLETT: You didn't think much of it.

ALEXAKI: No, because it was not like today.

DALLETT: What was it like?

ALEXAKI: What was it like.

DALLETT: What did you not like about it?

ALEXAKI: We didn't have no cars. Now, then, you've got to see a car. You have horses. You've got the milkman in the morning, four o'clock in the morning, with the milk, with the horse wagon. The bread man, everybody else. And, uh, awful lot of things they was different, awful lot of things. Toilets was outside the, the room. No bathtubs. You have a, someplaces you go in a week, once or twice a week. We used to give five cents. Some of them for the man, some of them for the womens. Yeah. So they told me get ready. In Philadelphia, the Market Street, it the first street. It was the South Street. The south Street, it was the best street for Philadelphia, those days. I wasn't even at the time. What I remember, when I came, every Saturday, uh, from the Front up to Sixth Street, Street and South, they come the farmers from Jersey. They have whatever they have, all day long. And we buy what we need. Fruits, all kind of, you know, they have some more Jewish in Philadelphia at that time. They're speaking Jewish and I don't understand Jewish. Because where I raised up, I raised up Jewish, Turks, English, Italians, all kind of people. But all we speak the same language. The Italians, they speak their own language, yeah, of course, but they speak Greek, too. You know, the Turks, they occupied Crete I don't know how many, about five hundred years. So a lot of them were there for three or four generations. But they're now, in 1920, when they

exchange with-- Here's your money. No, really, not no more, but we're all together. I mean, and the richest people in Hanin, not in the city, but outside, outskirts, the best, the best, it was them, the Turks. Because they stole it, years back, from the Greeks.

DALLETT; So they were the richest.

ALEXAKI: Now I couldn't understand, I couldn't understand, who got those properties. You know, you walk, and a lot of times you see the field had about two hundred, two hundred olive trees and they, they put women, you know, to do that. Not their, not the wives of them, not the Turk's wife, they're not working outside. Uh-huh. They call it, uh, the high, the high people, you know. Babes, the babies. Well, they, God knows where they are now, but anyhow-- I don't know who got that, but it's an awful lot of properties, it's an awful lot of nice places they had.

DALLETT: So when you came to this country not everybody was speaking Greek, so you were--

ALEXAKI: Not in this country, of course, not.

DALLETT: So how did you manage?

ALEXAKI: Everybody, everybody, everybody speak his own language, but everybody tried to speak English. I don't know if you know this, but the very, very first people come to this country is from all over Europe, you know?

DALLETT: Uh-huh.

ALEXAKI: They had tried what language the American people were going to talk, going to take. Because now we're not speaking English, did you know that?

DALLETT: What do we speak?

ALEXAKI: Broken English. We don't speak (?) English. Don't you under, don't you, don't you realize when an Englishman talks to you he's not an American?

DALLETT: I sure do, yes.

ALEXAKI: They had a vote, those first, how you call them,? The first people--

DALLETT: The first colonies, the pilgrims, the--

ALEXAKI: Yeah, the-- Whoever that was. It was from a lot of countries. They had to vote what language they're going to start to speak. They were supposed to be Greek, but for one vote he lost. You don't know that, do you?

DALLETT: No, I didn't know that.

ALEXAKI: Yes. Yes. I did read the (?) papers, I mean, but the people, then, they know all about it. And that people, sweetheart, they have troubles with the Indians, because they chase them.

DALLETT: Right.

ALEXAKI: Because this country belonged to nobody else but the Indians.

DALLETT: Right. So by the time you got here and they had voted on speaking English, how was it you learned the English?

ALEXAKI: Well, I learned little by little myself. Tell you the

truth, when I was twenty-seven years old, when I came here. And my husband, God rest his soul, said, "You now something, you better go, start going to school." I says, "What did you say?" "Go to school." I says, "Me? I finished my school, I'm going to go here? It isn't right." Because I was twenty-seven, that's almost too old to go to school. I was ashamed to go to school. Not because I don't want to know English, the language. So, he didn't bother to, he didn't bother me no more. And you not believe this, to this day, I go like this, I was coo-coo. Why didn't I do it? Because later on, some years after, one night a friend of mine got, God rest her soul, said, "Let's go, some older people are going to have exercise with going to school."

DALLETT: One second, I just need to turn the tape over. Uh, this is the end of side one of Interview Number 87 with Maria Alexaki.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DALLETT: This is the beginning of side two of Interview Number 87. Okay, you were saying about going to school.

ALEXAKI: Those days, when you go to school old they think you're

dumb. I thought they were going to think the same thing to me. I said, twenty-seven years old and I'm going to start school, they're going to think I'm dumb. That's why I didn't go. But one night, years after, I don't remember how many, you call that, uh, school, not the Girl's High, another school, where you go to high school, for the girls.

DALLETT: Uh, I don't know. Around here? Central High?

ALEXAKI: Here in Philadelphia.

DALLETT: Yeah. I don't know.

ALEXAKI: You don't know?

DALLETT: No, I don't know the high schools in Philadelphia.

ALEXAKI: Well, anyhow, they have a society, elderly people. So they were in, and I see the woman, ninety years old and I said, look at that, the dumb thing you are. Look at them, and I was only twenty-seven, I thought I was too old and I didn't go to school. Well, it was too late. But I studied it, the paper, the English paper, little by little and some of them, I understand, because if you, if you understand this, the American papers have an awful lot of words that, that's Greek. You pronounce them

different, but it's the Greek. And then I ask people, I had a man live with us for so many years and any time I read something or if I hear something I ask him what that means, does that mean, and he explained to me. So it's the way. And then my children raised up. I was ashamed, though, when I was young to go to school, started to put that American school. They asked me for the school, what that means, and I don't know what to tell them. Because my son, he was six years old when he started school and he didn't stay in school, because he didn't know what the teachers talked, told him. Well, anyhow, so when my kids were raised up, little by little, I learned. I'm not speaking very good, but I'm getting around.

DALLETT: What did your, what did your husband do, uh, when you joined him in this country?

ALEXAKI: I told you he was a cook.

DALLETT: He continued to cook.

ALEXAKI: Oh, yes. He was a good one, too.

DALLETT: And did he cook in the Greek style?

ALEXAKI: Greek, American.

DALLETT: Greek, American.

ALEXAKI: Oh, yes. Yeah, American the most. Of course, he worked in an american restaurant. Yeah, we had a business, our, when we first come, but we not having no success. So I says look, to borrow money to make a business and you lose it and you pay the money twice? Stay where you work and bring what you get home and--

DALLETT: And was there, was there a Greek community that you were part of? Was there a Greek church that you were part of?

ALEXAKI: Then we got one church. Big church, 12th and Fitzwater, but now it's not our church, excuse me it's 8th and Spruce, between Spruce and Locust, St. George Church, Greek Orthodox church. But we got four more in Philadelphia. St. Luke's on Broomall, uh, another two in the Northeast, and another one, St. Dimitrius in Upper Darby. Five churches we've got now.

DALLETT: And did your sister join you in America? Did she come to this country?

ALEXAKI: No, no, no. She died before.

DALLETT: Did you ever go back to visit? Did you go back to visit, back to Crete?

ALEXAKI: No. I never come back home.

DALLETT: You never went back.

ALEXAKI: After my mother died I didn't want to come back, and my mother died 1940. I was here ten years. And at the last letter from her, it says, "I want to know when you're going to come home. You promised me five years. It's ten years now, and you're not here yet. Why not you come, and even if it's not true." And she died the 29th of August, in 1940. So I don't want to go no more to see nobody. That's my fault, but that's what it is. My daughter, she goes back a few times already. She goes every year. Yeah. My country, that's very poorly now, more than when I left it.

DALLETT: Sorry?

ALEXAKI: More than I left, it's more better now, my country. Not because I was born there, sweetheart, but everybody goes there, not from Crete, from other places, but it's, uh, you miss something. One day I was down in my son's store downstairs in my house and a man walks in and he started, he was going to buy something. I took him and says, uh, "Where you

come from?" I says, "Well, I don't know, sir, but even if I told you I don't think you'd know." I says, Did you ever heard Island of Crete?" He says, "Yes, and what the devil you want here? What did you see in this country, living here, you left such a pretty country." And how did you know?" He says, "I just come back from there." I don't know who it was, but that's what he told me. "What the hell you want in this country, you left such a pretty place."

DALLETT: And did you feel the same way, or did you--

ALEXAKI: I did because, you know, it's a big island and an awful pretty place.

DALLETT: But you weren't sad, you're not sad that you left there, or--

ALEXAKI: Well, if I know I'm going to stay here all my life, I wouldn't come, I told you that.

DALLETT: If you had known back then that you would have stayed in America--

ALEXAKI: You know, when I started having kids, I don't want to

take my kids back home to raise up myself, my husband stay here. No, Because I see other womans do it, they never see the man again. So I says the kids belong to both of us, not the one. So I stay here and I'm still here. I've got a twelve, I've got fourteen great-grandchildren from my son's children. He's got, from his four children, he's got fifteen grandchildren. And my daughter got two children, two grandchildren. And one grandchild, and she, her daughter expecting any day. So there's going to be fourteen all together, fifteen. No more. My son has got thirteen grandchildren, and my daughter got one, now, grandchildren. She's got two children, boy and a girl. And, she got one son from her daughter and she's expecting the second one any day.

DALLETT: And one of your children runs the shop downstairs, is that right? Does your daughter run it?

ALEXAKI: No, no, no. This is the store that's my daughter's.

DALLETT: Uh-huh. Your daughter's shop is downstairs.

ALEXAKI: I had a house, I sold my house. Because I couldn't run it no more, so I sold it. But my son--

DALLETT: But downstairs is--

ALEXAKI: My son, my son has the store downstairs when I was there.

DALLETT: And it's a travel agency, right?

ALEXAKI: She has a travel agency, yes. Yes.

DALLETT: And also she does translations and, I saw a sign on the front that she does translations? From Greek to English would that be?

ALEXAKI: I didn't get you there.

DALLETT: I saw a sign on the door downstairs in the shop that says, "We do translations."

ALEXAKI: Oh, yeah.

DALLETT: So she'll help people who need to translate from, from Greek--

ALEXAKI: She speaks Greek too, you know, because she goes to Greek school.

DALLETT: So your children went to a Greek school, and they were raised speaking Greek?

ALEXAKI: Yes. Not my son's kids. They didn't go because their mother's American. Yes.

DALLETT: Okay. Can you--? Okay. I think I've asked you everything I need to and I thank you for talking with me.

ALEXAKI: Now, what would you going to do with that?

DALLETT: I just need to say one thing. That is the end of side two and the end of Interview Number 87 with Maria Alexaki.