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SENA JOSEPH

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NASH: Today is November 20, 1975. I am speaking with Mr. Joseph Sena who, from the end of 1952 through may 1954, worked as an interpreter for the Immigration and Naturalization Service and worked at Ellis Island. Did you only work at Ellis Island?

SENA: Originally I started working at the Immigration Office on Columbus Avenue and 59th Street in New York City. Toward the end of 1952 our unit was transferred to Ellis Island, New York Harbor.

NASH: What were your first impressions when you went there? Had you been to Ellis Island before you first started working there?

SENA: No, I had never been on Ellis Island before. That was my first experience on the Island. I must say that the trip back and forth from Manhattan was very invigorating and very pleasant and the surroundings on Ellis Island were very favorable too except perhaps for the inconvenience (tape blank) we would be compelled to take on our annual leave.

NASH: So are we. At that time I imagine a lot of the Island wasn't being utilized anymore. Is that true?

SENA: Certain sections of the Island were not utilized. Of course, most of my experience were concentrated in the Deportation Section and in the, what we call the Special Inquiry Section. That is where aliens were given deportation proceedings. If you allow me to elaborate, let me give you more or less the background of how these things operated. Some aliens were apprehended by Immigration investigators and for violation of the Immigration laws. Upon apprehension they would be taken to our detention facilities on Ellis Island. There they were given a preliminary questioning under oath regarding their immigration status. Thereafter they were served with what we call an Order to Show Cause, wherein the charges against them were enumerated. That is for being in the country illegally, and also a warrant of arrest. The alien was

placed in our detention facilities.

NASH: How did the aliens get to the Island? Did they get there on the same boat as the employees at the same time?

SENA: Sometimes at the same time, sometimes at different times, but the same ferry was utilized.

NASH: What was that like? Did they sit in a special section?

SENA: They were in a particular section of the ferry most of the time. It depends upon how many aliens were involved. Where there were one or two, they were in custody of the Immigration investigators and they would be sitting a little bit apart from the rest of the passengers.

NASH: Were people not supposed to talk to them? Was there any restriction on that?

SENA: Well, we certainly wouldn't want to do it. We never attempted to question any aliens because it was not within our right to do that. We refrained from exchanging any information with them unless it was for official purposes.

NASH: You mentioned that people arrived there who there was some

question about them when they were entering the country. I guess if their case was pending they sometimes stayed at Ellis Island?

SENA: There were two categories of aliens that were on Ellis Island. Those who were apprehended for violation of Immigration laws and they were in our detention facilities. There were other aliens who were what we call applicants for admission and in whose case there was a question as to whether they were admissible under the Immigration laws of the United States. The second category that I am referring to are people who had arrived by boat or plane and the preliminary interview by the Immigrant Inspector was not clear as to whether they should be allowed to enter the country or not. So those were the two categories of aliens detained on the Island. Those who were here illegally and had been apprehended and placed under deportation proceedings and the other, fewer, many fewer, they were applicants to enter the country.

NASH: Were they kept in the same place at Ellis Island?

SENA: As far as I know, the detained males on Ellis Island were kept in the bottom part of the great section where the detainees were detained. The upstairs were the passengers

and females or family groups. There were dormitories and there were rooms for individual families and sometimes individual passengers, but the regular detainees were not in the same area as those who were applying to enter the United States.

NASH: Did they break them up according to nationality?

SENA: Not as far as i know, not as far as I know. Of course, my contact with the detention facilities was practically nil. I came in contact with them at regular hearings. As I have said before, after they were placed under deportation proceedings with an issuance of an order to show cause and a warrant of arrest, they were given a deportation hearing before an Immigration judge. My function, as I have indicated, was to be an interpreter either in Spanish or Italian, according to the language the alien spoke. I would be repeating the questions in the foreign languages put by either the investigator or the special inquiry officer or judge, translated into the language--into that particular language to the alien. He would respond in either Italian or Spanish and I would then translate it for the record in English. And we had quite a number of hearing officers and Immigration judges on the Island at that time. We had about ten or fifteen of them.

NASH: You were only used in those cases during the hearings? I mean, were there ever other circumstances?

SENA: At times we had to go and interview aliens perhaps in a hospital or in courts. Some of the aliens who had violated the immigration laws and who had violated some of the statutes of the United States and were prosecutable, I as an Immigration interpreter, would many times have to go to court to be an interpreter in those cases. Sometimes there may have been a suit against the government, for example, and the courts would request the Immigration Service to supply an interpreter.

NASH: At that time were there many people living on Ellis Island?

SENA: Well, there were quite a number of them. I would say, from my knowledge, there must have been on an average of three to four hundred aliens being detained at any one time. The facilities, of course, were much bigger.

NASH: But at that time was the commissioner I don't know what the title would have been--of Immigration, was he at Ellis Island, living there?

SENA: No, no, there was no Commissioner of Immigration living on Ellis Island. We had, of course, and we still do have a district director for the New York District Office, but he certainly did not live on Ellis Island, to my knowledge, although one of them may have lived there, I don't recall exactly to be honest about it. He may have lived on the Island.

NASH: Could you describe the circumstances under which they lived? Did they ever complain to you? I mean how did you judge it?

SENA: Of course, any detention facility is not the happiest place to be in, but apart from the, the facilities, from what I could determine and to my recollection, were excellent as far as the aliens were concerned. They had plenty of room, they had recreational facilities, they could go outdoors and enjoy some sunshine. Of course, they would have preferred not to be there, but the food was very good. As far as the immediate area, the facilities available, I don't recall any complaints by the aliens involved.

NASH: Do you ever remember anybody trying to escape?

SENA: I don't recall any such instances and, of course, as I have said, I had no direct contact with the aliens at their

detention facilities. I would think that at one time or another probably one or more of them did attempt to escape.

NASH: I know that during the '40s they used to call it--the detainees themselves called it the Hilton on the Hudson. Did you ever hear that?

SENA: I never heard that terminology, but I do know, as I said before, that they had excellent facilities, and I think under the circumstance they enjoyed their stay on Ellis Island.

NASH: How was the food?

SENA: Naturally, I didn't eat the same food as the aliens. We had a separate cafeteria for the employees. We had no contact with the aliens on the Island, but to my knowledge, once again, they had very good food because some of the aliens themselves in many instances helped with the preparation of the food and I guess they wanted to have the best they could get available for them.

NASH: I know during the Second World War that they had rounded up a number of Germans from Yorkville and they had worked in restaurants so when they were there they organized the

kitchen and they made some very good food and I understand a lot of federal employees would sometimes go to Ellis Island on their lunch hour to eat.

SENA: Well frankly, when I was there that was not the case. We ate the aliens were separate and apart from the employees on the Island. They were kept in a particular area of the Island unless they had to appear for a hearing or before an Immigration judge or whatever the case was.

NASH: What were the circumstances of the well, since he dealt mainly with the Italians and the Spanish, what were Spanish speaking what could you say were the main reasons that they were there, or did they fall into any category?

SENA: I would say most of them, most of the aliens being detained on Ellis Island either had entered as visitors and forgotten to leave the United States within the time they were supposed to or many of them were seamen who jumped ship, which they were supposed to have departed with their ships. Some of them, of course, came in as stowaways until they were apprehended by the Immigration Service. Others may have entered on the Canadian border or Mexican border, but generally the biggest category I would say, they were probably tourists who had overstayed their time. Naturally,

among the aliens the illegal aliens we had some of the criminal element also, people who had either been convicted of a crime, a violation of law abroad or right here in the United States, and by virtue of the conviction they became deportable from the United States and were placed under deportation proceedings.

NASH: How did they know if they had committed a crime abroad?

SENA: Well, that was the job of the Immigration investigators. They developed information on particular aliens as to their deportability. We, as you know, no doubt, we have files on many, many aliens in the United States, and also let me mention that in 1940 all aliens in the United States were required to register. We call it alien registration and all aliens at that time were required to submit to finger prints and those prints, of course, are in the hands of the Identification Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Also, since 1940 all aliens who apply to enter the United States as immigrants are finger printed at the American Consulate abroad if they are fourteen years of age or older. In other words, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has prints on a good many aliens who were in the United States and, of course, if any one of them was arrested for violation of law, sometimes the Immigration

Service received notification of the arrest through official channels.

NASH: Besides being subject to the administrative proceedings which, of course, might lead to deportation, were there criminal proceedings that they might have to undergo?

SENA: In certain cases they did. For example, an alien who entered the United States without inspection, he would be amenable to prosecution for violation of Title 8, United States Code 1325. Another alien who may have been previously deported from the United States and re-entered the United States in an illegal manner was also subject to prosecution for violation of United States Code 1326, that is re-entry into the United States after deportation without permission from the Attorney General. These cases, of course, the Immigration Service referred them to the United States Attorney's office, whatever jurisdiction laid. In some cases the United States Attorney decided to prosecute and the alien would be prosecuted and in many instances were sent to jail for a while before his deportation, his or her deportation was effected.

NASH: Why would they prosecute in some cases and not in others?

SENA: It would depend upon how bad the violation was, how many times the individual had violated Immigration laws, whether he was a clean person, that is a hard-working individual, or whether perhaps he had been violating other laws of the state or the city. In other words, the background of the individual determined whether he would be prosecuted or not. Some of them, of course, you may know have extensive criminal records, and those cases would be more likely to be accepted for deportation by the United States Attorney.

NASH: Did you say that it was a criminal offense to enter illegally? That wouldn't make them liable for punishment would it? They just would be deported, wouldn't they?

SENA: No, you see these are criminal violations apart from the deportation. If any of those violations fall within the violation of Statutes, the Criminal Statutes of the United States, even for the first time except that generally the first time the United States Attorney, unless it be an unusual case, as a rule they don't prosecute. But still it was a violation and the United States Attorney would be advised of the violation and on the basis of all the evidence, all the facts in the case, the U.S. Attorney or his representative would make a determination as to whether prosecution would be authorized or not.

NASH: I was trying to think if in the time that you were there if there seemed to be a particular group of people who were trying to enter the country illegally. I mean, you know, in different historical periods there might be certain groups that are more likely to enter as a result of some incident or I don't know.

SENA: Of course, the Second World War. as you are aware, brought quite a bit of disaster in various European countries. For example, in that period there were a number of Italians who attempted to enter the United States illegally in one form or another, especially in view of the fact that Italy was restricted to a small quota under the previous immigration law. So those Italians who had no opportunities in Italy and who felt that they wanted to come to the United States, they attempted to enter and did enter in many cases in whatever form they could, in many cases as stowaways.

NASH: Among the Spanish speaking people, were there people who actually came from Spain or were they mostly Latin Americans?

SENA: Many of them came from Spain but most of them from South America, I would say, but many of them did come from Spain

too. Naturally, Spain at that time until the most recent period, was under the dictatorial form of government and some Spanish seamen in particular or stowaways attempted to enter the United States to seek opportunities in our country.

NASH: Did they ever claim political asylum?

SENA: I guess in some cases they did. Many cases they claimed they would be prosecuted if they had to return to their native countries.

NASH: Was that ever considered in their disposition?

SENA: Of course, I didn't follow the cases through, but no doubt there must have been instances where it probably was taken under consideration by the Immigration Service.

NASH: Well, of course, Ellis Island was closed sometime in 1951. I'm not exactly sure which month it was. But did you have any sense while you were there of it winding down? Was there talk in the air that it was about to be closed?

SENA: There was talk that they wanted to close Ellis Island because of the expenses involved. I guess Congress was not appropriating sufficient funds to operate the Island. One

thing we have to bear in mind that although no rent was paid to the Island, nut the operation of the ferry was an expensive proposition as far as the Immigration Service was concerned, and I would think that the Immigration Commissioner in those days was thinking in terms of curtailing the expenses for the Service. And there were rumors at that time when I left that perhaps the Island might be closed.

NASH: How did people feel about it? Were they relieved or were they saddened?

SENA: I would say the Immigration employees were not particularly saddened.

NASH: They could go do something on their lunch hour.

SENA: They could be working in the city and they would not be confronted with having to take the ferry back and forth, which generally lengthens the trip. But I would say, as I said before, the aliens themselves were better off on Ellis Island than in any other detention facility that I have observed.

NASH: That is interesting.