

SUMMARY

Interview with **Stella Karanastasi**

Interviewer: Helen Haltis

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The interview was conducted in Greek.

Stella Karanastasi, nee Despinoudis, was born in Neohori in the Prefecture of Halkidiki in 1929, the only daughter with three brothers. Her father worked as a shoe maker, while her mother supplemented the family income by working in the family held land and growing mainly beans and corn, but also a variety of seasonal vegetables. The crop was sold to visiting merchants and the family enjoyed a good standard of living.

Stella has fond memories of her early childhood years, feeling free and safe to move around the village. She also enjoyed her schooling which unfortunately, came to an abrupt end at the age of eleven due to World War 2. This event brought the family more distress and anguish as her father, an engineer in the First World War was drafted again and in 1941 he was killed at the Albanian front.

His grieving family along with his mother (who lived with the family), his wife and four children managed to survive thanks to his prudence to stock up on wheat for the daily bread, because he could sense hard times lay ahead. Nothing was easy though and life revolved around survival.

As if the war was not enough, the Greek Civil War started and brought havoc and terror. Houses were burnt and people were murdered. Stella recalls her young cousin was taken by the Communists in 1947 as he was supporting his mother on the farm. His mother protested in vain. Finally, she followed them so she could speak to their commander and take her son back. No one ever saw them again.

Things were not safe in the village and so Stella was invited to stay with relatives in Thessaloniki. It was a return of favour as they too took refuge in Stella's family house when the Germans started bombing Thessaloniki. Here she learnt to be a seamstress and worked in her cousin's atelier (workshop).

Her two older brothers were already enrolled in the local Seminary, east of Thessaloniki, under the auspices of the Bishop of Arnaia who took them under his wing after their father's death. The younger one was sent to Papaphis Orphanage in order to avoid being taken by the Communists.

The two older brothers finished their studies and enrolled with the army, to complete their compulsory service. Subsequently they found employment with great difficulty in the building industry. This was a painful experience for them as they had not been exposed to hard physical work. Little wonder then that the eldest brother jumped at the opportunity to migrate to Australia in 1955. This was a sponsored entry; therefore he was bound to remain in Australia for at least two years, if he was to avoid paying travel costs. Soon he

accumulated some spare cash which he sent to his mother and together with the proceeds of the sale of the family house they purchased an apartment in Thessaloniki.

As the two years drew to a close and instead of planning his return trip, he chose to get married. It was impossible for the whole family to attend this happy event so Stella volunteered to go as the sole representative. When the two years were up their mother anticipated, they could both come back together.

Deep down Stella's intentions were different. Even though World War 2 as well as the Civil War was over, things were very difficult, and she could not make enough money to sustain the family. So she was very keen to leave and see what lay ahead but not with the view of staying for good. The intention was always to go back. Soon she discovered this was not easy.

Her trip, on board 'Flaminia' lasted four weeks. She shared a communal room with 11 other girls and enjoyed the entire journey. She attended morning and afternoon English classes as she very much wanted to learn English.

The first Australian stop was at Fremantle which Stella liked. Here though her ego was deflated as she discovered her knowledge of English was not good enough to communicate with the locals contrary to expectation. The next stop was Port Melbourne where she was picked up by her waiting brother who came from Adelaide. They stayed overnight in Melbourne and the following day they left by train, for Adelaide.

Stella found the journey long but mostly she was taken aback by the vastness and the dryness of the place. It wasn't till they reached Adelaide that they came across some trees and some hills. The biggest shock however came when she saw the houses in Adelaide. She did not expect people to live in sheds or houses with tin roofs.

From the Central Adelaide Station they went by taxi for Bowden where her brother's fiancé was renting a place with her family. Stella was certainly not impressed with this house, but this is where she was going to stay for a while until her brother whose job with the PMG kept him out in the country area, found and rented a bigger place for when he married. Stella shared the only bed (double) in the house with her sister-in-law and her sister while the mother slept on the floor. At the new house, she shared her room with her sister-in-law enjoying the extra space.

Stella recalled with amusement how her brother met the girl he married. At the atelier (workshop), where she worked in Thessaloniki, there was another girl working with her who decided to leave for Australia. Great opportunity to send a small gift to her brother, she thought. Neither of them had the faintest idea how big Australia was. This girl ended up staying in Perth but another co-traveller whose family came from the island of Kos, continued on to Adelaide and she was asked to complete the mission. At Bowden she found someone who knew him and notified him to come and collect his gift. When he arrived he was so impressed with the girl that he made certain she was going to be his partner in life.

Through her brother's in-laws Stella got to meet her future husband. He too was from the island of Kos and was a regular visitor, as he had his own home in the neighbourhood. It was her brother who asked him to take Stella around and try to find her a job since he was fluent in English. He managed to find her one at Philips. This however had two alternate shifts and

since Stella was commuting by train she was not very happy. Later she found work in Bowden which suited her better since it was close and a single shift.

In the interim, she fell in love with her future husband and they married in 1958. Educated in Germany, he was fluent in German, Greek and English and worked as an interpreter at Bonegilla Migrant Centre, and later once they dismantled it, at Blackwood in Adelaide.

Soon after her marriage Stella was afflicted by depression. Bowden was not an area she liked to live in and generally she found Adelaide to be a small and insignificant town, not like the vibrant Thessaloniki. Her desire was to save enough money to cover all expenses and return home. Her husband then sold the Bowden house and bought a better and larger one at Glenunga which she liked very much.

Being too far away from her work, she was left with no choice but to stop working as she did not have a car. Her husband in the meanwhile worked for the railways for a period, and then went to work at the Water Supplies. Not easy for him as he was not used to hard physical labour.

Stella started going to school to improve her English but soon she fell pregnant to their daughter, who was born in 1960. Two or three years later she sensed that her husband was not doing well with manual labour and suggested they sell their house and get a shop where she too can lend a hand. He agreed and their first one was a Fruit and Vegetable shop. Later they ran a deli, but he developed problems with his heart and Stella recalls she had to carry a lot of the burden on her own which she found exhausting.

Within two years, after the daughter's birth came a son. Now Stella had to look after the children, do the house work and work at the shop from 7 am till midnight. As her husband's health deteriorated, the business suffered badly so the idea of converting the shop into a Dry Cleaner's appeared more appealing. It didn't go well though and soon the shop space was converted into a rumpus room where the young children could run and play. Eventually her husband died in 1969, and in order to make ends meet, she returned to dress making.

The cumulative effect of past events took their toll and Stella's depression returned, even more menacing and her doctor suggested she must get out of the house. Luckily her mother had joined her and shouldered a lot of the responsibilities in the house, creating opportunities for Stella to pursue other interests.

Her brother had just completed his studies in Social Work while at the same time he was ordained as a priest and was assigned the Parish of St Konstantine at Goodwood. He encouraged his sister to go with him and help establish a women's Welfare Group (Philoptohos). She embraced the idea and before long Philoptohos Tabitha was created. This organisation was focused on fundraising for needy registered bodies such as the Spastic Children Association and Thalassaemia, but more significantly it created opportunities for Greek women to become enlightened, informed and educated through regular 'Guest Speaker' meetings.

She took a small pause to fulfil a family promise, and took the children to Greece in 1979 after Jenny finished her year 12 studies. It was Stella's first trip back home after 22 years.

The travel bug must have set in firmly because by 1981 the committee started organising excursions for ladies, intrastate, interstate as well as overseas. In fact their very first

significant trip was to Jerusalem, Easter, 1981. This trip was repeated at least 15 times. More than 100 excursions were organised in total, Stella recalls fondly.

Parallel to this, she worked as a volunteer at all three major Public Adelaide Hospitals (Flinders, Adelaide and Queen Elizabeth), before the establishment of the 'Lavender Ladies'. She worked mainly with Greek female patients, interpreting for them and assisting in any way she could. When the 'Lavender Ladies' who assist both patients and visitors at the hospitals, celebrated their 30th anniversary, Stella was still there and received a special commemoration for her collective efforts.

She also worked with the 'Ladies Organisation' of the Greek Orthodox Community of South Australia in Franklin Street, the Pan Macedonian Society of South Australia, and more importantly 'Vergina' an association which promoted the Greek and especially Macedonian culture. The ladies of Vergina worked closely with the Modern Greek Department at Flinders University but also with the Community at large. It was through the efforts of this organisation that a compilation of Greek Proverbs was published. To achieve this Stella used her Radio Programme with 5EBI-FM, asking her listeners to come forward with any proverbs used in the region of their origin.

Stella's voluntary radio broadcasting lasted for 21 years, often running up to six different programmes per week. Her programmes included Greek and Australian news, Greek music, cultural and historical information, information on local activities, and a variety of guest speakers.

Reflecting on the 1979 family trip to Greece, Stella remembers well the mixed emotions that engulfed her, nothing was the same. In vain she searched for the spots that she identified with memories she carried for so long. But this was not only about her. It was about her children too, so they started moving around, absorbing what Greece had to offer. They even visited Turkey. The trip lasted for seven months, why so long? Even though Stella didn't say so, it was probable that she wanted to stay for good. The children wanted to stay she admits, for they liked what they saw and experienced. When three months were up though, they started missing Australia and so did Stella. She wanted to return home, to be with her brothers.

At home in Australia, the language of communication in the household was Greek. English was avoided so that Stella's children would be immersed fully in the Greek language. The grandmother after all did not speak English at all. The daughter studied Greek up to year 12 but the son was not so keen. However they are both proud of their heritage and this has been instilled into the 18 year old grandson who will parade in National Greek costume on ANZAC DAY, in honour of his grandfather who died during World War 2.

Finishing she reflects on all that has taken place with a deep sense of satisfaction and fulfilment. She wanders though where all this required energy came from. She was even instrumental in setting up the Greek Women Centre under the auspices of the organisation of 'Taiahas' of the Greek Orthodox Community. With the support of Ms Koula Aslanidis the Centre secured a grant of \$100,000 which was used for teaching young women a range of skills so they could improve their employment prospects, interpersonal skills and empowerment

It required lot of voluntary commitment and a lot of effort but it was all worth it she emphasised.