

**George Nasiaskos
Gus's Hot Dogs
Birmingham, Alabama**

Date: April 7, 2017
Location: Gus's Hot Dogs
Interviewer: Eric Velasco
Transcription: Technitype Transcription
Length: Fifty-six minutes
Project: Greek Restaurateurs in Birmingham

[Note: Gus’s Hot Dogs is so tiny it does not even have an office. This interview took place during the period between breakfast and lunch. Background noise includes employees coming in while preparing for lunch or to stir the pot of chili cooking on a stove. Word that Mr. Nasiakos is retiring has filtered among customers and a few come back to say goodbye. Also, Mr. Nasiakos “talks” with his hands and occasionally hits the microphone despite efforts by the interviewer to avoid such contact.]

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Eric Velasco: This is Eric Velasco for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is April 7th, 2017, and I’m sitting in the back prep area of the original Gus’s Hot Dogs to conduct an oral history interview with George Nasiakos. Mr. Nasiakos is the third native Greek to own Gus’s, which opened in the 1940s. He is retiring this year after twenty years of selling hot dogs.

[00:00:25]

George Nasiakos: Twenty-two.

[00:00:26]

Eric Velasco: Twenty-two years—I’m sorry—of selling hot dogs from a tiny stand at a downtown Birmingham parking deck. Please introduce yourself, Mr. Nasiakos. What is your name, please?

[00:00:39]

George Nasiakos: George Nasiakos.

[00:00:41]

Eric Velasco: And would you please spell your name?

[00:00:43]

George Nasiakos: N-a-s-i-a-k-o-s.

[00:00:48]

Eric Velasco: And for the record, what is your date of birth?

[00:00:51]

George Nasiakos: November 2, 1940.

[00:00:54]

Eric Velasco: So you're retiring. When do you plan to retire?

[00:00:58]

George Nasiakos: I retired the end of March, 31st.

[00:01:02]

Eric Velasco: So you just retired.

[00:01:04]

George Nasiakos: Yes.

[00:01:05]

Eric Velasco: Why did you decide to retire now?

[00:01:07]

George Nasiakos: Because I'm old. [laughter]

[00:01:11]

Eric Velasco: That makes sense. Do you have plans for retirement?

[00:01:17]

George Nasiakos: I got to go back to Chicago. I have two brothers and sister there. And after that, I leave my old country because I have two brothers and another sister there. After twenty-six years, I never see them.

[00:01:33]

Eric Velasco: Where are you from? Where were you born?

[00:01:36]

George Nasiakos: I born in south Greece, couple hours west of Athens. The name, the small city, Tripolis, Peloponnesus.

[00:01:51]

Eric Velasco: And you said you had six brothers and sisters?

[00:01:54]

George Nasiakos: Five brothers and two sisters, seven altogether.

[00:02:00]

Eric Velasco: Then you're the eighth?

[00:02:01]

George Nasiakos: No, seven.

[00:02:03]

Eric Velasco: I see. There are five brothers total.

[00:02:04]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. And two sisters.

[00:02:08]

Eric Velasco: Who was the first to come to the United States?

[00:02:11]

George Nasiakos: My brother Jim came in 1960, in Chicago, and after that, my other brother, Nick, he came in 1965, and then my father came in 1967.

[00:02:30]

Eric Velasco: What's your father's name?

[00:02:32]

George Nasiakos: My father's name, John. He has a brother there, and when he came in America, my father make the paper, and I came here in 1974.

[00:02:47]

Eric Velasco: So he sponsored you to come to the United States.

[00:02:49]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:02:50]

Eric Velasco: Why did your brothers and your father come in the 1960s?

[00:02:53]

George Nasiakos: Because they came one by one. You know, it's not that easy to come everybody at once.

[00:02:59]

Eric Velasco: But why did they want to leave Greece? Why did the first one leave Greece and come to the United States?

[00:03:05]

George Nasiakos: When we leave?

[00:03:08]

Eric Velasco: Your brother came in 1960. Why did he leave Greece and come to the United States?

[00:03:13]

George Nasiakos: My brother Jim, he finished the school and he had to go to school here, in Chicago. And the other one, he came for work.

[00:03:24]

Eric Velasco: What did he do?

[00:03:27]

George Nasiakos: He worked in a bakery, and after that, he opened a small place, a small grill in Chicago.

[00:03:39]

Eric Velasco: What was the name of that?

[00:03:41]

George Nasiakos: Chris Grill.

[00:03:44]

Eric Velasco: So everybody was settling in Chicago at that time.

[00:03:47]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:03:48]

Eric Velasco: You were the fourth member of your family to come, or was there anybody who came between your father and you? After your father, who from your family came to the United States?

[00:03:59]

George Nasiakos: Nobody. Just me.

[00:04:02]

Eric Velasco: You were the next to come after your father.

[00:04:04]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:04:06]

Eric Velasco: And you went to Chicago as well?

[00:04:07]

George Nasiakos: I stayed in Chicago twenty-one years.

[00:04:11]

Eric Velasco: What did you do when you arrived?

[00:04:13]

George Nasiakos: I was painter in Chicago, yeah, and I worked in construction.

[00:04:19]

Eric Velasco: And were you painting houses?

[00:04:23]

George Nasiakos: Houses, restaurants, yeah.

[00:04:26]

Eric Velasco: Were you working for somebody or working on your own?

[00:04:30]

George Nasiakos: I worked for some, but most of the time I worked for myself with some other guy, we have the same neighbor, same place from Greece. We are roommates too. You know what I mean?

[00:04:46]

Eric Velasco: Right. So were you getting business from a lot of other Greeks or just business in general for painting? Were Greeks hiring you to paint their restaurants and homes?

[00:04:57]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:04:58]

Eric Velasco: So it was kind of a network. People knew each other.

[00:05:01]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, yeah.

[00:05:02]

Eric Velasco: Knew you needed some work, and they needed something done.

[00:05:05]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. Usually we worked in the Greek restaurants. Many Greek restaurants in Chicago.

[00:05:12]

Eric Velasco: There's a big Greek population in Chicago.

[00:05:15]

George Nasiakos: I think it is 350 to 400,000 people.

[00:05:20]

Eric Velasco: Wow.

[00:00:00]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. New York has more.

[00:05:23]

Eric Velasco: When you came to the United States, did you go directly to Chicago?

[00:05:29]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:05:30]

Eric Velasco: Or did you go to New York?

[00:05:30]

George Nasiakos: No, direct to Chicago. Athens, we stop in Montreal, Canada, and Montreal to O'Hare, Chicago.

[00:05:43]

Eric Velasco: And those were just the legs of your flight? That's where your flight went?

[00:05:46]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, yeah.

[00:05:47]

Eric Velasco: Because I understand there was a big Greek community in Montreal as well.

[00:05:50]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, many there, yeah. I have a friend of mine there too.

[00:05:55]

Eric Velasco: How long did you paint? How long were you a painter?

[00:06:00]

George Nasiakos: Oh, I was, from Greece.

[00:06:03]

Eric Velasco: You did that in Greece as well.

[00:06:04]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, I start from nineteen years old, yeah.

[00:06:10]

Eric Velasco: You went to trade school in Greece, I believe?

[00:06:12]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, I worked in Athens in the technician school. You know what I mean? And after I finish, I start to work for construction, too, there, and same thing in Chicago.

[00:06:25]

Eric Velasco: Did you work in any restaurants while you were in Chicago?

[00:06:25]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, restaurant, houses, yeah.

[00:06:32]

Eric Velasco: But I'm talking about working for a restaurant.

[00:06:36]

George Nasiakos: No.

[00:06:37]

Eric Velasco: So you painted the whole time. You were a painter the whole time you were in Chicago?

[00:06:44]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, all the time, but sometimes in wintertime we had bad weather. You know what I mean?

[00:06:49]

Eric Velasco: Right.

[00:06:49]

George Nasiakos: We didn't have any business.

[00:06:53]

Eric Velasco: You get some bad weather there in Chicago.

[00:06:54]

George Nasiakos: Oh, yeah, long time.

[00:06:56]

Eric Velasco: They don't call it the Windy City for nothing do they?

[00:06:58]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, long winter.

[00:07:01]

Eric Velasco: How was weather compared to where you were from in Greece?

[00:07:04]

George Nasiakos: In Greece, I'm from south Greece. The climate is like Birmingham. North Greece is cold sometimes like Chicago. You know what I mean? North Greece. But I'm all the way south. It's nice weather there.

[00:07:25]

Eric Velasco: So that was quite an adjustment for you, going from the nice weather to the cold.

[00:07:29]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. [laughs]

[00:07:34]

Eric Velasco: Describe Tripolis, the town where you're from.

[00:07:38]

George Nasiakos: I'm five miles, five, six miles south of Tripolis. We drive with car, it's like ten minutes. You know what I mean? Like here to Homewood or a little longer. You know what I mean? [Interviewer's note: Homewood is a suburban municipality that abuts Birmingham to the south.]

[00:07:57]

Eric Velasco: Yes, sir.

[00:07:58]

George Nasiakos: One area they have eighteen villages. You know what I mean? It's all farmers there. You know what I mean? Yeah, I born in small village, yeah.

[00:08:06]

Eric Velasco: Did your dad farm?

[00:08:09]

George Nasiakos: My father just a small farmer, not farmer like here. You know what I mean?

[00:08:13]

Eric Velasco: But grow enough for the family to eat?

[00:08:15]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:08:16]

Eric Velasco: What kind of food did he grow for eating?

[00:08:18]

George Nasiakos: We grow all vegetables and apples, usually apples, cherries, pears. You know what I mean? Yeah.

[00:08:29]

Eric Velasco: What was your favorite vegetable to eat in Greece?

[00:08:33]

George Nasiakos: Any kind. I love it. Everything. I love it in Greece.

[00:08:38]

Eric Velasco: Now, have you ever been back to Greece?

[00:08:43]

George Nasiakos: I went September 1990, and my mother was sick and I went there to see her. You know what I mean?

[00:08:57]

Eric Velasco: Yes, sir.

[00:08:58]

George Nasiakos: And I stay there and I take an extension and I stay six months. So when I left, at the time my mother had passed.

[00:09:12]

Eric Velasco: I'm glad you got to spend some time with her. How old were you when you came to the United States?

[00:09:18]

George Nasiakos: I came thirty-three years old.

[00:09:21]

Eric Velasco: So you were thirty-three when you came to the United States.

[00:09:23]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:09:24]

Eric Velasco: What was it like being separated from so much of your family?

[00:09:29]

George Nasiakos: Because after World War II, we had bad time there. I born when they start the war. You know what I mean?

[00:09:44]

Eric Velasco: Yes, sir.

[00:09:45]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. October 28th, the Italians try to go to Greece, near to Albania, you know. They came, fight six months, and after that, along with Germany comes, one, two, three, and took over the country, so they have a fight. You know what I mean? The rebels and the martyrs. You know what I mean? [Interviewer's note: The battles with Italy started in October 1940; Germany started its blitzkreig in April 1941 and occupied Greece until fall 1944.]

[00:10:14]

Eric Velasco: The civil war after World War II.

[00:10:15]

George Nasiakos: No. 19— 1945, '44. I'm not sure. The Germans, they start to lose the war, you know, and they left. And after that, they start the civil war, you know, communists. The right side, you know. And they have three years civil war. The communists, they lost. And after that, the country was—people, most of the people living in poverty. You know what I mean? So those days, they have big families, like my father, seven or eight, my uncle, six, the

other, five, four, you know. So except the [unclear], they don't have any factories and nothing. You know what I mean?

So America helped us a lot. I remember the school, when I went in the grammar school, they served milk, sugar, flour, a lot of things. I remember that. In the summer, shoes, you know. And they help the people because a lot of people, they die from without food, you know. And after that, America opened the door and they came a lot of families. Not really the families. The men first. You know what I mean? So they work and they make the paper and bring families, and after that, they start to come, immigrants here, you know, legal. [Interviewer's note: "Make the paper" refers to the forms a U.S. resident fills out to sponsor an immigrant to legally enter the country.]

So now in America I think is over 2 million people, Greek people—New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, here, all over the United States. And they sent a lot the families back.

[00:12:35]

Eric Velasco: Was your family here in Chicago able to send money back to family in Greece?

[00:12:40]

George Nasiakos: My grandfather came 1895 here, and three more brothers, in Pueblo, Colorado. So my grandfather, after that, he went to Chicago. He stay three, four years, and came back.

[00:13:00]

Eric Velasco: To Greece?

[00:13:03]

George Nasiakos: Greece. My father born 1904, and he stayed two more years and he left again. He stayed in America again, you know, stayed two, three years, '96, yeah, three more years. He went back and he never came back. So he die young, fifty-eight, from pneumonia, fifty-eight year. And his brother in Pueblo, Colorado, they stay in America. They never went back. You know what I mean? So that's all I know from family's history. [Interviewer's note: Mr. Nasiakos is talking about his grandfather's death from pneumonia.]

In 1956, my uncle came in Chicago, too, yeah, my father's brother.

[00:14:01]

Eric Velasco: You had a fair number of people there, relatives in Chicago when you were there.

[00:14:08]

George Nasiakos: Chicago, yeah, some relatives and some people from old place, yeah.

[00:14:22]

Eric Velasco: From the same general area?

[00:14:24]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:14:28]

Eric Velasco: How did you come to Birmingham?

[00:14:31]

George Nasiakos: I had a friend in Chicago. In 1956, '57, '58, '59, we worked in the technician school.

[00:14:43]

Eric Velasco: In Greece?

[00:14:44]

George Nasiakos: In Greece, in Athens, together. He was from some other part, but we meet each one at the school.

[00:14:52]

Eric Velasco: Became friends there.

[00:14:53]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. So when I get in Chicago, he was in Chicago, I found there, and every morning he went to my brother, to restaurant for coffee and breakfast, something like that, and I saw him. “Hey, Gus, how are you?”

“Oh, George, what you doing?”

Then one day, it was Saturday, he say to me, “George, you like to go to Alabama?”

“What do we do there, Gus?”

“I have a brother.”

My brother say, “Go ahead. Go to see there, because I went there. It’s a nice place.”

So we bought ticket, you know, and we came here, and I met his brother.

[00:15:46]

Eric Velasco: What was his brother’s name?

[00:15:50]

George Nasiakos: His brother?

[00:15:51]

Eric Velasco: His brother here, who you met. Yes, sir.

[00:15:53]

George Nasiakos: He’s not my brother. He’s Aleck.

[00:15:56]

Eric Velasco: What was his last name?

[00:15:59]

George Nasiakos: Choraitis. It was his place.

[00:16:01]

Eric Velasco: So your friend in Chicago was Gus Choraitis.

[00:16:04]

George Nasiakos: Gus Choraitis from Chicago. His brother here, Aleck Choraitis.

[00:16:09]

Eric Velasco: What did his brother here do?

[00:16:10]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. So we stay the Saturday afternoon, we left again, and after that, the wintertime we are not busy. You know what I mean? I visit here my friend Aleck, you know, so I stay one week, two weeks, ten days. Then one day we talk about business, this and that, and we talk about that. So, okay. I take a decision and I came to Birmingham, and I bought in 1995 this place.

[00:16:46]

Eric Velasco: So they were trying to get you—they thought you'd be a good person to take over his restaurant, Gus's Hot Dogs.

[00:16:54]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:16:55]

Eric Velasco: That's why they wanted you to come down to visit. When you visited, did you spend much time here at Gus's?

[00:17:00]

George Nasiakos: No, I spent the time at Andrew's Bar-B-Q.

[00:17:05]

Eric Velasco: That's the other restaurant. [Interviewer's note: Mr. Choraitis also owned Andrew's Bar-B-Q at the time.]

[00:17:07]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, and after that, we talk about Gus's, yeah. He asked me if you like here, and this and that, "I'll sell the Gus Hot Dog." I like this weather, the place. You know what I mean? I say yes. But to begin with, I had no idea about a restaurant, you know.

[00:17:24]

Eric Velasco: Had you worked in any restaurant before that?

[00:17:27]

George Nasiakos: No, just the first year I stay at my brother's, but I did nothing, whatever some say do this or that, no cook, no nothing.

[00:17:38]

Eric Velasco: You weren't learning the business.

[00:17:39]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, because I don't stay too long for the restaurants. So I came here. He has another worker here. They train me. You know what I mean? How to fix this and that and that. So to begin with, it was a little hard for me, but after long, you know what I mean, everybody learn something.

[00:18:03]

Eric Velasco: You had not done any cooking before in a restaurant?

[00:18:06]

George Nasiakos: No, no. I had no idea about—I'd seen my brothers, they cook soups, they make roast beef, hamburgers, French fries, like that. You know what I mean? But hot dogs, I had no idea. But after too many years, you know what I mean, I have a lot of experience now.

[00:18:35]

Eric Velasco: You were trained in how to do it. The person who was working here trained you how to do the hot dogs.

[00:18:39]

George Nasiakos: Yes, for the sauce, for the chili, for the beef or slaw, yeah, they trained me.

[00:18:52]

Eric Velasco: Describe your hot dog to me. How do you make the hot dogs and make the stuff that goes in the hot dog? First of all, the wiener itself.

[00:19:00]

George Nasiakos: What we put on it?

[00:19:02]

Eric Velasco: How do you cook it?

[00:19:03]

George Nasiakos: We cook on the grill, yeah, and after that, the hot dog bun is warm, we put the hot dog and we ask the customer, “What you like?” A Regular. A Regular comes with mustard, onions, kraut, and sauce. The Chili comes with mustard, onions, and chili. The Special comes with mustard, onions, kraut, beef, and sauce. And Coleslaw: mustard, onions, slaw, and sauce. And hamburgers and something like that.

[00:19:43]

Eric Velasco: So you have beef and then you have chili, and those are different things?

[00:19:47]

George Nasiakos: These are different. The chili is hot, spicy. The beef, not spicy.

[00:19:58]

Eric Velasco: Are you using the same sauce that goes back to the original Gus's?

[00:20:01]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. It's a little different. You know what I mean? Yeah.

[00:20:12]

Eric Velasco: You made some changes to it?

[00:20:13]

George Nasiakos: When I came here and they trained me, they make it a little hot, and I see the people, they don't like—not that they really complain, but say too hot, too hot. And I change it. But now the sauce, ninety five percent they like, and a lot of people, they ask me if I sell. You know? And a lot of people, they say, "I like it extra sauce," you know, so it means the people like the sauce.

[00:20:51]

Eric Velasco: They like it the way you made it.

[00:20:54]

George Nasiakos: That's all.

[00:20:56]

Eric Velasco: How do you make your sauce?

[00:21:00]

George Nasiakos: We make it with some—we put a little celery, some onions, some sauce, and then tomato paste, sugar, salt, some spices. You know what I mean? Yeah.

[00:21:28]

Eric Velasco: Then how do you make your chili?

[Interviewer's note: As he prepares to answer, Mr. Nasiakos leans over and peers into the pot where the chili is being made on the stove inches away.]

[00:21:31]

George Nasiakos: Chili, you see there are the onions and we cook the beef, and after that, we put the spices, hot, and I make it a little thick. Yeah. That's all it is. And the beef, is the beef and salt, a little pepper, not too many ingredients for the beef.

[00:22:04]

Eric Velasco: Something simple.

[00:22:06]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:22:07]

Eric Velasco: So you can taste the beef.

[00:22:08]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, but they like a special beef and the chili and the slaw, the people like it a lot, yeah.

[00:22:17]

Eric Velasco: How are Birmingham hot dogs different from hot dogs you find in places like Chicago?

[00:22:24]

George Nasiakos: Chicago has different. They put mustard, ketchup, and pickles are all I remember, you know. That's the style there. And tomato, yeah. But the southerners here, they have better hot dogs than Chicago. They put in water. Here we cook on the grill, and the grill is more delicious. In Chicago, they put in hot water. That's how they're different, yeah.

[00:22:52]

Eric Velasco: Grilling really brings out a lot of the flavor, doesn't it?

[00:22:55]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. Grilling, the best.

[00:22:57]

Eric Velasco: Do they steam their buns in Chicago?

[00:23:00]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:23:02]

Eric Velasco: Because that seems to be a common thing here. Everybody says that's very important, everybody I talk to here.

[00:23:08]

George Nasiakos: I like to be honest, I never seen. You know what I mean? Yeah. Possible be real hot, you know?

[00:23:15]

Eric Velasco: Describe your customers. Who comes here to eat? The people who come here to eat, tell us a little bit about them.

[00:23:28]

George Nasiakos: They come, a lot of people here, they come plain workers, they come lawyers, they come from the offices, from the offices, you know, they come a lot of people. Some people work in the court, some people work in the city hall, policemen. They come a lot, a lot of people.

[00:23:55]

Eric Velasco: You're in a good spot here. You're right in the middle of the action in downtown Birmingham.

[00:23:59]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. [laughs] Twenty-two years ago when I came here, the downtown was empty. Across the street was the Forbes Piano. They had been in the corner. Empty. [unclear], empty, nothing. The others they have been building six, seven years, these are brand new. So now the city is growing up, big business, construction, very nice, yeah.

[00:24:34]

Eric Velasco: So is business picking back up here at Gus's too? You're finding more people coming in to Gus's now that there's more going on down here?

[00:24:41]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

[00:24:48]

Eric Velasco: Did you know anything about Gus Alexander, who originally owned Gus's?

[00:24:51]

George Nasiakos: Gus Alexander, just I hear from the other Greeks, they know him. He opened this place 1947. I never met him.

[00:25:06]

Eric Velasco: He was long back in Greece by the time you moved here, right?

[00:25:11]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. And after him, I don't know, somebody else bought it. After the other, my friend Aleck bought it, and I bought it from Aleck. [Interviewer's note: In his 2004 oral history interview with the Southern Foodways Alliance, Aleck Choraitis said his son-in-law, Jim Morris, ran Gus's before Mr. Nasiakos bought it.]

[00:25:25]

Eric Velasco: When did Mr. Aleck buy Gus's?

[00:25:29]

George Nasiakos: Aleck?

[00:25:31]

Eric Velasco: Yeah. What year did he buy Gus's?

[00:25:32]

George Nasiakos: I bought it 1995 from him. I don't know when he bought it. I don't know.

[Interviewer's note: In the 2004 SFA oral history, Mr. Choraitis does not say exactly when he bought Gus's from Mr. Alexander; it was in the early 1970s.]

[00:25:38]

Eric Velasco: How long did you work here before you bought the restaurant?

[00:25:42]

George Nasiakos: Here?

[00:25:44]

Eric Velasco: Yes, sir.

[00:25:44]

George Nasiakos: Even one day, no.

[00:25:49]

Eric Velasco: Did you have to put money upfront for it or did you pay Mr. Aleck for it over time?

[00:25:56]

George Nasiakos: I paid him.

[00:26:03]

Eric Velasco: If you don't mind my asking, how much did it cost to buy the business?

[00:26:07]

George Nasiakos: How much I bought it?

[00:26:10]

Eric Velasco: Yes, sir.

[00:26:11]

George Nasiakos: Those days I bought it—cost me \$30,000.

[00:26:16]

Eric Velasco: So you'd done fairly well in Chicago to have some money to be able to buy a business like that. That's not bad.

[00:26:21]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. Chicago, the business is more expensive, yeah.

[00:26:25]

Eric Velasco: Right, right. So tell me about your routine here. Before you retired on the 31st, tell me about your day here at Gus's. When would you come to work? What time would you come to work in the morning?

[00:26:40]

George Nasiakos: Oh, 7:30 in the morning, and we close 5:00 o'clock. But after 5:00 o'clock, lot of things here. Usually, me, I leave at 7:30, 8:00, 9:00 o'clock, you know, because I set up, I open and everything, I set up everything I like it to be there for the next day, yeah.

[00:27:04]

Eric Velasco: So you can walk in and go to work the next day.

[00:27:05]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, six days a week, except Saturdays open 10:00 o'clock to 4:00 o'clock. The weekdays, 7:30 to 5:00 o'clock.

[00:27:17]

Eric Velasco: And what kind of breakfast do you serve?

[00:27:20]

George Nasiakos: We have bacon, egg, and cheese; ham, egg, and cheese; sausage, egg, and cheese; bologna, egg, and cheese; bologna sandwich; BLT; or egg and cheese, whatever they like.

[00:27:40]

Eric Velasco: Do you get much breakfast business?

[00:27:42]

George Nasiakos: Not big business in the breakfast, no, especially the hot dogs, yeah.

[00:27:49]

Eric Velasco: And do you sell anything besides hot dogs after breakfast? Do you just sell hot dogs or anything else?

[00:27:57]

George Nasiakos: After breakfast, we start for hot dogs and hamburgers, but sometimes some people, “I need an egg” [unclear] there, he did, yeah, he make it, but usually we don’t make breakfast after ten o’clock.

[00:28:17]

Eric Velasco: So you sell hot dogs and hamburgers after ten o’clock.

[00:28:22]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. And BLTs if they like, you know.

[00:28:27]

Eric Velasco: For the good customers. [laughs]

[00:28:28]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:28:33]

Eric Velasco: Compare southern food to the food you know from Greece and the food you ate back in Greece. How is southern cooking similar and different from Greece?

[00:28:43]

George Nasiakos: The Mediterranean is different. First of all, nowadays they have everything there like America, so McDonald's and fast food. Before, we didn't have any fast food, just gyros. And we didn't have any hot dogs and those stuff. So usually the Greeks those days they cook, everybody home, because they had big family. You know what I mean? And they were given money to go—there are restaurants and this, you know, but most of the people, it is impossible, you know?

[00:29:33]

Eric Velasco: They don't have the money to go out to eat.

[00:29:35]

George Nasiakos: Of course. They cook with their mother, cook one meal for everybody, you know? So now there they change a lot, so they call delivery pizza, they delivery this, you know, the new generation. My generation, before and after, was different. That's all. But I tell you something. Those days, I remember we brought chicken home, we have some sheeps and goats and we make own cheese, feta cheese, own butter, own chickens and the eggs. And some

people, they brought pork, you know what I mean? And usually the people there, they eat vegetables, beans, all the [unclear — best decisions?], you know. So chicken and lamb, not much beef, but the meat not every day, you know? Once a week, twice a week, all depends the family's economy. You know what I mean?

[00:31:14]

Eric Velasco: How much money they have.

[00:31:15]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. They bought one, two pounds of meat, you know. All depends the family, whatever you have to buy. You know what I mean? And I tell you something. Those days, it was everything 100 percent natural, no chemicals. I remember myself.

[interruption as Mr. Nasiakos says goodbye to a customer]

[00:31:48]

Eric Velasco: What we call organic now.

[00:31:49]

George Nasiakos: Everything organic, everything those days. No sprays, no nothing, nothing. Mother Nature. And we got from a farm, go straight to cook, you know. So, fresh. And I tell you something. I don't remember from my age, the kids, nobody sick, no sick.

[00:32:23]

Eric Velasco: The food made you healthy.

[00:32:27]

George Nasiakos: And I remember old people in the village, one, two, each house, eighty-five, ninety, ninety-five, ninety-three, you know. Never they go to doctor. [laughs] So really they have a long life, those days. So when we went to European Union, one group from scientists, doctors, they visit some countries in the whole Europe and they went to Greece, they saw some old people and they ask them, “What you ate in your life?” “Beans, tomatoes, chicken, this and that.” But we use a lot of olive oil because we have a lot of oil there, it very nice.

[Somebody is stirring the pot of chili and banging the spoon on the pot nearby.]

[00:33:32]

Eric Velasco: Which also is healthier.

[00:33:35]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, very healthy. My grandfather, my mother’s father, has big land. He make in those days over twenty tons olive oil, yeah, and every year they send to us a lot of oil. We never are short. And the results, they found the oldest people in the Europe, in Germany, for example, they eat too much pork, sausage, a lot of fat things, you know? And the result was the Mediterranean food is—now they tell you that to your generation.

[00:34:31]

Eric Velasco: That's what everybody wants to eat now.

[00:34:33]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:34:37]

Eric Velasco: Sounds like you had a very hard life as a child, growing up in war, civil war, occupation.

[00:34:45]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I was too young and I didn't remember, but I heard from the olders, yeah. When they came, 1941, the Germans, you know, with Italians, we fight six months, don't came in Greece. But Germany was very strong, and after three, four days—

[00:35:12]

Eric Velasco: Took over.

[00:35:15]

George Nasiakos: Took over the country. So the Germans, they took most of the food for the people for the Army, so make it on purpose. For example, you live in Birmingham. There would leave people to go out to the farms to find something even some grass to eat, and they die,

a lot of people, and every day they found on the street. You know what I mean? The people die, no food.

[00:35:51]

Eric Velasco: That's how they kept you weak, by nobody having food.

[00:35:54]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. A lot of people died. In 1944, I think, the rebels, because we are with Allies, you know, America and England, you know, we are together, but we don't have any army, rebels was in the mountains. You know what I mean? Against the Germans. And that's all was the war. So some Germans, they go one place to the other and the rebels they kill two, three. And the Germans, the Germans, they go in the small, small city and they take the people. You know what I mean? And they put in a like square like here. And around there into the hills, to talk to them. And they start with the guns, machine guns.

[00:36:59]

Eric Velasco: They shot them all.

[00:37:00]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, and they kill 1,300 or more, something like that, yeah.

[00:37:07]

Eric Velasco: This was revenge for the freedom fighters fighting them.

[00:37:11]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, because they kill some Germans. You know what I mean? And they take the people and they kill them, yeah.

[00:37:17]

Eric Velasco: Did your father fight in the war?

[00:37:21]

George Nasiakos: My father, my father, no, because if you have five kids, you didn't. I born November 2nd, Saturday, 5:00 o'clock in the morning, and he went to—it's like we call them—like secretary, and they put him on it. [Interviewer's note: Mr. Nasiakos, the fifth child who would earn his father an exemption from fighting, was born five days after the Italians began their unsuccessful attempt to conquer Greece in 1940. He was seven months old when the German occupation began.]

[00:37:54]

Eric Velasco: Your birth certificate.

[00:37:56]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. So my father, he had five kids. He didn't. Four more brothers, they went. Yeah, four more brothers. My father, my mother's side, too, yeah. I lost one uncle, his name George, in the World War II, yeah.

[00:38:15]

Eric Velasco: Did your father do anything besides farm when he was in Greece? Did he have a job?

[00:38:25]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, a small farm, yeah. We eat potatoes, everything, you know, beans. The beans are for wintertime, you know.

[00:38:41]

Eric Velasco: He would dry them for the winter?

[00:38:42]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, yeah. That's all. Not [unclear]. [laughs]

[00:38:57]

Eric Velasco: What do you want to do when you go back to Greece, say, as part of your retirement? You want to go back home and see your family.

[00:39:02]

George Nasiakos: I tell you the truth. I like it here in Birmingham. So the weather, the people very polite. I have a lot of friends here, and here I feel like my home. I'll share. But I'm single, so now I'm okay, but after five, I don't know God how long he give to me after this. If I cannot

do that, I have nobody. So I still have two brothers and a sister older than me in Chicago, and I have two brothers, one sister in Greece. My other, the youngest brother, is in Greece. So I got to go there to stay, you know, and I come back, too, because I like in America. I like to be honest. And in the end, you know what I mean, I stay there, to die there. That's all.

[00:40:09]

Eric Velasco: Right. With family. That's where your family is.

[00:40:11]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:40:12]

Eric Velasco: You don't have any family here, do you, in Birmingham?

[00:40:15]

George Nasiakos: No, no. No, I have nobody here, no. Two brothers and one sister in Chicago, yeah.

[00:40:23]

Eric Velasco: Did you spend much time at Holy Trinity-Holy Cross? Did you go to worship there or go to events there at the church? [Interviewer's note: Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Cathedral, with roots dating back to 1906, is the Greek Orthodox congregation in Birmingham.]

[00:40:32]

George Nasiakos: I went—before, I went often. Lately, lately, I like to be honest, I like to go and I start now. Seven days a week I'm alert. So Saturday, six days here. Sunday, I sleep a little over. I wake up about 10:00 o'clock. And after that, I got to go to Sam's to buy some stuff here, Walmart. I got to go to farmers' market to buy some stuff here, and I spend all day. Usually I never had a day off except Christmas, New Year, Fourth of July, Labor Day, and Ascension Day, five days a year.

[00:41:27]

Eric Velasco: Wow.

[00:41:28]

George Nasiakos: The other days, 360 days, I'm alert. That's all.

[00:41:33]

Eric Velasco: And even your day off, you're working. You're getting ready for the next week.

[00:41:40]

George Nasiakos: Now I came here to help the guy, new guy. You know what I mean? I came to show everything this and that, yeah.

[00:41:47]

Eric Velasco: How did you find somebody to take over Gus's? How did you find Lee to take over Gus's? [Interviewer's note: Lee Pantazis is the new owner of Gus's Hot Dogs.]

[00:41:56]

George Nasiakos: How I find him?

[00:41:57]

Eric Velasco: Yes, sir.

[00:41:59]

George Nasiakos: I know his father. [Interviewer's note: A woman bursts into the room, saying to Mr. Nasiakos, "I heard a horrible rumor about you."]

His father is lawyer. His name Lee. His father's a lawyer, and we are good friends. And there's somebody else he came to buy, but he didn't, and somebody else, too, didn't. And one day he asked me, he said, "My son, he'd like to buy the place." "Okay." And that's all. We talked five minutes and the deal is over [slaps hands], and he took over, Mr. Lee.

[Mr. Pantazis responds in the background, "Roll Tide."]

[00:42:47]

Eric Velasco: Are you glad that Gus's is going to stay on, stay open? Are you glad that someone is taking over for you and it'll stay open?

[00:42:54]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:42:56]

Eric Velasco: You were hoping that it would? You were looking for somebody to take over for you, right?

[00:43:00]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:43:01]

Eric Velasco: And you're glad it's another Greek? Are you glad it's a fellow Greek who's taking over?

[00:43:08]

George Nasiakos: He Greek too.

[00:43:08]

Eric Velasco: Exactly.

[00:43:09]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:43:10]

Eric Velasco: He's going to be the fourth Greek to own the restaurant.

[00:43:12]

George Nasiakos: [leans over to talk to Mr. Pantazis] Are you Greek?

[00:43:12]

Lee Pantazis: Very. [laughs]

[00:43:14]

George Nasiakos: Tell him [unclear].

[00:43:18]

Lee Pantazis: I'm very happy to have another Greek in the building.

[00:43:25]

Eric Velasco: What am I missing here? What else do people need to know about you and about Gus's? What else do people need to know about you? What am I missing about you?

[00:43:33]

George Nasiakos: Oh, I have a lot of friends here. I have good relations, friendly with people here, yeah. I never had problem in twenty-two years here. I never had problem. Whenever I need something, because I don't know too many places here because I stick here, my house here,

whatever I need, whatever I need, black and white, people, they help me a lot, and I appreciate that and I never forgot. They help me always. Good people, yeah.

[00:44:11]

Eric Velasco: These are people you've met through Gus's. These are people you've met through the restaurant, right?

[00:44:16]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:44:17]

Eric Velasco: Friends you've made through here, through this building.

[00:44:20]

George Nasiakos: Right.

[00:44:23]

Eric Velasco: So when you would come home from work, after work, about 9:30 or 10:00, would you do anything or just go to bed? [laughter]

[00:44:32]

George Nasiakos: I try to eat something because I don't eat too much alone. You know what I mean? [laughs] I take a shower, shave, and iron all my clothes. You know what I mean?

That's all. Because I take care of myself because I don't have nobody, you know? I don't need another extra job in my house. You know what I mean?

[00:45:00]

Eric Velasco: You don't need to be doing that, do you?

[00:45:02]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. [laughs]

[00:45:04]

Eric Velasco: You have a big old thick head of hair. What is your secret to having such great hair?

[00:45:10]

George Nasiakos: Gray hair?

[00:45:12]

Eric Velasco: No, great. Thick hair. It's really nice hair.

[00:45:16]

George Nasiakos: Because I don't have time to cut. [laughter]

[00:45:22]

Eric Velasco: Well, I'm jealous, because you have really thick hair. I used to have nice long hair, but no more.

[00:45:27]

George Nasiakos: [laughs] The age. My brothers, they're all [he indicates a balding head].

[00:45:35]

Eric Velasco: So they get really jealous of you.

[00:45:37]

George Nasiakos: Everybody, my brothers, except me. My father's side they have the hair. They have the teeth too.

[00:45:47]

Eric Velasco: Teeth too. Good teeth. Good health in general.

[00:45:52]

George Nasiakos: They never went to dentist.

[00:45:58]

Eric Velasco: Of the seven children, where are you in the order? From oldest to youngest, where are you in the family?

[00:46:07]

George Nasiakos: My oldest, he name Gus. So he's born 1934, he's eighty-three years old.

The second one, 1936. The other one, 1937. My sister, 1939. Me, 1940. The other sister, 1943, and the youngest, 1945.

[00:46:39]

Eric Velasco: And all are still living?

[00:46:41]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:46:42]

Eric Velasco: Amazing.

[00:46:43]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, everybody, thank God.

[00:46:46]

Eric Velasco: How old was your mom when she died?

[00:46:48]

George Nasiakos: My mom, she get a problem in the breast, you know, and she don't say nothing because she don't like to bother nobody, but eighty-three years old. She be cancer of her

death, you know. So if she say something, was good, but she don't like it to take care of nobody, so I don't know why she was, her character like that.

So my father, he was ninety-four years old. My sister, she lives in another city, she marry there, about an hour from bus. Was January 15, something like that. He said, "I've got to go see my daughter, grandkids."

My youngest brother say, "Daddy, it's wintertime now. Wait. I give ride Saturday."

"No, I got to go."

"Please don't go."

But my father, nobody bothered. He had good life. He did whatever he likes, you know. My brother say, "Don't do that."

He say, "No, no." He was complete 100 percent free. He like to do that, that's it. Go there. Nobody bother him.

So he left. They making a highway and they have on the street they put the cement, something like that, the concrete, you know, and he tried to go across the highway. It was real dark, and some other guy come from Athens, you know, and it hit and it kill him on the spot. But the fault was my father, not the driver.

[00:48:51]

Eric Velasco: This was in Greece, after he moved back?

[00:48:56]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. At the same time, my brother-in-law, he finish from his job and he goes home, and he stopped, say, “What’s going on here? Oh, my god, my father-in-law.” So he lost his life like that. He never be sick, my father, never.

My grandmother, she die 103; my father, ninety-four; my uncle, ninety-one, ninety; the youngest, ninety-six; my aunt, ninety-five; and my uncle from Chicago, eighty-five. He make open-heart operation and the food, you know what I mean? That’s what I’m talking about, Mediterranean [unclear].

[00:49:52]

Eric Velasco: If he’d stuck to the Mediterranean diet, he’d have been okay.

[00:49:55]

George Nasiakos: And now I have another aunt, ninety-seven years old, from my father family, one alive now, my aunt, ninety-seven years old. My father—from my mother’s side, her brother, the oldest one, ninety-eight; the aunt, ninety-three; the other aunt, almost ninety, something like that; and youngest, around eighty. So another one, he’s ninety-three years old, ninety-four now in life. They get a long life, yeah.

[00:50:39]

Eric Velasco: Seems to run in your family.

[00:50:41]

George Nasiakos: Yeah.

[00:50:43]

Eric Velasco: You've been working hard here for twenty-two years, long, long days. You're a week into retirement now. Have you come into Gus's every day since you've been retired?

[00:50:55]

George Nasiakos: As long I'm here, I'm here every day.

[00:50:58]

Eric Velasco: Since 7:30 in the morning?

[00:51:00]

George Nasiakos: No, no, no. I get in 9:00 o'clock.

[00:51:04]

Eric Velasco: You're leaving that part to Lee.

[00:51:06]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, yeah.

[00:51:09]

Eric Velasco: Do you think you'll miss it?

[00:51:11]

George Nasiakos: Too much. Even now, even now I think I own this place, yeah. Yeah, I said too many years.

[00:51:21]

Eric Velasco: What do you think you'll miss the most? What will you miss the most?

[00:51:27]

George Nasiakos: This place and the people. That's all. The people here, who came in over the years, like my people, belong to me, you know, and especially the kids. Over twenty years, I bought a lot of candies, a lot of candies, and comes here, "Oh, George, I need candy." They come now. They're grown up.

[00:51:51]

Eric Velasco: They're all grown up.

[00:51:52]

George Nasiakos: Yeah. They ask me, "Hi, George. You remember me? No? You don't remember me? You gave me candies."

"When you were young, I remember but not now because you've changed a lot." Yeah.

[laughs]

[00:52:07]

Eric Velasco: A lot of people have been coming by and saying goodbye to you.

[00:52:13]

George Nasiakos: Yeah, and a lot of people, we take the pictures. You know what I mean?

And they know I'm here and they come to say bye to me, yeah. I had good times here, yeah.

The most important thing, from my experience, to keep the people close. "Keep the friends close and keep the enemies more close." You know what I mean? So the worst thing is to fight. Fight is no good. Friend is good, because everybody, we each one. Everybody. Something, one day something happen, you help somebody, somebody help you. You know what I mean?

[00:53:05]

Eric Velasco: You've seen that in your own life.

[00:53:06]

George Nasiakos: That's right. All my life I never had fight with nobody, no, no. All over I have good friends. That is my type like that.

[00:53:17]

Eric Velasco: When people are sitting there thinking about Gus's and all the time they've known you, what do you want people to say about you? How do you want people to remember you?

[00:53:27]

George Nasiakos: What people remember me?

[00:53:30]

Eric Velasco: Yes, sir. What would you like for somebody to say when they're talking about you years from now, "Yeah, I remember Mr. George." What do people call you here? What name do people call you by here?

[00:53:42]

George Nasiakos: Usually I don't remember too many names. You know what I mean?

[00:53:46]

Eric Velasco: But how do people talk to you? Do they call you Mr. George? They call you Mr. Nasiakos?

[00:53:51]

George Nasiakos: Mr. George.

[00:53:53]

Eric Velasco: So years from now when they're talking about Mr. George, what would you like for them to remember about you?

[00:53:59]

George Nasiakos: I don't know.

[00:54:03]

Eric Velasco: A good guy? Some candy, I guess.

[00:54:05]

George Nasiakos: [laughs] Yeah. This lady here, she came to see me.

[interruption as Mr. Nasiakos calls to a customer named Kelly. They speak in Greek. She gets teary-eyed as she hugs Mr. Nasiakos. “I’ll miss you,” Mr. Nasiakos says in English, mentioning her family.]

[00:55:01]

Eric Velasco: Well, listen. I do appreciate you taking the time with me today. This has been a delight talking with you.

[00:55:05]

George Nasiakos: Thank you.

[00:55:06]

Eric Velasco: And thank you for sharing.

[00:55:08]

George Nasiakos: Thank you. I appreciate, too, and I hope to see you again.

[00:55:13]

Eric Velasco: Me too.

[00:55:14]

George Nasiakos: Okay.

[00:55:15]

Eric Velasco: Me too. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]