



**George Sissa  
Niki's Downtown  
Birmingham, Alabama**

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Date: April 21, 2017  
Location: Niki's Downtown  
Interviewer: Eric Velasco  
Transcription: Technitype Transcription  
Length: Fifty-four minutes  
Project: Greek Restaurateurs in Birmingham

[Note: The interview took place in the dining room of the restaurant, as employees were closing down for the weekend. The old ice machine constantly rattles in the background, occasionally dumping ice with a thump. A telephone by the nearby cash register rings frequently.]

[*START OF INTERVIEW*]

**Eric Velasco:** This is Eric Velasco for the Southern Foodways Alliance. I’m conducting an oral history interview with George Sissa at his restaurant, Niki’s Downtown. Niki’s, a Birmingham institution, has been open for sixty-six years, and Mr. Sissa has been owner since 1988. It is April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017. We’re sitting in the dining area as they close on Friday.

Please introduce yourself, Mr. Sissa, and if you would, also please spell your name and give us your date of birth for the record.

[00:00:32]

**George Sissa:** My name is George Sissa, last name S-i-s-s-a. My date of birth is 9/20/51.

[00:00:46]

**Eric Velasco:** And I wanted to start, your family’s had a longtime association with the city of Birmingham. Tell us about your father, where he was born, and how he came here, please.

[00:00:55]

**George Sissa:** My father was born in Veria, Greece, and my mother’s from Naousa, Greece, and they came to America. My dad left Greece when he was eighteen and came here, came to America, settled in Birmingham.

[00:01:17]

**Eric Velasco:** What year did he come to America?

[00:01:24]

**George Sissa:** I can’t remember.

[00:01:25]

**Eric Velasco:** How old? Do you know how old he was? Was he young man?

[00:01:27]

**George Sissa:** When he first came to America, he was nineteen years old. He left the family, came up here. [Interviewer’s note: Online records indicate Mr. Sissa was born in 1888 and died in 1984. That means he likely arrived in the United States in 1906 or 1907.]

He went to Greece several times, and then, I never will forget, he told me the last time he went, his father told him, he says, “You’re my best son,” he says, “and you’re not married.” He says, “I’ve picked a bride for you.”

[00:01:50]

**Eric Velasco:** And that bride was your mother?

[00:01:54]

**George Sissa:** That’s right. And that’s what he did.

[00:01:57]

**Eric Velasco:** So tell us your father’s name, please.

[00:01:58]

**George Sissa:** My father’s name was Nicholas James Sissa, and my mother’s name was Ourania Sissa.

[00:02:08]

**Eric Velasco:** Could you spell that for us, please?

[00:02:09]

**George Sissa:** Ourania?

[00:02:13]

**Eric Velasco:** Yes, sir.

[00:02:14]

**George Sissa:** O-u-r-a-n-i-a.

[00:02:16]

**Eric Velasco:** I never would have guessed that spelling. [laughs] Do you remember how the name of her hometown—do you know how that’s spelled?

[00:02:23]

**George Sissa:** N-i-a-s-s-e, I believe. [Interviewer’s note: Naousa is 10 miles from Veria in the Macedonia region of northern Greece.]

[00:02:31]

**Eric Velasco:** Thank you very much. So what did your father do when he came to the United States?

[00:02:37]

**George Sissa:** The first time, he did whatever, whatever kind of labor he could find to sustain himself, that’s what he did. He traveled the whole state—I mean the whole country. And he had some friends in Birmingham, and he kept coming back to Birmingham, and then he settled in Birmingham, and that was it.

[00:03:01]

**Eric Velasco:** Why did he come to the States in the first place?

[00:03:03]

**George Sissa:** For a better life. The real reason is he had a brother that was a governor, and the other brother was a mayor of a city, and in '47, that war, the communist war, they massacred the two brothers, and so he said he never would go back. But anyway, he went back to see his father and all, and when he got married, I was born nine months later. After I was born, he told me, he told my mother, my mother told me, she said, “He kept saying America’s the only place to raise a child. We’ve got to go back to the States.” And so they came back.

[00:04:06]

**Eric Velasco:** Were things pretty tough economically back home where your parents are from?

[00:04:12]

**George Sissa:** Well, my mother’s family was in good shape, very good shape. My father’s family, the whole time he was working here, he kept acquiring property over there, so he left his family in good shape.

[00:04:41]

**Eric Velasco:** But did he come here before the war or after?

[00:04:43]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yeah, before. He served in World War I.

[00:04:45]

**Eric Velasco:** Oh, okay. Now we’re starting to get a date, a little time frame for it. What did he do in World War I?

[00:04:53]

**George Sissa:** He was in the Armored Division in Germany.

[00:04:59]

**Eric Velasco:** Did he ever talk about fighting for the United States?

[00:05:08]

**George Sissa:** He didn’t talk a whole lot about the war. He just—not a whole lot of conversation about that.

[00:05:19]

**Eric Velasco:** So he would have been, I guess, probably here in the early teens, I guess it was.

[00:05:24]

**George Sissa:** Right, right. When he passed away, he was ninety-seven years old.

[Interviewer’s note: Mr. Sissa died five months before what would have been his 97<sup>th</sup> birthday.]

[00:05:29]

**Eric Velasco:** What year did he die?

[00:05:34]

**George Sissa:** With that thing, I can’t—

[00:05:36]

**Eric Velasco:** Right. I understand. I’ll look up an obituary. Those things are all online. That’ll help with that. So I once read an interview with you where you said that a lot of the people from where your dad was from wound up over in New York City and Buffalo.

[00:05:54]

**George Sissa:** That’s right. Most of the people from—Veria is a suburb of Thessalonica, and Naousa, where my mother’s from, is a suburb also. [Interviewer’s note: Thessalonica is an alternative name for Thessaloniki, Greece’s second-largest city.]

Many of those people settled in New York City and in the East Coast. He had some friends in the southern part of Greece that settled in Birmingham, and for some reason he just liked it here.

[00:06:19]

**Eric Velasco:** Weather’s a lot better.

[00:06:20]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yes. Oh, I’m glad he did. [laughter]

[00:06:25]

**Eric Velasco:** You know, we seem to have these village and city and town clusters in different cities, of immigrants in different cities here in the United States. Why is that?

[00:06:41]

**George Sissa:** Well, I can tell you this. When my dad told me they came over, they didn’t have anybody to associate with, and he said, “We had to stick together.” And there would be like ten guys or eight guys living in one room, and he told me that every night one of the guys was supposed to cook dinner for everybody, and so he said they got to be pretty good cooks. Well, I’m thinking that might be why they ended up in the restaurant business and then the food business, grocery business, produce business.

[00:07:22]

**Eric Velasco:** And your dad ended up in the restaurant business as well.

[00:07:24]

**George Sissa:** Right.

[00:07:26]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell us about his restaurant, please.

[00:07:27]

**George Sissa:** Well, he had one on 20<sup>th</sup> Street, right across from the Hillman Hospital, which is now University of Alabama in Birmingham.

[00:07:38]

**Eric Velasco:** This is 20<sup>th</sup> Street South?

[00:07:40]

**George Sissa:** That’s right. And it was like a combination of a—the best way I can describe, what he told me, it was like a Kwik Mart, you know, buy groceries in there, you could buy meats and stuff, or there was a restaurant also on the side.

[00:08:03]

**Eric Velasco:** What did he sell?

[00:08:05]

**George Sissa:** Well, he told me back then it was a bowl of chili and a hamburger. That’s really how we started off.

[00:08:17]

**Eric Velasco:** And what was the name of the restaurant?

[00:08:20]

**George Sissa:** James’s Cafe.

[00:08:22]

**Eric Velasco:** James’s Cafe. Do you know around when he opened that?

[00:08:26]

**George Sissa:** That I don’t know.

[00:08:31]

**Eric Velasco:** This was before or after he got married?

[00:08:34]

**George Sissa:** Before.

[00:08:37]

**Eric Velasco:** And then he had other restaurants.

[00:08:41]

**George Sissa:** Oh, he had several other restaurants. He had some on south side, some up by the terminal station on 26th Street. After he married my mother, he bought a restaurant by the TCI mill in Ensley, where they made steel, and he had a restaurant, he had a pool hall, and a barbershop. He bought that building and he operated that until he retired.

[00:09:16]

**Eric Velasco:** The one that’s by the terminal, what was the name of that one?

[00:09:20]

**George Sissa:** That one was called the Plant Cafe.

[00:09:23]

**Eric Velasco:** The one out in Ensley?

[00:09:24]

**George Sissa:** Ensley.

[00:09:25]

**Eric Velasco:** And then the one before that?

[00:09:26]

**George Sissa:** The one before that was called the Terminal Cafe on 26<sup>th</sup> Street, across the street from the old terminal station.

[00:09:32]

**Eric Velasco:** So when did your dad retire?

[00:09:36]

**George Sissa:** He retired at about 95, and he stayed retired for about two months, and then he told me, he says, “I can’t do this. I’ve got to find me a job.” And the next thing I know, the next day he came to me and says I’ve got a job at Leontis’ barbecue stand.

I said, “Dad, what didn’t you retire?”

He said, “I can’t stay home. I’ve got to find something to do.”

[00:10:06]

**Eric Velasco:** The man believed in work.

[00:10:07]

**George Sissa:** Yeah, oh, yeah.

[00:10:11]

**Eric Velasco:** So how long did he work at the barbecue stand?

[00:10:14]

**George Sissa:** For about a year, and then he came home. That was it.

[00:10:20]

**Eric Velasco:** Had to get it out of his system, I guess.

[00:10:22]

**George Sissa:** That’s right. That’s right.

[00:10:26]

**Eric Velasco:** [laughs] Do you have any siblings?

[00:10:30]

**George Sissa:** I do. I have a younger sister.

[00:10:33]

**Eric Velasco:** What is her name?

[00:10:34]

**George Sissa:** Her name is Katherine Staursky.

[00:10:38]

**Eric Velasco:** Is it Katherine with a C or a K?

[00:10:39]

**George Sissa:** K. And then I have a younger brother, Jimmy.

[00:10:46]

**Eric Velasco:** Who were you named for?

[00:10:50]

**George Sissa:** My dad’s brother that was a governor, George.

[00:10:54]

**Eric Velasco:** What was he governor of? Is it states in Greece or— ?

[00:11:02]

**George Sissa:** They were city-states back then. Now I think it’s evolved and changed, but he was a governor of a city-state that had Naousa and Veria in it. In fact, in Veria, there’s a street that’s named after my family, Sissa, and then at the corner from down Main Street, that’s called Sissa Stop, which is the bus stop. I’ve seen that. I remember that.

[00:11:38]

**Eric Velasco:** So your dad must have been remarkably accomplished for your grandfather to say, “You’re my best son,” when one of them was a governor, one had been a mayor.

[00:11:49]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yeah, he was. Dad, the main reason he came to America was to educate his brothers. That’s what he wanted to do. And he ended up educating them, he ended up marrying off his sister, and then he started acquiring property over there.

[00:12:09]

**Eric Velasco:** How much property did he acquire?

[00:12:11]

**George Sissa:** He had a whole square block.

[00:12:12]

**Eric Velasco:** In Veria?

[00:12:14]

**George Sissa:** In Veria. Sure did.

[00:12:16]

**Eric Velasco:** Wow. So I guess he paid for his brothers’ education in Greece.

[00:12:24]

**George Sissa:** Right. He would send money over there. That’s how he did it.

[00:12:28]

**Eric Velasco:** That’s amazing. Your father sounds like an amazing man.

[00:12:32]

**George Sissa:** You know, they were tough people back then, they really were, and they lived a long time and they were always healthy.

[00:12:39]

**Eric Velasco:** Why do you think that is?

[00:12:42]

**George Sissa:** I don’t think they had the stress that we do. You know, they lived life. They lived life. They didn’t bother eating too heavy. He never would eat after six o’clock. I remember whenever he would have a meal at home, he either had a glass of wine or a bottle of beer with every meal, but never, *ever* saw him intoxicated. He used to tell me, he said, “You take alcohol and treat it like medicine. You control it; it doesn’t control you.”

[00:13:25]

**Eric Velasco:** Just enough to relax, but not too much.

[00:13:29]

**George Sissa:** That’s right.

[00:13:30]

**Eric Velasco:** What did you eat growing up?

[00:13:31]

**George Sissa:** All Greek. My mother would cook Greek food, Greek chicken, stuffed grape leaves, roast lamb, Keftedakia, the meatballs, Greek chicken, I told you that. Fish. We ate a lot of fish. She would raise dandelions in the backyard and we ate dandelions. They were delicious.

[00:14:01]

**Eric Velasco:** That’s like somebody in the south saying “raising dandelions,” as opposed to pulling them. [laughs]

[00:14:06]

**George Sissa:** Yeah. Well, you know, I never will forget, he had hired a paint crew to paint the house, and they couldn’t figure out what my mother was doing cultivating the dandelions.

[00:14:18]

**Eric Velasco:** And she would use them in a salad?

[00:14:20]

**George Sissa:** In a salad or either she would boil them with lemon and olive oil. Oh, they were great.

[00:14:27]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, where would she get things like olive oil and grape leaves and things like that in the sixties and the fifties too?

[00:14:34]

**George Sissa:** There was a place called Sarris’—not Sarris’. What was her name? I can’t remember the lady’s name. She was an older lady, and she would import the stuff. She would import. I don’t know if she imported it herself or she had it brought in and then distributed from her storefront.

[00:15:05]

**Eric Velasco:** Well, there had to be a great market for it, because every person I’ve talked to said they grew up eating Greek food. [laughs]

[00:15:10]

**George Sissa:** That’s right. Feta cheese, all that.

[00:15:14]

**Eric Velasco:** There’s always been a fairly substantial population of Greeks here in Birmingham.

[00:15:22]

**George Sissa:** There has been.

[00:15:23]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell us where you grew up.

[00:15:27]

**George Sissa:** I grew up in Norwood. I went to F.D. McArthur School and then I went to Phillips High School and then I went to Jacksonville State. And growing up in Norwood was great because everybody knew everybody, and if you stepped out of line, it wasn’t your mother that would get you first; it was the neighbors. And then when you got home, you got it from your mother.

[00:15:57]

**Eric Velasco:** And describe Norwood to the listeners here. It’s a beautiful neighborhood.

[00:16:03]

**George Sissa:** At one time it was very beautiful, beautiful homes, everything was manicured just right, everybody took pride in what they were doing in their homes, and they were all families, all families, and it was just a family atmosphere.

[00:16:23]

**Eric Velasco:** Very mixed group of people living there, too, a lot of Greeks.

[00:16:27]

**George Sissa:** There was a lot of Greeks, and then a little bit further on the other side of Norwood, there was a lot of Italians. I think that’s about all that I remember, as far as foreign nationalities. [Interviewer’s note: Norwood also had a substantial number of Jewish residents.]

[00:16:44]

**Eric Velasco:** Who did you grow up around?

[00:16:48]

**George Sissa:** You mean my—

[00:16:50]

**Eric Velasco:** Some of the other families, some of the other Greek families.

[00:16:54]

**George Sissa:** The Stevens family; the Pappas family; the Derzis family; Koustas family; the Drakos family; the Chibides [phonetic] family; the Orfanos family. You know, that’s where we spent our times together.

[00:17:20]

**Eric Velasco:** And then I guess they all were part of the Greek Orthodox Church?

[00:17:24]

**George Sissa:** Yes.

[00:17:27]

**Eric Velasco:** Had the two congregations merged by the time you were growing up?

[00:17:31]

**George Sissa:** Yes, they had already merged, and we used both churches. The Holy Cross, we used it on the weekend—weeks, during the week services. And then Holy Trinity, we used it for Sunday services.

[00:17:49]

**Eric Velasco:** And where was Holy Cross?

[00:17:50]

**George Sissa:** Holy Cross was on Twelfth Avenue and Seventh—no, 24<sup>th</sup> Street and Seventh Avenue.

[00:18:02]

**Eric Velasco:** South.

[00:18:03]

**George Sissa:** North. North. There was a half-a-block complex there, and I think the City of Birmingham bought the property, and then everybody moved to Holy Trinity.

[00:18:15]

**Eric Velasco:** That’s not far from where you grew up, right?

[00:18:17]

**George Sissa:** No, not far at all.

[00:18:20]

**Eric Velasco:** And then Holy Trinity is on the site where it is now?

[00:18:25]

**George Sissa:** On Third Avenue South and 19<sup>th</sup> Street.

[00:18:28]

**Eric Velasco:** It’s a pretty big church, isn’t it?

[00:18:31]

**George Sissa:** It is.

[00:18:32]

**Eric Velasco:** It’s actually a cathedral now.

[00:18:33]

**George Sissa:** It is a cathedral.

[00:18:34]

**Eric Velasco:** What makes a cathedral a cathedral versus a church?

[00:18:41]

**George Sissa:** The size of it, the number of parishioners that it has, and then they bring in a priest that is elevated to a higher level, and then it becomes a cathedral.

[00:18:56]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell us about growing up around the church and the church itself.

[00:19:00]

**George Sissa:** That was it. That was what we did. Every afternoon, we would go to Greek School when we got out of our regular, like F.D. McArthur. My mother would take us to Greek School, which was at the Education Building next to the church. At one time, we had two teachers, then we went down to one, but they taught us how to read and write Greek. And the kids were from all over. I mean, there was some from Ensley, there were some from Fairfield, some from Homewood, some from Mountain Brook, and that’s where we all got together every afternoon.

[00:19:48]

**Eric Velasco:** So from the west side of town and the south side.

[00:19:50]

**George Sissa:** West side, south side, north side. That was where we got together.

[00:19:55]

**Eric Velasco:** Do you still speak Greek?

[00:19:58]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yes.

[00:19:59]

**Eric Velasco:** Do you write it?

[00:20:00]

**George Sissa:** No. I have left it alone for so long, I can’t write it, but I do speak it.

[00:20:08]

**Eric Velasco:** Why did all the Greek kids go to the Greek School?

[00:20:14]

**George Sissa:** At the time, our parents spoke Greek at home, and they wanted us to learn two languages, so the church set up the school. And in the beginning, there were quite a few kids going there. I mean, there was probably over 100. But then after a few years, it dwindled down when they felt like it wasn’t that important.

[00:20:48]

**Eric Velasco:** And then the church itself, that seemed to be a gathering place as well as a worshipping place.

[00:20:56]

**George Sissa:** Absolutely.

[00:20:57]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell us about that.

[00:20:58]

**George Sissa:** It was, of course, the worshipping place, and then we had our Sunday School was there and our Greek School was there. We had a lot of social events were held there. We would rent movies from Greece and bring them over on a reel-to-reel and project them on a screen and show them to all the Greek families. They would actually pay money. It was a fundraiser for us kids. We used it as a fundraiser, but it was a lot of entertainment for the adults and it was entertainment for us.

[00:21:46]

**Eric Velasco:** Why were you raising funds?

[00:21:48]

**George Sissa:** We were raising funds so that we could go on trips to Atlanta to visit the Atlanta community or either to Montgomery or Huntsville.

[00:21:58]

**Eric Velasco:** Were these these conventions I’ve heard about?

[00:22:01]

**George Sissa:** Some of them were. Some of them were just—some of the conventions got real big. Now, when they got that big, I kind of bailed out because I had started playing ball at school, so that took up a lot of my time, but in the beginning as a youngster, I remember we went to Savannah, Georgia, Atlanta, Huntsville, Montgomery. And it was basketball tournaments,

singing tournaments. It was just a gathering. It was good. The bishops were there. The priests were there.

[00:22:44]

**Eric Velasco:** It was all a way of maintaining that sense of the community of Greeks and get to know other people.

[00:22:54]

**George Sissa:** In essence, that’s right. In essence, that’s what it was trying to do, that’s right.

[00:22:59]

**Eric Velasco:** And then at the same time, opportunities to meet other Greeks, possibly date, marry, all those good things.

[00:23:05]

**George Sissa:** We had several that did.

[00:23:07]

**Eric Velasco:** Take me back. I kind of skipped over this, but it sounds like a great story, about how your parents got together.

[00:23:19]

**George Sissa:** Dad told me that he went back to visit his dad, and his dad told him, he says, “You’re my best son. I need for you to be married.”

And so my dad said, “Okay.”

Well, his dad, my grandfather, told him, “We’re going to this particular cafe.” It was an outdoor cafe. “And her family will be at one side of the cafe and we’ll be at the other.” And he says, “I’m going to let you see her.” And so that’s how they saw each other, and they both said yes. So then the parents had a little party between each other and brought the kids in and introduced them, and away it went.

[00:24:08]

**Eric Velasco:** So how long did they court before they got married?

[00:24:12]

**George Sissa:** You didn’t court then. There was no courting. It was done. They had agreed.

[00:24:17]

**Eric Velasco:** Have a party and head to the church.

[00:24:19]

**George Sissa:** They had agreed. Her family had agreed. Everybody was in sync. It was over.

[00:24:25]

**Eric Velasco:** And then nine months later, you came along.

[00:24:28]

**George Sissa:** That’s it. You know, I had a friend who asked his grandmother, “How did you happen to marry and stay married to my grandfather as long as you did when there was no love involved?”

And she told him, “There was respect and honor first. Then came love.” And, you know, that makes a whole lot of sense. There was a good foundation to begin with.

[00:25:04]

**Eric Velasco:** What were your grandparents’ names, your dad’s parents?

[00:25:09]

**George Sissa:** My dad’s parents, his father was James, his mother was Maria. My mother’s parents, her father was James and her mother was Maria. How about that? Unreal.

[00:00:00]

**Eric Velasco:** Well, there’s that tradition of naming people for saints.

[Mr. Sissa punctuates his point by hitting the table. He does this throughout the interview.]

[00:25:35]

**George Sissa:** You get your name for saints, and then the other thing is, in my family, like my name is George Nicholas Sissa. My dad gave me his brother’s name, and then my middle name

is my dad’s name. And the reason they did that in Greece, so they could keep track of who your father is, and that way they knew what was going on, you know, if you were stepping out of line, who they needed to talk to.

[00:26:08]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, did your dad shut down his restaurant in Birmingham before he went to Greece? Because that’s a long time to be gone.

[00:26:15]

**George Sissa:** Well, now, see, the last one, the Plant Cafe is what he called it, he didn’t open it up till he got back to the States. Prior to that, he would go in and lease the building and set up a restaurant. Then when he went to Greece, he’d sell it and go to Greece and then come back and start all over again.

[00:26:51]

**Eric Velasco:** Did your family interact much with the other Greek restaurateurs in town?

[00:26:55]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. On Sundays, they would all get together, either at our house or the Drakos household or Orfanos household or the Stevens household. Oh, it was every Sunday afternoon, every Sunday evening.

[00:27:12]

**Eric Velasco:** And a lot of food?

[00:27:14]

**George Sissa:** Lot of food, a lot of good times. I mean, that was just what was done.

[00:27:25]

**Eric Velasco:** Did you go out to eat any, growing up?

[00:27:28]

**George Sissa:** A little bit after I got older, but the majority of our meals were at home because my mother was an excellent cook, and even though my mother was an excellent cook, my dad was even better than she was.

[00:27:42]

**Eric Velasco:** Well, I guess he had a little bit of experience too.

[00:27:44]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. He was doing it every day.

[00:27:49]

**Eric Velasco:** And the Plant Cafe, do you know what kind of food he was serving there?

[00:27:55]

**George Sissa:** He had a steam-table operation where you would go in, there’d be several different meats. You’d order your meat and then several different vegetables, and your breads, and he had pies, he had ice cream. He served sandwiches of all kinds. Oh, yeah.

[00:28:20]

**Eric Velasco:** Clientele, a lot of millworkers, I would imagine.

[00:28:24]

**George Sissa:** There were a lot of millworkers early in the morning because they would be going into the mill, and then for lunch there were just people from that Ensley neighborhood area, they’d come up. And then in the evening it was just sparse. It was not that strong.

[00:28:44]

**Eric Velasco:** And, of course, by mill, we’re talking about steel mill.

[00:28:49]

**George Sissa:** Steel mill, that’s right.

[00:28:50]

**Eric Velasco:** Large steel mill there.

[00:28:51]

**George Sissa:** Oh, it was huge. It was blowing smoke so bad, it was unreal. And they were running too. Man, they were running that steel.

[00:29:02]

**Eric Velasco:** Were they doing three shifts a day?

[00:29:04]

**George Sissa:** Three shifts, oh, yeah. Three shifts, and after a long time, they cut off one. But, no, those mills ran. Man, did they run. And if you went by there at night, like if we went to the Plant Cafe at night, you could see the glow right there where the—I guess they were blast furnaces or whatever. You could see the glow.

[00:29:34]

**Eric Velasco:** Orange or—

[00:29:35]

**George Sissa:** Yeah, orange.

[00:29:35]

**Eric Velasco:** Wow. Did you work there much when you were growing up?

[00:29:39]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yeah.

[00:29:40]

**Eric Velasco:** What did you do and when did you start doing it?

[00:29:42]

**George Sissa:** Well, I worked the cash register. Then I got to where I would serve some food and just help my dad at whatever he wanted me to do. I'd run to the bank and get change and come back. There was always something to do.

[00:30:03]

**Eric Velasco:** What age did you start working for him?

[00:30:07]

**George Sissa:** Oh, I had to been about eight, I guess, eight.

[00:30:11]

**Eric Velasco:** Go in Saturdays, or what days was he open?

[00:30:14]

**George Sissa:** He was open seven days a week. I would go there on Saturdays and work all day. Then during the summer, I would work all day. Sure did.

[00:30:27]

**Eric Velasco:** That’s where you got your start in restaurants.

[00:30:30]

**George Sissa:** Yes.

[00:30:32]

**Eric Velasco:** You said you played ball. What kind of ball did you play?

[00:30:34]

**George Sissa:** I played football and I ran track, I played basketball, I wrestled. But those days are gone.

[00:30:43]

**Eric Velasco:** [laughs] What position did you play in football?

[00:30:46]

**George Sissa:** Linebacker.

[00:30:47]

**Eric Velasco:** How about basketball?

[00:30:49]

**George Sissa:** I was not a forward; a center.

[00:30:52]

**Eric Velasco:** So you were always a big guy, then.

[00:30:54]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yeah, yeah.

[00:30:56]

**Eric Velasco:** How tall are you?

[00:30:57]

**George Sissa:** Five eleven and a half.

[00:30:59]

**Eric Velasco:** Solid man.

[00:31:02]

**George Sissa:** I hope. [laughter]

[00:31:06]

**Eric Velasco:** Did you play any beyond high school?

[00:31:10]

**George Sissa:** No. I tore up my knees. I was getting invitation to visit several universities, but after I tore up my knees, they didn’t know who I was.

[00:31:26]

**Eric Velasco:** The letters stopped coming.

[00:31:27]

**George Sissa:** That’s right.

[00:31:28]

**Eric Velasco:** What sport were you playing then, or what were you being recruited for?

[00:31:31]

**George Sissa:** Football. I was being recruited to play ball, football.

[00:31:36]

**Eric Velasco:** What kind of schools were knocking, or what school were knocking— ?

[00:31:39]

**George Sissa:** Well, it was Auburn, Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, Georgia Tech. Oh, yeah, I was—

[00:31:47]

**Eric Velasco:** Major powerhouses.

[00:31:49]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yeah. Of course, back then if you got a knee tore up, it’s not like it is today where they can go in and scope them and rebuild them or whatever they do now.

[00:31:59]

**Eric Velasco:** You were damaged goods.

[00:32:00]

**George Sissa:** Yeah.

[00:32:02]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, what were your first paying jobs? I assume working for Dad, that was helping out, that was helping Dad.

[00:32:13]

**George Sissa:** There was another Greek family, the Morris family, and they had a Kwik Mart, and next door to that they opened up a laundromat. In fact, the laundromat got so good that they closed the Kwik Mart down. Uncle Pete, that’s what he wanted me to call him, one day he told me, he says, “Come by here. I want to show you something.” Well, he showed me how to clean up the laundromat. It was those coin-operated machines.

[00:32:53]

**Eric Velasco:** Right.

[00:32:53]

**George Sissa:** He showed me how to mop and sweep and clean it up and set it back up. So he asked me, said, “You want to do this three nights a week?” So when I was in high school my freshman year, that’s what I did. That was my first paying job.

[00:33:11]

**Eric Velasco:** That’s not bad. So I guess you would have been, what, fourteen, thirteen?

[00:33:16]

**George Sissa:** Fourteen. Yeah, fourteen.

[00:33:19]

**Eric Velasco:** What else did you do?

[00:33:22]

**George Sissa:** After that, one summer I worked downtown at a hot dog stand.

[00:33:27]

**Eric Velasco:** Which one?

[00:33:28]

**George Sissa:** DeMoes’ Hot Dogs.

[00:33:30]

**Eric Velasco:** Who owned it?

[00:33:32]

**George Sissa:** Gus DeMoes. And there I did a little bit of everything. I worked there two or three summers, and then Pete’s Famous, which was Pete Koutroulakis owned it, I worked for him for several summers in a row. [Gus DeMoes emigrated with his family from Greece at age 8 in 1948, and grew up in north Birmingham. He opened seven locations of DeMoes Delicious Hot Dogs before relocating to Colorado in 1976. He died in 2012.]

[00:33:51]

**Eric Velasco:** Pete’s Famous. That was an institution. [Interviewer’s note: In 1939, Pete Koutroulakis used his winnings in a card game to buy a restaurant in downtown Birmingham with a partner. After buying out the partner in 1946, Koutroulakis renamed it Pete’s Famous Hot Dogs and put up a neon sign that became a city landmark. After a heart attack, Pete moved back to Greece, and his nephew, Constantine “Gus” Koutroulakis, took over in 1948. Pete’s Famous closed after Gus died in 2011. Gus Koutroulakis was the subject of a Southern Foodways Alliance oral history interview in 2004. The Pete’s Famous sign is preserved at Barber Motorsports Museum outside Birmingham.]

[00:33:55]

**George Sissa:** That’s the famous one. That’s right. That’s right.

[00:33:58]

**Eric Velasco:** What did you do there?

[00:33:59]

**George Sissa:** There I worked on the grill, I made the hot dogs, I did cash register.

[00:34:08]

**Eric Velasco:** When did you decide that you wanted to go into restaurants?

[00:34:12]

**George Sissa:** Well, I don’t know, it just kind of—I kind of backed into it. I had gone to work for a wholesale food company and I was doing exceptionally well, and then my brother had gone overseas and worked for an oil company, and he said, “Let’s get in the restaurant business.” So he and I bought this building and property, and then after about two months, he told me, he says, “I can’t take this. I’m outta here.” So he left.

[00:34:59]

**Eric Velasco:** So you two bought this as partners.

[00:35:01]

**George Sissa:** As partners. Then he left. I paid it off, and then after I paid it off, he says, “I want you to buy me out.” So, I mean, that was kind of tough, but—

[00:35:15]

**Eric Velasco:** Must have been some lean times then.

[00:35:17]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

[00:35:19]

**Eric Velasco:** Everything’s going out the door.

[00:35:20]

**George Sissa:** You know, that’s part of it.

[00:35:26]

**Eric Velasco:** So did you know the Hontzas family before you bought this place?

[00:35:30]

**George Sissa:** Yes, I did. I knew Phil, I knew Jimmy, and I knew George very well.

[00:35:37]

**Eric Velasco:** For listeners and for readers, who are they, especially in relation to this place?

[00:35:42]

**George Sissa:** Uncle Johnny Callas was the one who actually built this building. Give you an example, he was getting ready to open it up, and he told me that he didn’t know what to name it. His youngest daughter’s name was Niki, and she said, “Name it after me.” So that’s what he did. That’s why it’s got a feminine gender on the name. But he opened this one and kept it going. Then nine years later, the farmers’ market was located all the way around them. Nine years later, they moved to Finley Avenue. He didn’t think this one was going to exist, so he moved out there, bought a lot of property, because this one was landlocked, and opened up Niki’s West. And after several years, his nephews, his wife’s nephews were running this place, they got into some—they decided they wanted to sell, so he and I bought it, and then he left, and then I bought him out.

[00:36:55]

**Eric Velasco:** Who was Mr. John’s wife?

[00:36:58]

**George Sissa:** Callas?

[00:36:59]

**Eric Velasco:** Yes.

[00:36:59]

**George Sissa:** Oh, Margaret. Margaret was his wife, Margaret Callas. Both of them have passed away now. That family lives in Chicago, their daughters do.

[00:37:10]

**Eric Velasco:** Niki’s family?

[00:37:12]

**George Sissa:** Right.

[00:37:13]

**Eric Velasco:** Why did they open here?

[00:37:15]

**George Sissa:** Why did he open here?

[00:37:17]

**Eric Velasco:** Yes, sir.

[00:37:18]

**George Sissa:** Because the farmers’ market was located across the street on First Avenue [North], and where the old Tillman-Levenson Building is, they were located there. This was a garage for trucks. He bought it, tore it down, and built this building.

[00:37:44]

**Eric Velasco:** What kind of things would he do in the restaurant early on? It seems to have gone through different kinds of phases.

[00:37:52]

**George Sissa:** He started off, he did barbecue here, but he closed up the pit after several years. He did a big breakfast because the farmers were always here. They would get here about 3:30 in the morning. And he just did good—it was a good breakfast and lunch business and a little bit in the evenings. Now, his wife’s nephews developed the evening business for seafood and steaks, and they also bought John’s Restaurant, and that’s where they developed that out. [Margaret Hontzopoulous Callas recruited nephews from Greece to run both Niki’s Downtown and Niki’s West. Brothers Phil, Jimmy and George Hontzas (the family named had been shortened in the United States by then) ran Niki’s Downtown until Mr. Sissa bought it in 1988. Gus Hontzas, cousin to the brothers at Niki’s Downtown, ran Niki’s West until his death in 2001. Now his sons, Pete and Teddy run it. John’s Restaurant was started in 1944 by John Proferis, a Greek immigrant. He sold the downtown Birmingham restaurant to the Hontzas brothers in 1972.]

[00:38:38]

**Eric Velasco:** So how did you get to meet them? How did you get to know the Hontzas brothers?

[00:38:45]

**George Sissa:** Well, our families. My dad would bring me down here. I knew them all the whole time. Then when I was in the grocery business, I was selling them groceries.

[00:38:55]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell me about being in the grocery business. Was that the wholesaler or—

[00:38:58]

**George Sissa:** Wholesaler. It was working for a wholesaler. Back then it was called Alabama Complete Foods. It was just a locally owned outfit. Then after a few years, a company called Sysco bought us out, and it just kept growing.

[00:39:15]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, the farmers’ market that was here, when did it move?

[00:39:22]

**George Sissa:** In ’58 or ’59. [Interviewer’s note: The Jefferson County Truck Growers Association opened the farmers market in 1956 on Finley Avenue in north Birmingham. Niki’s West opened nearby in 1957.]

[00:39:26]

**Eric Velasco:** And it moved out to Finley?

[00:39:28]

**George Sissa:** Right, because they had built those warehouses.

[00:39:31]

**Eric Velasco:** And I guess John and Margret moved out with them? [laughs]

[00:39:33]

**George Sissa:** That’s right. The teachers’ union had built those warehouses out there. They had bought the property and built the warehouses, and they were starting to lease them. In one area, they set it up with stalls for farmers to bring their stuff, so that’s when everybody left here and went out there. There was more accessibility to it.

[00:39:54]

**Eric Velasco:** So that must have been kind of tough on business here.

[00:39:59]

**George Sissa:** Well, I—

[00:40:00]

**Eric Velasco:** That wasn’t your problem?

[00:40:02]

**George Sissa:** I was away from that, so I don’t know. I don’t know. Somehow it survived, even though it was landlocked.

[00:40:11]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, when you and your brother bought this place, what year was it?

[00:40:17]

**George Sissa:** Eighty-eight.

[00:40:19]

**Eric Velasco:** And I understand that two of the Hontzas brothers were deceased at that point.

[00:40:23]

**George Sissa:** That’s right, two of them had deceased, and what happened was we had to buy the business from George Hontzas, and part of the—wait a minute. Part of the business from George Hontzas, and then the two, Jimmy and Phil’s estate, we had to buy their portion out of here. And then Margaret, by then Uncle Johnny had died, but Margaret, we had to buy her for the property. So it was a hell of a damn negotiation. [Interviewer’s note: George Sissa and John Callas are not related. Mr. Callas was an uncle by marriage to George, Phil, Jimmy and Gus Hontzas, which is why he was commonly called “Uncle Johnny” and his wife was called “Aunt Margaret” by many.]

[00:41:04]

**Eric Velasco:** Multiple transactions too. Wow. How did you decide or how did you two hook up to—did you and George Hontzas have a conversation about buying this place, or was this a result of your brother’s desire for the two of you to open up a restaurant?

[00:41:31]

**George Sissa:** My brother came in town. He would come in town every six months. And then he found out that George was going to sell this one and John’s, and so that’s when he said, “Let’s get into the restaurant business.” Of course, at the time I thought it was going to be a two-man show, but, you know, everything works out.

[00:42:00]

**Eric Velasco:** So was Niki’s this kind of setup when you bought it?

[00:42:07]

**George Sissa:** Yes.

[00:42:12]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell us a little bit about your clientele here.

[00:42:15]

**George Sissa:** Well, I will say this. They’re all out of downtown—most of them are out of downtown. We get a lot of lawyers and judges, councilmembers, business owners. We get laborers that come in here that work in the area. We get a big variety of people.

[00:42:38]

**Eric Velasco:** It’s more of a business-y, warehouse-y kind of area now.

[00:42:41]

**George Sissa:** Yeah. Of course, they say it’s all going to change.

[00:42:44]

**Eric Velasco:** What are some of the plans for around here? Do you know?

[00:42:49]

**George Sissa:** Well, they say that these new hotels that have come in down there, they’ve redone them, the Thomas Jefferson. [Interviewer’s note: A hotel when it opened in 1929 at Second Avenue North and 16<sup>th</sup> Street but abandoned in the 1980s, the Thomas Jefferson Building reopened in 2017 after renovations for residences and a restaurant, Roots & Revelry. The building still has a mooring for zeppelins, the last remaining anchor for tying down the inflated airships.]

And then the Alabama Gas property behind us, I don’t know, I’ve had some brokers tell me that somebody’s going to want to buy this whole block. I don’t know.

[00:43:15]

**Eric Velasco:** Would you be interested in selling?

[00:43:18]

**George Sissa:** I don’t want to say yes and I don’t want to say no. You know, who knows what they—you know, I don’t know. I mean, they might say something to me that attracts my attention.

[00:43:35]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell me about the food here and what you serve here.

[00:43:39]

**George Sissa:** All right. It’s a steam-table operation, and we serve baked chicken; veal cutlet; hamburger steak; roast pork and dressing; Pastitsio, which is Greek lasagna; salmon patties; fried snapper; baked snapper. And then our vegetables are—there’s a variety of them up to about thirty different vegetables.

[00:44:11]

**Eric Velasco:** All fresh?

[00:44:14]

**George Sissa:** All fresh. Oh, yes. Otherwise, you can’t be in it.

[00:44:21]

**Eric Velasco:** Is it more southern, Greek, or how would you describe the food?

[00:44:26]

**George Sissa:** I’m going to say southern with a Greek accent.

[00:44:29]

**Eric Velasco:** How so?

[00:44:31]

**George Sissa:** Well, the seasoning is—seasoning that I have put in, which is a little more Greek. And when I first came down here, they were putting pork in the vegetables. Well, I cut that out right off the bat.

[00:44:52]

**Eric Velasco:** Why?

[00:44:53]

**George Sissa:** I didn’t think people wanted it. And they loved it. They loved it. They loved the vegetables cooked naturally rather than with that heavy pork in there.

[00:45:10]

**Eric Velasco:** It made a big difference in those turnip greens I had earlier.

[00:45:13]

**George Sissa:** Did you like those?

[00:45:14]

**Eric Velasco:** Yes, sir. Nice and sweet, so surprisingly sweet.

[00:45:17]

**George Sissa:** I’ll have to look at that. Maybe she put too much sugar in it. [laughter]

[00:45:26]

**Eric Velasco:** It wasn’t overly sweet. It was pleasantly—it was a surprising flavor.

[00:45:33]

**George Sissa:** Yes. At the end, you had a little sweetness.

[00:45:35]

**Eric Velasco:** Exactly.

[00:45:35]

**George Sissa:** Okay. No, that’s what I want.

[00:45:37]

**Eric Velasco:** Right. And I guess part of it also that kind of accented the fact that it didn’t have all that heavy pork fat in it too.

[00:45:45]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yeah. You want to taste the vegetable. You don’t want to taste the pork or the fat. You want to taste the vegetable. That’s what I get a lot of customers tell me, say, “If I eat squash here, I taste squash. If I eat corn, I taste corn. Turnip greens, I taste turnip greens.” He said, “You go to these other places, it’s all the same.”

[00:46:05]

**Eric Velasco:** Because of that, that addition?

[00:46:08]

**George Sissa:** Yeah, oh, yeah.

[00:46:12]

**Eric Velasco:** What other changes did you make when you took over?

[00:46:17]

**George Sissa:** Well, I added more items on the steam table, more meat items and more vegetable items. They didn’t have any desserts, and I started making desserts. I’ve added coconut pie, chess pie, key lime, lemon pie, coconut cake, and pecan pie.

[00:46:44]

**Eric Velasco:** Southern classics, one and all.

[00:46:47]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yeah.

[00:46:48]

**Eric Velasco:** So how did you become so familiar with southern cooking and southern [unclear]?

[00:46:54]

**George Sissa:** Well, the recipes, I got those from my dad.

[00:46:57]

**Eric Velasco:** So this is the kind of thing he’d been serving in his restaurant?

[00:46:59]

**George Sissa:** That’s right. That’s right.

[00:47:00]

**Eric Velasco:** Oh, that’s so neat.

[00:47:01]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yeah. I’ve had people that come in here for the first time, they’ll tell me, “You know what? This tastes just like my grandmother made.”

“Well,” I said, “I’ve accomplished what I wanted. I wanted to remind you of your grandmother.”

[00:47:17]

**Eric Velasco:** Well, this is usually a southern grandmother, not a Greek grandmother.

[00:47:20]

**George Sissa:** That’s right. That’s right.

[00:47:25]

**Eric Velasco:** I’ve noticed a couple, two, three kinds of greens.

[00:47:29]

**George Sissa:** Spinach, turnips, collards, and cabbage, we serve all those every day. Now, if I can’t get them fresh, I won’t serve them that day. We serve mashed potatoes; grilled potatoes with onion; macaroni and cheese; sautéed vegetables which we call Niki’s blend; okra tomatoes, outstanding; green beans; pinto beans; lima beans, fried green tomatoes; fried eggplant; fried zucchini.

[00:48:13]

**Eric Velasco:** When do y’all start cooking?

[00:48:15]

**George Sissa:** Soon as we get here at about 4:30, 5:00 o’clock in the morning.

[00:48:20]

**Eric Velasco:** And how are you getting your vegetables?

[00:48:23]

**George Sissa:** Farmers’ market.

[00:48:25]

**Eric Velasco:** Does somebody go there?

[00:48:26]

**George Sissa:** I’ll go there in the evenings, load up. I’ll already have my order in, and come down. Used to, I had farmers bring it to me. They’re not in the business anymore. They say they can’t afford to have all that extra labor.

[00:48:46]

**Eric Velasco:** Right.

[00:48:48]

**George Sissa:** So it’s changed.

[00:48:55]

**Eric Velasco:** So you’re getting your vegetables and all that the night before. Coming in, you say, 4:00, 4:30, you say?

[00:49:02]

**George Sissa:** Right, 4:30 in the morning, that’s when we start.

[00:49:06]

**Eric Velasco:** Walk us through the morning. Walk us through the day.

[00:49:09]

**George Sissa:** We’ll come in in the morning, and one girl gets on the vegetables and starts washing the turnip greens, collard greens, and spinach. The mashed potatoes are already peeled and cut the day before, the afternoon before, so we can mash them. Another girl gets the chickens, quarters them, splits them, splits them and quarters them, seasons them, and put them in the oven. I cook all the vegetables. I have one girl that cooks the chicken and I have one girl that fries the fish. I cook all the pork, all the beef, all the beef tips. Hmm. Okay. Sometimes you forget about things when you’re doing them every day, I guess.

[00:50:08]

**Eric Velasco:** Did you have these recipes in your head already from working with your dad when you bought this or [unclear]?

[00:50:15]

**George Sissa:** From working with my dad, I had some, but after making them or cooking them, I started tweaking them to where I thought would accommodate the taste buds of my customers. And it worked.

[00:50:34]

**Eric Velasco:** And how do you figure that out? I mean, I know the feedback helps, but how do you determine that on the front end?

[00:50:41]

**George Sissa:** I taste them. I taste them. And you’re not always right. Sometimes you’re dead wrong, and when you’re dead wrong, I used to think you could get rid of them. Well, the only way to get rid of them is toss them, because it pisses off more people than it— But, you know, after I’ve been in here twenty-eight years now, it’s just I’ve worked it down to a science.

[00:51:10]

**Eric Velasco:** Second nature to you now.

[00:51:12]

**George Sissa:** Yeah. I can look at a pot of turnip greens and tell exactly how much of each item I need to add to it. Or green beans or the mashed potatoes or—it’s just second nature.

[00:51:25]

**Eric Velasco:** How many seats in this restaurant?

[00:51:27]

**George Sissa:** A hundred and seventy-six.

[00:51:30]

**Eric Velasco:** And you stay fairly busy, especially during lunchtime.

[00:51:33]

**George Sissa:** During lunch.

[00:51:35]

**Eric Velasco:** Turn over a lot of people.

[00:51:37]

**George Sissa:** We try.

[00:51:38]

**Eric Velasco:** [laughs] Tell us about your staff.

[00:51:44]

**George Sissa:** All right. I’ve got the girl that’s been with me longer is Vicki [Harris], and I’ve trained her on everything.

[00:51:53]

**Eric Velasco:** How long has she been with you?

[00:51:56]

**George Sissa:** She told me the other day she’d been with me seventeen years.

[00:51:59]

**Eric Velasco:** Wow.

[00:52:00]

**George Sissa:** And then I’ve got Mary; she’s been with me about three years. Then I’ve got Booker; he’s been with me about two years. I’ve got Terry; he’s been with me—Vicki’s been here seventeen, Terry’s been here fifteen. I’ve got Christy [phonetic] and myself.

[00:52:29]

**Eric Velasco:** You walk through the line when you’re ordering, then you have some kind of waitress kind of person working.

[00:52:40]

**George Sissa:** Right. She’s out on the floor. You order, you get your tray, you go sit down, and then she’ll come by and ask you what you want to drink. She’ll get your drink for you. She’ll also give you a ticket. Then when you’re finished with your meal, you come up and visit the register.

[00:53:00]

**Eric Velasco:** And you work the cash register.

[00:53:01]

**George Sissa:** Right.

[00:53:01]

**Eric Velasco:** Everybody here is so friendly and so polite.

[00:53:08]

**George Sissa:** You mean here in the restaurant?

[00:53:10]

**Eric Velasco:** Yes, sir. I’ve noticed that from watching your staff today, everybody’s saying goodbye to everybody as they’re walking out the door. Is this something you instill or—

[00:53:22]

**George Sissa:** Absolutely. This is what I tell them: “We are ladies and gentlemen, and we are serving ladies and gentlemen, so that’s how you’re supposed to act.” That’s what I tell them when I first hire them. And what has happened is the ones that have been here the longest have followed through, copied me, mimicked me, and then when a new person comes on, they’ll either blend in or they’ll blend out. It won’t take long.

[00:53:58]

**Eric Velasco:** You figure that one out real quick?

[00:54:00]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. It won’t take long. They’ll leave on their own. They’ll realize, “Hey, they’re asking too much here.”

[00:54:07]

**Eric Velasco:** This is hard work here too.

[00:54:08]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

[00:54:10]

**Eric Velasco:** A lot of long days and hot.

[00:54:13]

**George Sissa:** It is hot. It’s long. It’s backbreaking.

[00:54:16]

**Eric Velasco:** Do you like it?

[00:54:19]

**George Sissa:** Love it.

[00:54:20]

**Eric Velasco:** Why?

[00:54:20]

**George Sissa:** There’s something about the mix of the customers, the food, getting it ready, making sure that it tastes like it’s supposed to, the satisfaction that I get when a customer tells me, “You know what? Those were the best turnip greens I’ve ever had. You know, that pecan pie was outstanding.” You know, I get a lot from that. And the other thing now is, the customers, when they come up here to pay, they’ll talk. They’ll talk truth. [laughs] I enjoy the conversations. I get all kinds of conversation from different parts of the city, and it’s good.

[00:55:06]

**Eric Velasco:** That must have been a big part of what you dad missed when he sort of retired.

[00:55:10]

**George Sissa:** He did. Yeah, he did. He really missed it.

[00:55:15]

**Eric Velasco:** How has this area around here changed in the time you’ve owned it?

[00:55:20]

**George Sissa:** The area has gone way down. About four blocks from here, it’s swinging back up, new properties—I mean new buildings remodeling completely.

[00:55:36]

**Eric Velasco:** This is back towards the central business area.

[00:55:38]

**George Sissa:** Right. And it’s coming this way. It’s not going to travel very fast, but it’s going to come this way. It will go all the way to the interstate, which is right beside us. [Interviewer’s note: Interstate 65]

They say, “Don’t worry. This thing’ll be taken over by the downtown area.”

[00:55:59]

**Eric Velasco:** Do you think the Regions Field has made much difference? [Regions Field at First Avenue South and 14<sup>th</sup> Street, is the home of the Birmingham Barons minor league baseball team. The team relocated there in 2013 from Hoover, a suburban municipality south of Birmingham. Before moving to Hoover in 1988, the Barons played at historic Rickwood Field in Birmingham.]

[00:56:03]

**George Sissa:** Big positive thing.

[00:56:04]

**Eric Velasco:** How so?

[00:56:06]

**George Sissa:** When they built Regions Field, I went through it at the end when they were finishing up. I was so impressed with how user-friendly it is, and I said, “I hope that the public comes to it.” Well, they came. They kept on coming. It got better and better. Then a few years later, they start building this. They want to add this. They want to change this. Regions Field is what started it. UAB [University of Alabama at Birmingham] was always there, and they’ve always done a lot of big things for us, but by putting in Regions Field, it has changed this area completely, and it will continue to change. It will keep evolving and getting better.

[00:57:00]

**Eric Velasco:** It’s kind of symbolic, too, of the downtown coming back, because the baseball team, the Birmingham Barons, had moved from downtown, Rickwood Field, out to Hoover—

[00:57:10]

**George Sissa:** That’s right.

[00:57:11]

**Eric Velasco:** —south suburb, and now they’re coming back.

[00:57:13]

**George Sissa:** They’re coming back to town. That’s right.

[00:57:16]

**Eric Velasco:** You know when the interstate was built through here?

[00:57:21]

**George Sissa:** No, I don’t. I’m sorry, I don’t. [Interviewer’s note: Construction of Interstate 65 through the Birmingham area was started in 1960 and completed in 1985.]

[00:57:31]

**Eric Velasco:** So how did you and your wife meet?

[00:57:33]

**George Sissa:** Well, I’m not married.

[00:57:35]

**Eric Velasco:** You’re not married?

[00:57:36]

**George Sissa:** No.

[00:57:36]

**Eric Velasco:** Ever been?

[00:57:38]

**George Sissa:** Yes. I was going to Jacksonville State, and I met her there. We courted for a long time, then finally we got married.

[00:57:49]

**Eric Velasco:** Is she Greek?

[00:57:50]

**George Sissa:** No. I had two children: my son, Nicholas, who’s in Houston, Texas, works for a big oil company, and my daughter Rania, who’s in Panama City, works for a critical care hospital. She’s the liaison person between the hospital, the doctors, and the patient.

[00:58:12]

**Eric Velasco:** How does she spell her name?

[00:58:13]

**George Sissa:** R-a-n-i-a.

[00:58:16]

**Eric Velasco:** Were they children when you bought Niki’s?

[00:58:22]

**George Sissa:** They were.

[00:58:23]

**Eric Velasco:** Did they spend much time down here working?

[00:58:25]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yes. And they thought I was mean and I was cruel.

[00:58:30]

**Eric Velasco:** Because you made them go work?

[00:58:31]

**George Sissa:** I made them work. After they went to college, they came and told me, said, “Dad, you did the right thing.”

I said, “What do you mean by that?”

I never will forget my daughter says, “I know how to wash my clothes, fold my clothes, put them up, and clean up my apartment, and cook.” She said, “None of the other girls in my apartment know how to do any of it. Their mamas have to come in here and help them.”

I said, “Well, raise your kids the same way.”

[00:59:04]

**Eric Velasco:** [laughs] Who’s your daughter named after?

[00:59:09]

**George Sissa:** My mother. My mother’s name is Ourania, and that’s what we wanted to name her, but my wife didn’t want that. She cut it off anyway.

[00:59:21]

**Eric Velasco:** Was your family name back in Greece Sissa?

[00:59:25]

**George Sissa:** Yes.

[00:59:27]

**Eric Velasco:** So it didn’t get shortened or—

[00:59:29]

**George Sissa:** Well, they dropped an *S*. It was Sissas. And when my dad came over, they dropped an *S*. No, what they did is—yeah, they left the *S* on. Then when he went into the Army, they dropped the *S*.

[00:59:43]

**Eric Velasco:** Just for paperwork or—

[00:59:46]

**George Sissa:** The paperwork, and I think when you spell it S-i-s-s-a-s, I guess whoever were signing him up said, “You don’t need that last *S*.” [laughter]

[01:00:00]

**Eric Velasco:** And a new name is born.

[01:00:02]

**George Sissa:** That’s it.

[01:00:03]

**Eric Velasco:** Now, you used to be open at nights here, I believe.

[01:00:16]

**George Sissa:** Right.

[01:00:17]

**Eric Velasco:** How long and what changed?

[01:00:19]

**George Sissa:** Used to be open at nights and I had a line out the door. I had people from all walks of life. I had people from the government. And we served seafood and steaks. I was bringing all my seafood from Port Saint Joe, independent fisher, and we did a big business. And

there was an incident that happened that killed the downtown business. I don’t want to go into it, but it didn’t even happen here in Birmingham; it happened in California.

[01:01:17]

**Eric Velasco:** So how did that affect here?

[01:01:19]

**George Sissa:** The following week, there was a fax message sent to all the offices that “If a white person is found in downtown Birmingham, he will be treated just like—.”

[01:01:40]

**Eric Velasco:** So it was a racial hate crime?

[01:01:44]

**George Sissa:** Yeah. It was when those officers beat up that black guy. [Interviewer’s note: He is referring to the 1991 police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles. The acquittal of four white police officers in 1992 touched off rioting in Los Angeles in which 55 people were killed before the National Guard quelled the violence. Rioting also broke out in several other cities across the United States after the acquittal.]

[01:01:48]

**Eric Velasco:** Okay.

[01:01:49]

**George Sissa:** And who would have thought that something way out there would have affected this down here? But it did. That weekend, I could’ve shot a cannon through here and would not have hit anybody. Nobody came down.

[01:02:10]

**Eric Velasco:** This city has struggled with racial relationships for years. How did that affect your life? What did you see when you were growing up around here during the Civil Rights Movement?

[01:02:21]

**George Sissa:** I didn’t see that much of it. You know, my dad said, “They’re all people. We’re all connected. We’re all the same. You can’t be prejudiced against this group. Just treat them equally straight across the board.” That’s how he always treated people. But then when they had the riots downtown and all that, I was in grammar school, and I remember all the parents came up and took the kids out of school. But anyway. [Interviewer’s note: He is referring to Civil Rights demonstrations in downtown Birmingham during the 1960s. Many of the peaceful marches were broken up by city police with fire hoses and attack dogs.]

[01:03:00]

**Eric Velasco:** Where was your school located at the time? Was it more toward the downtown?

[01:03:06]

**George Sissa:** No, it was F.D. McArthur, which is right off 26<sup>th</sup> Street [North], two blocks from Carraway Hospital. But what happened was those riots, I guess the parents got worried, upset, or whatever, and came in and took the kids out.

[01:03:33]

**Eric Velasco:** And so on some levels after Rodney King and that verdict—

[01:03:38]

**George Sissa:** Yes, that’s what—

[01:03:41]

**Eric Velasco:** That’s what part of the fear, was it?

[01:03:43]

**George Sissa:** That was what really did me in.

[01:03:47]

**Eric Velasco:** And so I guess at that point, that was when Birmingham’s downtown just started—

[01:03:53]

**George Sissa:** Falling in.

[01:03:54]

**Eric Velasco:** —turning out the lights and shutting down at night.

[01:03:56]

**George Sissa:** Right after that, there was a banker who came out of one of the new bank buildings and got kidnapped and was thrown in the trunk of his car. Now, he made it alive, but the publicity played on it, so that isolated more people from coming downtown.

[01:04:19]

**Eric Velasco:** That’s when everybody started to look at downtown as being very dangerous.

[01:04:22]

**George Sissa:** Right. It didn’t matter whether we were or weren’t. The appearance was that we were, so—

[01:04:27]

**Eric Velasco:** So I guess at that point there wasn’t any point in staying open late if there was no customer base.

[01:04:34]

**George Sissa:** Well, I kept on trying, kept trying, trying. It kept dwindling, and finally I just said, “To hell with it.”

[01:04:39]

**Eric Velasco:** And the day lunch business would probably, I guess, be relatively unaffected by that, because people were downtown working.

[01:04:46]

**George Sissa:** That’s right. That’s right.

[01:04:49]

**Eric Velasco:** Did your dad ever talk about how Greek immigrants were fitting in in Birmingham society and viewed, especially by white people here in Birmingham?

[01:05:03]

**George Sissa:** He told me in the beginning when he first came over, he said, “They called me ‘Baa, baa, baa,’ like a lamb.” But he said, “I knew that if I was to make it, I had to work, save my money, and just live over it.” And that’s what he did, and finally he gained respect, is what he gained. That’s what he did. That’s all in essence what he did. He gained respect from everybody around him.

[01:05:37]

**Eric Velasco:** It seems that’s a common thing here in Birmingham with the Greeks. That’s what I’d always heard when I came here, is that hardworking family people, just basically they would see themselves reflected in you.

[01:05:54]

**George Sissa:** That’s right. That’s right.

[01:05:55]

**Eric Velasco:** But I guess that immigrant experience probably played a role in how your dad viewed races and different people versus what was the predominant view at the time.

[01:06:10]

**George Sissa:** Yeah. He always believed in treating everyone equal and rising above whatever adversaries that were coming after you, no matter what it was.

[01:06:36]

**Eric Velasco:** Which was bigger in your household growing up, Greek Independence Day or Fourth of July? [Interviewer’s note: Greek Independence Day, which commemorates the beginning of Greece’s war for independence in 1821 after centuries of Ottoman rule, is on March 25.]

[01:06:43]

**George Sissa:** They were both big. I mean, they were both big. Independence Day, we had a big cookout, had all family over and all that. That was on Fourth of July. On Greek Independence Day, they had a big luncheon after church, of course, and we had poems and young Greek School kids would read poems and all that. But they were both big.

[01:07:19]

**Eric Velasco:** What would you cook for Fourth of July?

[01:07:21]

**George Sissa:** Ribs, chicken.

[01:07:23]

**Eric Velasco:** All-American food.

[01:07:26]

**George Sissa:** That’s right.

[01:07:31]

**Eric Velasco:** Were you in the military at all?

[01:07:34]

**George Sissa:** No. My knees kept me—

[01:07:36]

**Eric Velasco:** Yeah, that would have been kind of not happening because—

[01:07:41]

**George Sissa:** It was during Vietnam.

[01:07:43]

**Eric Velasco:** Right. That’s what I was just trying to piece together in my mind, it was during the Vietnam War.

Do you cook at—I guess you take food home. You don’t do much cooking at home, do you?

[01:08:06]

**George Sissa:** No. I’m by myself. I might take a piece of chicken or something, but I don’t cook at home. Now, on holidays I have to cook. I have to cook for everybody, but that’s all right.

[01:08:24]

**Eric Velasco:** Who’s everybody?

[01:08:25]

**George Sissa:** Well, my family, you know, my sister, her husband, their kids. My children come up.

[01:08:34]

**Eric Velasco:** What’s your favorite thing to cook?

[01:08:38]

**George Sissa:** Oh, gosh, there’s so many things. I love to cook snapper. I love to broil it. I like it fried too. I love to cook steaks on the grill, ribs on the grill. Chicken I love roasted in the oven better than I do off the grill.

[01:09:02]

**Eric Velasco:** Do you put Greek seasonings on that?

[01:09:05]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yeah. Well, I have my own little blend that I’ve come up with, and that’s what I use. I’ve got one for pork, one for beef, and one for chicken.

[01:09:14]

**Eric Velasco:** What’s in your blends?

[01:09:15]

**George Sissa:** I couldn’t tell you that.

[01:09:17]

**Eric Velasco:** That’s why I like to ask. [laughter]

Now, the Hontzas family has been pretty big here in Birmingham. Summarize the impact that they’ve had in Birmingham food.

[01:09:34]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yes, I agree.

[01:09:38]

**Eric Velasco:** There’s this place, there’s Niki’s West, Smoke House.

[01:09:44]

**George Sissa:** Smoke House was another part. It wasn’t connected with the—well, there’s a Hontzas there, but he was a brother of Gus. [Interviewer’s note: Theo Hontzas.]

[01:09:53]

**Eric Velasco:** Right. So a lot of restaurants, and now we’ve got another Hontzas running a restaurant here in town.

[01:10:01]

**George Sissa:** What is it, Johnny’s?

[01:10:02]

**Eric Velasco:** Johnny’s, yeah. [Interviewer’s note: Tim Hontzas, a Mississippi native, is the chef/owner of Johnny’s Restaurant in Homewood. His grandfather, Johnny Hontzopoulos, opened a self-named in restaurant in 1954 in Jackson, Miss. His sister was Margaret Hontzopoulos Callas. Their Greek-born nephews learned the business at Johnny’s Restaurant in Mississippi before moving on to Birmingham to run Niki’s Downtown and Niki’s West in the

late 1950s. Tim Hontzas is the subject of a 2017 Southern Foodways Alliance film, “Johnny’s Greek and Three.”]

[01:10:03]

**George Sissa:** Yeah, he’s a good food man. I’ve eaten there one time, and I’ll be honest with you, the food is excellent. See, to be a restaurant man, you have to be a food man *and* a businessman. You can’t be all food man because then your business is going to deteriorate. So you’ve got to have a balance between the two.

[01:10:28]

**Eric Velasco:** Where did you learn to be a businessman? Or how’d you learn to be a businessman?

[01:10:32]

**George Sissa:** Hard knocks. That’s the best way, because, you know, I didn’t want to listen to anybody growing up. But, boy, when you’re counting the money and there’s not enough there, then you start thinking what the hell am I doing?

[01:10:46]

**Eric Velasco:** Especially since you were under so many obligations, those pressures and obligations early on, paying off the note, buying out your brother.

[01:10:53]

**George Sissa:** That’s right. Getting money together so I could educate my kids, paying for a house. Hoo!

[01:11:08]

**Eric Velasco:** Talk to me about the impact that Niki’s Downtown has had on Birmingham.

[01:11:16]

**George Sissa:** At one time before all the new spots had opened up, this was one of *the* spots for years. It was a mainstay, that was it. But now as time passed on, we had a lot of new restaurants come in, a lot of chains came in, a lot of new ideas. Of course, the population gets sliced and slivered, and the pie gets thinner and thinner and it gets spread out. But that’s what happens with everything.

[01:11:52]

**Eric Velasco:** So what keeps Niki’s going?

[01:12:01]

**George Sissa:** The people coming in and feeling satisfied. If they don’t have that, they don’t come back. You know, my motto is when they pay and they hit that door, I want them to think one thing: “You know, it cost me \$10, but I feel like I got \$12 worth of value.” If you feel like you got more value than what you paid, you’re coming back.

[01:12:32]

**Eric Velasco:** And it’s good, honest food.

[01:12:34]

**George Sissa:** That’s it. No fancy, no dancy, no nothin’. Just plain everyday food.

[01:12:45]

**Eric Velasco:** What’s the future of Niki’s?

[01:12:49]

**George Sissa:** I think it’ll be here for a long time. I don’t know how long I can live, but it’ll be here for a long time.

[01:12:57]

**Eric Velasco:** Any thoughts on when you may be done, or are you going to be like your dad, you just realize that “I can’t sit around”?

[01:13:06]

**George Sissa:** Oh, I don’t know. I guess that when that feeling comes, I’ll know it, but it hasn’t gotten here yet.

[01:13:22]

**Eric Velasco:** Have you ever been to Greece? Or I guess, “back to Greece” is kind of an odd thing considering you were an infant when you left.

[01:13:28]

**George Sissa:** I did. Spent my ninth, almost the full ninth year there. Dad took us all back because my mother wanted to see her relatives, and there was a lot I remembered about that because it was so different.

[01:13:49]

**Eric Velasco:** Describe what you remember seeing about it, because you’re completely unfamiliar.

[01:13:56]

**George Sissa:** The greenery was everywhere, whether you were looking at a field or you were looking at a mountain. The mountains, there were some high mountains, because I remember we went up to a place called Seli, which is where the ski team trains, and, gosh, it was beautiful. Then a lot of orange, apple, and pear orchards, unbelievable, and big old oranges, big apples.

[01:14:38]

**Eric Velasco:** Is this more down in a valley then?

[01:14:41]

**George Sissa:** This is a little bit of all of it. We went through all of it. See, my dad had some farmland there, where they were growing oranges, apples, and pears. And then up in the mountains, Seli, he had a house up there, and we went up there several times and stayed there. It

was cool. You could see almost—it looked like the stars were so close you could touch them. I don’t remember much industry. I saw a lot of small shops, a lot of people in the major cities like Thessalonica. Gosh, it was too crowded, too much. [Interviewer’s note: Thessalonica is an alternative name for Thessaloniki, Greece’s second-largest city.]

[01:15:38]

**Eric Velasco:** How big was Veria?

[01:15:44]

**George Sissa:** Veria was not that big at that time, but my sister, who goes all the time, says, “You’re not going to believe what it looks like now.” It’s just like a major city. See, because it started off, it was like a suburb. I remember the town square. It was a round thing, city hall was there, courthouses and all that, and that’s where everybody would gather. I remember that, and then down the road.

[01:16:19]

**Eric Velasco:** How do you want to be remembered?

[01:16:24]

**George Sissa:** I want to be remembered as “He was tough, but he sure was good to me,” you know, because I tell them I try to be tough on them to where they become better people. That’s what it’s all about, and I always try to make them better. Sometimes they listen and they hang in

there with you, and a lot of times they’ll leave immediately, which you didn’t want to waste any time with them anyway.

[01:17:07]

**Eric Velasco:** Was there somebody in your past that inspired that kind of thinking or philosophy?

[01:17:11]

**George Sissa:** My dad. My dad. That’s how he was. He took his shirt off for everybody.

[01:17:23]

**Eric Velasco:** What am I missing here? What else do people need to know?

[01:17:31]

**George Sissa:** We’ll be here.

[01:17:34]

**Eric Velasco:** Were you ever involved in the Greek Festival?

[01:17:36]

**George Sissa:** Yes, before—

[01:17:37]

**Eric Velasco:** What would you do?

[01:17:38]

**George Sissa:** Before I got into this, I was in charge of the kitchen upstairs. Of course, it was much smaller back then, but the kitchen that roasted all the chickens, prepared much of the food. I did that. I was involved with that several years.

[01:18:02]

**Eric Velasco:** About what years were those?

[01:18:05]

**George Sissa:** They had to have been '72—no, '73, '74, '75, '76, maybe '78.

[01:18:22]

**Eric Velasco:** Right at the beginning.

[01:18:23]

**George Sissa:** Yeah.

[01:18:26]

**Eric Velasco:** Tell us what the Greek Festival is and why it started.

[01:18:31]

**George Sissa:** Well, it started because downtown Birmingham at the museum, Boutwell Auditorium, they used to have a festival once a year, and there would be several countries involved. And then they got to where they would pick one country to showcase. [Interviewer’s note: The Birmingham Festival of Arts was established in 1953. Since 1964, the annual event has mainly celebrated the culture of a specific nation. Salutes to Greece were in 1968 and 1976.]

And as a kid, I would dance up there. We would all dance. And then from there, when that thing keeled over, when they stopped it, that’s when the festival started at the church. [Interviewer’s note: A Night in Athens was a fundraising event for Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Cathedral held at the Boutwell Auditorium. It was replaced by the Greek Festival, started by the Ladies Philoptochos Society in 1972 at the cathedral. The fall festival is one of the largest community events in Birmingham.]

Everybody comes for the food, which is great, fantastic. Some people come to see the church, which is even better, and to learn something about the religion and what we’re made out of and why we do what we do. And now they’ve gotten into all the little trinkets and clothing and jewelry and sweets and all that, which, you know, that’s part of it. You’ve got to have something to attract people.

[01:18:31]

**Eric Velasco:** It’s a huge festival.

[01:19:40]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yes. And, you know, the money they make, they turn around and donate it all.

[01:19:50]

**Eric Velasco:** They’re supporting several charities—

[01:19:52]

**George Sissa:** Several charities. Years ago, they used to support Children’s Hospital, write them a big check every year. They do the right thing.

[01:20:04]

**Eric Velasco:** Because that’s one of the things I’ve seen with a lot of the Greek people I talk to down here, is that there is this intense cultural pride, but at the same time this intense community involvement too.

[01:20:17]

**George Sissa:** Involvement. That’s right.

[01:20:20]

**Eric Velasco:** Why has that been important?

[01:20:23]

**George Sissa:** I think because they left their families, they left their country, and came to strange place. They didn’t know what it was going to be here, but they came here to make a better life for themselves, and they realized, “Hey, I can do that. I can make a better life for

myself. I can make a better life for my family.” And then eventually, like my dad always said, he says, “You know, we come to America and then we—.” There were several that would badmouth. He says, “You come to America, you make the dollar bill, and then you want to badmouth it? You need to worship that dollar bill instead of badmouthing it.” But he always believed in that, that “We’re here now. We need to be here. This is it. This is our home. Our ancestors are Greek. That’s our homeland. That’s where we were born. But we are here. We’re American citizens now.”

[01:21:36]

**Eric Velasco:** A proud American.

[01:21:38]

**George Sissa:** Oh, yeah. Oh, gosh, yeah.

[01:21:43]

**Eric Velasco:** How do you view yourself, more Greek, southern?

[01:21:49]

**George Sissa:** How do I view myself?

[01:21:50]

**Eric Velasco:** Yeah.

[01:21:52]

**George Sissa:** I guess I view myself as an American citizen of Greek heritage. That’s the best way I can describe it. I don’t look at myself as a Greek citizen. I don’t look at myself—no, all I have is a Greek heritage. That’s it.

[01:22:18]

**Eric Velasco:** Well, that’s part of what makes the country great.

[01:22:22]

**George Sissa:** That’s right. Takes all the little slices put together to make a pie.

[01:22:29]

**Eric Velasco:** Well, listen, I do appreciate you taking the time with us.

[01:22:31]

**George Sissa:** It’s been a pleasure.

[01:22:33]

**Eric Velasco:** And we’re going to pause for thirty seconds while we run this out. Thank you.

[01:22:38]

**George Sissa:** Thank you.

[End of interview]