

## **NIKI'S DOWNTOWN**

1101 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave. North  
Birmingham, AL 35203  
(205) 251-1972

*"[W]e...have to pay respects to who brought us. And, uh, you know, the Hontzas family--Uncle Johnny, Aunt Margaret and Niki—developed this place...I wouldn't think of it operating under any other name."*

**--George Sissa**

Born in Greece, George Sissa grew up in Birmingham, where his father ran a handful of restaurants downtown, including the Terminal Café. George bought Niki's Downtown from the Hontzas family (the same Hontzas family line that still has Niki's West) in the late 1980s and is serving up some traditional Greek fare, Southern specialties, and the absolute best fudge pie anywhere. When the place first opened in 1951, the Birmingham Farmer's Market called the same neighborhood home, and the Hontzas's quickly became known for the locally grown fresh vegetables on their menu. The Farmer's Market has since moved to the north side of town (it is now adjacent to the another Hontzas family restaurant, Niki's West), but George Sissa maintains the same bountiful menu. And in addition to the thirteen meats and thirty-two vegetables offered every day, one can also find some traditional Greek dishes like pastitsio, souvlaki and Greek-style chicken. Another facet of Niki's Downtown is Bill Mimmikakis, who works with George. Originally from Greece, Bill worked in the candy business and then spent many years at Golden Rule Bar-B-Q. At Niki's Downtown, good fresh food is the golden rule.

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### **Full Interview Transcription:**

George Sissa, Owner  
NIKI'S DOWNTOWN  
1101 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave. North  
Birmingham, AL 35203  
(205) 251-1972

INTERVIEWER: Amy Evans  
DATE: March 11, 2004 @ 2:30 p.m.  
LOCATION: Restaurant's dining room  
LENGTH: Approx. 25 minutes

**NOTE:** This interview was conducted in the restaurant's dining room just after lunch service ended for the day, and the staff can be heard working in the background throughout the interview. Periodically, there will be sounds of silverware being put away, change being counted, chairs being moved across the floor and waitstaff chatting.

\* \* \*

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans, and it's Thursday, March eleventh, two thousand and four. And I'm at Niki's Downtown on Second Avenue North with George Sissa. Mr. Sissa, would you mind saying your name and also, if you don't mind, your birthdate for the record?

[Short pause]

George Sissa: I'm, uh, George Sissa, and my date of birth is nine, twenty, fifty-one.

AE: Okay. And how long have you been the proprietor here at Niki's Downtown?

GS: Fourteen years.

AE: And did you buy it from the Hontzas family?

GS: I bought it from the Hon—two Hontzas estates and one—one of the, uh, one of the brothers that was still living.

AE: Okay, and his name was?

GS: Uh, George Hontzas.

AE: Okay.

GS: I bought it from George, uh, Phil Hontzas's es--estate, and Jimmy Hontzas's estate.

AE: Okay. And I--I spoke with Pete and Teddy Hontzas [who own and operate Niki's West] yesterday, and I don't think I ever asked them this question, but why were these restaurant's named Niki's?

GS: [Clears throat] Uncle Johnny and Aunt Margaret [Hontzas] started these Niki's restaurants. The reason he started this restaurant was because the farmer's market was located right behind the building.

AE: Before it was on the north side of town? [The Birmingham Farmer's Market is now next to Niki's West].

GS: That's right.

AE: Really? Okay.

GS: And across on First Avenue. And, uh, they bought this property and built the restaurant [sound of George Sissa wiping the table] to support the farmers that were bringing—and in those days, they were not truck farmers, but they were the true farmers—

AE: Um-hmm.

GS: --that would harvest their crops or pick their eggs and bring them in and sell them on the back of the trucks. [Short pause] And, uh, they bought this property in 1950, started construction in October of fif—of—excuse me. Started construction in October, 1950 and opened up in April of fifty-one. Uh, Uncle Johnny and Aunt Margaret owned it. Then [clears throat] when the farmer's market moved to the north side of town, they were afraid that they were going to lose this place altogether--it was going to close down. So they bought property out there and built that restaurant [Niki's West]. Well, they couldn't run both, so Aunt Margaret ran to Greece and got all her side of the family, which is the Hontzas's, and brought them to the United States and put two brothers here [at Niki's Downtown] and two brothers out at Finley [Avenue, where Niki's West is located]. And that's how these two restaurants ended up.

AE: Okay. And they're named after someone, then?

GS: Niki—oh, when Johnny was getting ready to open up this restaurant [pounding the table while speaking], he stopped and asked, "What should I name the restaurant?" And his little—his youngest daughter, her name was Niki. If you notice, the name [of the restaurant] is a feminine "Niki." And she said, "Daddy, name it after me." And he did.

AE: Okay.

GS: Today, Niki is a grandmother living in Chicago.

[Phone rings]

AE: Okay, well that's a good angle to the story. Um, and so then on your business card I noticed that you have "Niki's #1"—because I—in conversation people say "Niki's Downtown" and "Niki's West," but this is the first, I guess.

GS: This is the original one right here.

AE: Okay. And how did you get into the restaurant business?

GS: [Clears throat] Well, my dad was in the restaurant business all his life. Uh, he had restaurants all over town. Uh, he was across the street from the Helman Hospital, which is now University of Alabama. He, uh—

AE: What was the place there called?

GS: Uh, Nick's Café is what he called it there. He was on Twenty-Sixth Street across the street from the Terminal [Train] Station. He called that Terminal Café. He, uh, had another place on Eighteenth Street South. He—I

remember, you know, as a young kid, he had several different places. And so I kind of grew up in it and, uh, I vowed that I would never get into it. But, uh, after school I—you know. [Pats on table] I guess once it's in your blood, it's in your blood.

AE: Um-hmm. And what was your father's full name?

GS: Nicholas James Sissa [pats table after each name]. And he was born in Verria, Greece.

AE: Can you spell that?

GS: V-E-R-R-I-A.

AE: Okay.

GS: He came to the United States at the age of seventeen, [short pause] served in World War I and lived here the rest of his life. Except for nine months, when he went back to Greece, married my mother, I was born, and then came back to the United States with both—both my mother and myself.

AE: Okay. Do you know why he came to Birmingham, specifically?

GS: When he first came to the United States, he told me that he traveled all—he traveled almost every state in the con—in the—what am I trying to say?

AE: Contiguous.

GS: C—contiguous states.

AE: Um-hmm.

GS: And in Birmingham there was a group of Greeks that he got next to for some reason. Now, most of the people that came to America from Greece in the same city that he was born at, ended up in New York City and in Buffalo, New York. But, uh, the Greeks down here were from a place called Tsitalia.

AE: Um-hmm.

GS: And so that's where, uh, he had developed some friendships, and he just stayed here with them.

AE: Hmm. And how did *he* get into the restaurant business? Did he come here and work in a restaurant initially and then--

GS: This is what he told me. That, uh, when they came from Greece, nobody would hire them. So they took the most—you know, some of the jobs that

nobody else wanted. And they couldn't afford to live anywhere, so there'd be four or five guys together, and they'd rent one room. And they would alternate the cooking [short pause] chores. Like on a Monday it would be [short pause] uh, Nick Sissa, or Tuesday it would be Sarris, Wednesday it might have been Hontzas. And that's, uh—and he told me that's how they developed a competitiveness between each other to see who could come up with a better dish every night. And from there, some of them started opening up little fruit stands. And then they started little snack bars with sandwiches. And, uh—it was funny one day, he told me—he said, uh, he remembers the restaurant business in Birmingham when it was a bowl of chili and a hot dog and a fruit stand next door to it. And he says, "Look where it's evolved to today." Of course, he's been dead now for twenty-one years. But, uh, anyway, that's a little history of my dad.

AE: Um-hmm. So what do you think about the hot dog stands that are still going strong. Or—they're kind of hanging by a thread, I guess, anymore.

GS: They're—they're —they're still there. I think they'll always be there. There's a niche there. In Birmingham there will always be—there will always be a niche for them.

AE: Um-hmm. Did you grow up going to places like Pete's Famous and Gus's [two well-known hot dog stands still in operation in Birmingham]?

GS: Pete's Famous was, uh, was one that we regularly—regularly visited. I even worked—

AE: Did you?

GS: --at Pete's Famous for , uh, one summer. And there was another one called Tom's Coneys right down the street from Pete's Famous. Of course, it's not in existence now. It was even smaller than Pete's Famous!

AE: Oh, my goodness. I can't imagine. [Laughs]

GS: And, uh, anyway, that's how they started. With hot dog stands. Little, uh, fruit stands and, uh—

AE: Um-hmm.

GS: --developed from there.

AE: Um-hmm. And so what year did you, again, take over this—this place?

GS: It was in [nineteen] eighty-eight.

AE: Okay. And what is it about--all these Greek restaurants are named for the person who started them, and then generations later they still retain that

name? And nobody—nobody wants to change it to the name of the person who's owning it –

GS: Why change something that's working?

AE: Yeah.

GS: You know, and—and you—we have to [short pause]—we have to pay respects to who brought us.

AE: Um-hmm. Sure.

GS: And, uh, you know, the Hontzas family--Uncle Johnny, Aunt Margaret and Niki—developed this place. And, uh, I wouldn't think of it operating under any other name.

AE: Yeah. Well, that's—from my end, that's something that's been really interesting to go to Andrew's and speak to Alec, and go to Pete's and speak to Gus, and go to Gus's and speak to George and—

GS: [Laughs] And you wonder why!

AE: [Laughs]

GS: [Coughs]

AE: It gets complicated. But I'm—I'm trying to keep it all straight. [Laughs] So tell me about the restaurant here and the food that you serve.

GS: We have—we operate a steam table operation here during the day. We have a variety of thirteen different meats every day. [Short pause] We'll—we offer anything from prime rib to, uh, chicken potpie. We, uh, have thirty-two different vegetables, and we offer eight different pies. Everything is cooked from scratch. That—that's why we have so much labor here. Uh [Short pause]. I—I mean, we go to the farmer's market every day, pick up our produce, our fresh vegetables, uh, our meats are now delivered in, but th--I mean, everybody knows what we want. That's the—I mea, that's the way it is. [Clears throat. Short pause]. It's funny, I--we can sit here and ask the customers, "How's the food?" "Great, just like always. Just like always. Exactly what I expected." And I think they, uh—the consistency means more to them than anything.

AE: Um-hmm.

GS: They know, when they come here, what they're going to get.

AE: So when you took over the restaurant in the eighties, did you maintain the same menu that's always been here, or did you change it much?

GS: What I did is I expanded it. The meats were only six. The vegetables were only twelve. I expanded it to try and give more variety. And the reason I did that, thinking that I would get, uh, maybe a party of six or eight, rather than parties of just ones or twos. But the variety is what the customer likes. So, I just stayed with it.

AE: Do you have much on the menu that's Greek?

GS: Yes. We serve pastitsio, which is the Greek lasagna. We serve Greek chicken. We serve, uh, those two items are on [the menu] every day. And souvlaki, which is the pork that's marinated overnight and then cooked over an open flame. Those three items are on every night—every day. Periodically, we have spinach pie. And, um, [short pause] that's about it. Now, our vegetables are seasoned with no meat--Greek-style--but we do have a touch of a Southern accent to it. So I guess you could say it's got a Southern—U. S. Southern accent by way of Greece.

AE: [Laughs] Okay. I'll buy that. And are you in the kitchen? Do you cook? Do you have a hand in most everything? I know you--

GS: I'm in the kitchen every day.

AE: Yeah.

GS: From can to can't. That's—that's why I'm always with an apron.

AE: Uh-huh.

GS: But, uh, I'm a hands-on operator. I'm not a, uh--some people are able to operate at a distance. I've never been able—I never was taught to operate that way.

AE: Yeah. Well, you told me you made this amazing fudge pie I have in front of me, so—

GS: We make all of—

AE: You're good at what you do!

GS: Well, thank you. We, uh, make all our pies from scratch .

AE: Um-hmm.

GS: And, um[short pause] the thing that we've tried to do with —that I've tried to do with the pies is develop recipes that tasted like pies you ate that your grandmother baked, rather than these new sweets. And—it's funny, I've had so many customers come up and say, " You reminded me of my

grandmother." "You reminded me of my Aunt So-and-so." "This chocolate pie reminds me of what my mother used to make." [Sound of Mr. Sissa pounding the table after each comment for emphasis] And that's what we want to do.

AE: Um-hmm. Well, did your, um, father cook, or was he more of a businessman?

GS: No, he was—well—now, he cooked. He—he enjoyed cooking. Uh, I'd say he was more of a businessman, but he enjoyed cooking. I remember that when he would cook at home, the meals were unbelievable. He could *way* out-cook my mother. [Short pause] But as far as the restaurants, he always had other—he always had cooks that did the cooking for him.

AE: Did you own another restaurant before this one?

GS: This was, uh—no, I didn't own one individually. No, I just, uh--I helped my dad. But as far as actually owning one, no.

AE: Did you grow up in the Greek Orthodox Church here?

GS: Absolutely.

AE: Yeah? You still attend and everything?

GS: Eh—no other church for me *to* attend.

AE: Yeah. Do you speak Greek?

GS: I sure do. Very much so. Kalimera, tikanete? [Greek for "good morning, how are you?"] The, uh--[short pause]. You talk about the Greek Church—and our heritage are one in the same. And, uh, the church is where they would gather to meet each other. At—when they couldn't speak to each other during the week because of work. [Short pause] And it became a, uh—some people called it a social gathering. They would make a whole day and evening of it. You'd get your religious teachings, uh, check up on all your neighbors, and usually in the afternoon there would be a social event.

AE: Do you have children of your own?

GS: I have two children: I have a daughter named Rania. She is twenty-one. And a son named Nicholas, who is twenty.

AE: Your daughter's name again? I'm sorry.

GS: Rania. R-A-N-I-A.

AE: Okay.

GS: She's named after my mother. *Uraneeya* is the way it's pronounced in Greek.

AE: Do your children speak Greek?

GS: Very little. They, uh, [short pause]—it was—it was not because they didn't want to. Due to unfortunate circumstances that were out of our control.

AE: And have you as a family traveled to Greece?

GS: As a family we have not. Uh, growing up I went to Greece several times. Uh, that is something that my—both my children told me they want when they graduate—for all of us to go back to Greece--

AE: Um-hmm.

GS: --together, so they can see all their cousins and the homes and everything that I was—that our parents—my parents and, of course, their grandparents came from.

AE: Um-hmm. Are either of them interested in the restaurant business?

GS: My daughter's getting ready to go into de—she wants to get into dental school, but she always says, "Do not let the restaurant go. I will keep it up."

AE: Good for her.

GS: "No matter what." My son has not, uh, committed either way.

AE: Yeah.

GS: So we stand there.

AE: Have they put some time in here behind the counter?

GS: All the time.

AE: Yeah.

GS: Growing up, all through high school, they—they all worked here every summer. And periodically, they'll work if I'm in a bind. Now, my daughter will work two days a week as a waitress and, uh, [short pause] whenever I've got a catering job or any big event, they're always right by my side.

AE: Yeah. Do you do catering often?

GS: Yes. We do some corporate catering. We some, uh, large corporate accounts that we cater their sales meetings and general meetings.

AE: Um-hmm.

GS: And then we cater weddings—Greek weddings. Prime rib dinners. We've catered bar mitzvahs.

AE: What is a Greek wedding like?

GS: Did you see the movie? [*My Big Fat Greek Wedding*]

AE: I did. [Laughs]

GS: About ninety-nine percent exactly the way it should—what you saw is what—what you'll get.

AE: [Laughing] Okay. [Still laughing]

GS: Everybody's into everybody's business.

AE: Okay.

GS: But it's—it's all in the, uh, family atmosphere. Everybody's interested in—in—in, uh, you know, helping each other out.

AE: Is there a traditional food that you serve more at a wedding that you don't really offer at the restaurant?

GS: [Short pause] Greek traditional food--you can have lamb, uh, of course the chicken, the pastitsio. Uh, the traditional cookie is the kourabiedes for the wedding, which is a, uh—it's got—some people—it's almost like that, uh, a wedding cookie--the, uh--that I've tasted from some other nationalities.

AE: Any chance I could ask you to spell that for me [the name of the cookie]?

GS: I'll try.

AE: Okay. [Laughs]

GS: I'll try. I'll show you later.

AE: Okay, I appreciate it Um, do you have any Greek pastries for dessert here? Like baklava or—

GS: Baklava, no. I don't serve it here. Periodically—I mean, sometimes we'll, you know, we'll make some on a special occasion. But, uh, I can't get enough

time. To--you—you know, by the time we get our vegetables made, or our meat cooked--our meats ready, our pies ready, you know, they're coming in for lunch.

AE: Um-hmm.

GS: And I just don't have, uh—it's hard to get staff nowadays like you used to.

AE: Um-hmm. How many people can you seat in this restaurant?

GS: A hundred and seventy-eight.

AE: Do you have a good clientele from downtown at lunch?

GS: We have, uh—I have been told that this is the only restaurant that you can see a governor, lieutenant governor, a supreme court justice—Alabama Supreme Court justice, uh, United States senator or representative. They might be sitting beside a construction worker or a secretary or an office worker. It's—it's—it's a good mix—cross-section of what this city's all about.

AE: Um-hmm. And what kind of hours do you keep?

GS: We open at six a.m., and right now we close at three p.m.

AE: Okay.

GS: [Coughs] We're getting ready to expand our operating hours at night. [Short pause] And, uh, we're open Monday through Friday and, when we do expand our hours, we'll go into to weekends too. With the revitalization that's going on in downtown Birmingham, uh [short pause] I don't know the exact number of condominiums and flats and apartments that they have put up, but as soon as they finish a building it's completely leased out. So there's going to be people living here twenty-four [hours a day], seven [days a week]. They've got to have a place for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

AE: And what do you serve for breakfast?

GS: Anything that you—that pertains to breakfast.

AE: [Short laugh]

GS: We se—uh, prime rib with scrambled eggs.

AE: Really?

GS: Sausage, ham, bacon, biscuits—homemade. Toast. Straight across the board.

AE: I believe I might come visit you for breakfast in the morning.

GS: That'll work perfect.

AE: How does that sound? Okay. Okay, um, and how many employees do you have?

GS: We, uh, it's fourteen to eighteen. The number fluctuates between there.

AE: Do you have some people who have been here from the time before you took the restaurant over?

GS: [Coughs]. Excuse me. I've got, uh, Rose Cook, who's been here for thirty-seven years. I have, uh, Vicki Harris, who's been here for nine years. Uh, then every one else has been here around—between nine and eight years. But those are my two longest-standing employees.

AE: Um-hmm. Those are some dedicated employees.

GS: They're great people.

AE: Yeah.

GS: A tremendous nucleus I have here.

AE: Yeah.

GS: I'm very lucky.

AE: Well, I can tell you like what you do.

GS: Oh, yeah! [Laughs]

AE: Definitely. And you definitely like the cooking part. Do you like the socialization and everything and getting to see your neighbors?

GS: I enjoy seeing my customers and, uh—[A man comes from behind the counter and approaches the booth where we're sitting] This is—by the way, I want you to meet--this is Bill Mimmikakis.

Bill Mimmikakis: We've met, I think.

AE: [Nods head] Hello, sir.

BM: Yes, I'm Bill. Nice to see you.

AE: Nice to see you.

[Bill remains standing at our table]

GS: Bill is from Greece. Born there. He came to the United States and in Greece he was a --import—he was in the import/ export business and in the candy business. And he came to the United States thinking he was going to start off in the candy business and ended up in the barbecue business.

AE: Really?

BM: Um-hmm.

AE: What barbecue business? [To Bill]

BM: Golden Rule.

AE: Golden Rule Bar-B-Q?

BM: Uh-huh.

AE: Okay.

BM: In Pelham.

AE: In Pelham? Interesting.

BM: Yeah.

GS: And, uh, Bill retired and when he did, the next day I was there, and I said, "Listen, you're coming to work for me!" [Laughs]

AE: [Laughs]

BM: Here I am!

AE: Here you are! So it just worked out for every one, huh?

BM: Eight years later.

AE: All right.

BM: It's about eight years, isn't it?

GS: That's right.

BM: Long time.

AE: Yeah. You like the restaurant business? [To Bill]

BM: I like it pretty good. Yeah.

AE: Apparently so, you've stuck with it all these years, huh?

BM: That's right.

AE: [Laughs]

BM: I did it for twenty-five years.

AE: Yeah? What year did you come to Birmingham?

BM: Sixty-eight.

AE: Sixty-eight.

BM: Yeah, long time.

[Short pause]

BM: See you. [To George]

GS: All right.

AE: Nice to meet you, sir. Take care. [Bill exits the restaurant] [Now speaking to George] Well, is there anything that I haven't asked you that you might like to add to our record here?

GS: I—I--I don't—No, I think that about covers it all. Now, at one time we were open at night.

AE: Uh-huh.

GS: And we did a tremendous seafood business at night. We'd have, uh, people standing outside waiting to get in the building. But about six years ago we had some problems in downtown Birmingham. And because of that we—we shut down our night operation. But that's why I say we're getting ready to crank it back up with all the people that are living down now.

AE: Um-hmm.

GS: It's a completely different environment in downtown Birmingham than it was six or seven years ago. Completely different.

AE: Really, that recent? Huh. And how about, um, the import company across the street? Is that George Sarris's place?

GS: That belongs to George Sarris.

AE: Okay.

GS: Who also owns the Fish Market [restaurant] on the south side.

AE: Um-hmm. I spoke with him on Monday. He's an interesting guy.

GS: He's quite a, uh, character.

AE: Uh-huh.

GS: A lot of stories.

AE: [Laughs]

GS: Now, he is originally from Greece. Well, now wait minute—and I was too. But he didn't come over till he was, uh—I think he was probably in his eighteen, nineteen—

AE: Yeah.

GS: Nineteen years old.

AE: I think he was seventeen-ish. Um-hmm. Yeah.

GS: So, uh.

AE: That's a good story.

[Short pause]

GS: He saw both ends.

AE: And you were ment—just talking a little bit casually about The Bright Star [a Greek-owned restaurant in Bessemer, Alabama just outside of Birmingham] earlier. You grew up going out there too—in Bessemer?

GS: Sure did. I remember going out there and, in fact, I remember when my—I remember my sister being baptized at the church, and after the baptism we had the reception at—at The Bright Star in one of the back rooms. And I remember a picture that my dad had that, uh, has us all at the table together with the Koikos family [the family that owns The Bright Star]. But, uh, that was, uh, where we would go when we went out to eat.

AE: That's a ton of history out *there*, I tell you.

GS: That's right.

AE: Yep. Well, okay. This has been a great interview. I certainly appreciate your time.

GS: well, I have enjoyed it. Thank you.

AE: Good! Good. Thank you.

**[END]**