

**NPS-68**

**THOMAS PITKIN**

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**INTERVIEWER: ED KALLOP, JR.**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: CAMILLE FORD, 7/1979**

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**HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mr. Pitkin conducting research about Ellis Island circa 1974**

PITKIN: --to the American Museum of Immigration where I am at the moment, on July 8, 1974, even though the Immigration and Naturalization Service doing research for a report on Ellis Island and a contract with the National Park Service. I had inter-departmental clearance and I had free access to everything that they had as far as I know, and they had a big battery of card files, index files, on -- on records going clear back to the beginning of the Service. So I kept requesting files from this index record pertaining to Ellis Island, several hundred numbered files, as I recall it, and they would send out for them, but they -- most of them didn't come back. That is the records themselves never showed up. And I began to feel baffled and finally a gentleman over in the corner came over and said, "Look, I destroyed those records," and I expressed a certain amount of astonishment. And he said, "Yes, several years ago, the -- when the Archives were complaining about not having room to store records, records were piling in faster than they could take of them, we -- we thought we would do them a favor and we went

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over there and pulled out the immigration records and destroyed the bulk of them. We sent the rest of them back."

Well, naturally -- naturally, I was -- I was disturbed over this. It made my job a little easier because if there's no records --- no history, you know. But I went back over to the Archives where I had been before and they gave me a slightly different story. The people at the Archives, some of whom I had known in graduate school, said, "Yes, the Immigration and Naturalization Service in 1960 had taken out at least the bulk of the immigration records going back to the early 1900s and returned only a small portion of them." Well, I said, "Why did they do this?" And they said there had been a fellow, name of William Preston [ph], was one of Oscar Hanlan's [ph] graduate students, was preparing a study on the IWW. And he had been going through these records, among others, and apparently had been getting some stuff that J. Edgar Hoover (who was still alive and more or less running the Department of Justice at that time) J. Edgar Hoover might think it was a little sensitive.

It didn't reflect too highly on some of his activities, particularly during the period of the big Red scare in 1919 and 1920, and they thought, they couldn't prove it, of course, they thought that that was why the Immigration and Naturalization Service was directed, as they felt, to come over and cull out those records. Anyway, they confirmed -- they confirmed -- what I had been told over at the Immigration and Naturalization Service, that the bulk of the immigration records covering the whole period of the height of immigration had been taken out of the National Archives and destroyed. So far as my subject, which is Ellis Island, is concerned I still have the records.

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About seventy-five percent of them had disappeared. I don't know whether the same thing was true of other types of records or not. Certainly the Department of Justice had been active on Ellis Island during the big Red scare. In fact, they practically took over the place, and the Department of Labor which was supposedly running Ellis Island at the time, had a real hard time getting control again. That I have the record of.

KALLOP: What, what kind of record? You mean, a written?

PITKIN: I -- I -- I have -- I have from surviving files and also from some newspaper supplementary material, indications that the -- the Department of Justice had muscled in and taken over Ellis Island, in effect.

KALLOP: Uh hm.

PITKIN: Now J. Edgar Hoover was -- was probably involved. I -- I haven't any material to establish that, but he was not yet the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, but he was coming up, coming up the ladder rapidly and he was certainly involved in the -- in the raids that were taking place at the time on the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party, and on others who were merely associated with left-wing groups. They were piling them into Ellis Island and there was a great big stink about it at the time.

KALLOP: Well, do you think -- is it your opinion that the--?

PITKIN: It -- it -- I don't want to -- I don't want to say it is -- that it's my opinion. I just don't know what happened. I got one story from the Immigration and

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Naturalization Service and a different story from people whom I knew in the national Archives. But the fact is to -- unquestionably that the grea-- the bulk of these records were taken out and destroyed.

KALLOP: Yeah. No. I was just going to ask you if you thought this was kind of willy-nilly on their part and they really didn't be selective about it.

PITKIN: Whatever -- whatever their instructions were, they destroyed a vast amount of material that had no bearing on J. Edgar Hoover or the -- or the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It just seems to have been done by grabbing out handfuls here and there. There are big chunks still remaining. I got a -- I got hold of quite a bit of stuff, fragments of most files, and they were very illuminating. But for -- for -- for my work on Ellis Island during that period, I had to depend very heavily on New York City newspapers to fill up gaps. And I -- and also I -- I had access to the letter files which still exist. You see, the numbered files, the case files, were -- were in large part destroyed, but the letter files were not. The letter files were kept up through 1912. When the --

KALLOP: What do you mean by the letter --?

PITKIN: A daily record file. Most -- most offices --

KALLOP: [Interposed} You mean like log?

PITKIN: ---government agencies, and I suppose private agencies, keep -- keep a copy, a carbon copy of every letter they send out, and that -- that

KALLOP: [interposed] I see what you mean.

PITKIN: ---constitutes a letter file. Now there were hundreds, literally hundreds of volumes of these letter files still in existence, and I had access to them. I found hundreds of volumes of letter files -- letters sent from the Bureau of Immigration in Washington to the field. And I found another set as -- just about as large of letters sent from Ellis Island.

KALLOP: Um hm.

PITKIN: And I -- I -- I went -- I went through those. I sampled them broadly. I wouldn't live long enough to go through them thoroughly, but I -- I -- I followed up leads and I sampled through them. I went through maybe sixty-five or seventy volumes all together.

KALLOP: This was in Washington?

PITKIN: In -- in the National Archives. These were -- hadn't been destroyed and they weren't restricted, but they break off in 1912. I didn't find anymore letter files after 1912 when the -- when the Department of Labor was -- was set up. These were mostly Department of Commerce and Labor and Department of the Treasury. You see, Immigration was under Treasury until 1903 when the Department of Commerce and Labor was set up, and then it was under that department until the beginning of 1913 when the Department of Labor was set up. And then Immigration was transferred to the Department of Labor. It didn't come under the jurisdiction of the department of Justice until 1940.

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Why Immigration should still be a function of the department of Justice, I have no idea.

KALLOP: (CHUCKLES).

PITKIN: But it still is and they inherited these records and when they felt like destroying some of them, they did. And apparently it was perfectly legal. I have no -- no reason to suspect that it isn't -- it wasn't legal. They did it.

KALLOP: Why do you suppose that they would be--well, this particular thing I raised about our little records here, has kind of died down. At least I haven't heard anything since, but why would they be interested--

PITKIN: That's about all I can ---

END OF TAPE