

SUMMARY

Interview with **Dimostenis Vakitsidis**

Interviewer: Helen Haltis

Date: 13 November 2012

The interview was conducted as part of The Greek Migration Experience, Oral Histories Project. An OEEGA initiative funded by the "Australian Government's, Your Community Heritage Program - Sharing Community Heritage Stories".

The interview was conducted in Greek.

Dimosthenis Vakitsidis, was born on the 15th of December, 1942 in the village of Laimos of Prespes, Prefecture of Florina. He was the youngest of five siblings, the others being in order of seniority, Nick, Peter, Arthur and his sister Aspasia.

His parents practised agriculture and animal husbandry and Dimosthenis fondly remembers that even though the family did not have much money at their disposal, there was always food on the table.

Like most children in the area, they could not attend school due to World War 2 but more importantly due to the civil war that followed and which lasted until 1949.

He remembers living in a two storey house in the outskirts of the village, but as soon as the civil war started the family was evicted by Zahariadis and Vafiadis, the two local commanders of the communist guerrillas, so as to use it as their headquarters. From here, in 1947, they issued a communiqué encouraging the local youth to enlist with them and fight alongside them. "My father", he said, "warned our mother to hide us, for he did not want us to end up going into the impoverished communist countries". As the response was non conciliatory from most families, the insurrectionists went around and forcefully conscripted every young male and female they could find. Amongst them were his two brothers, Nick and Peter as well as his sister Aspasia who was 17 at the time.

For three years the guerrillas were the absolute masters in the region. The National Greek Army could not eradicate them as they were moving freely in and out of Greece, using the neighbouring communist countries of Albania and Serbia (Yugoslavia). By 1949 the National Greek Army managed to capture the two key nearby mountains of Grammos and Vitsi, thus isolating the guerrillas at the region of Prespes with neighbouring Albania the only way out. Before they were trapped, they gathered as many of the local women they could find, together with their children, and marched them into Albania. This was easily executed as the menfolk were either fighting with the government troops or were conscripted by the communists. Amongst them was young Dimosthenis at six years of age, his 11 year old brother and his mother. As they were escaping, towards the border, the National Greek air force gave chase and dropped bombs on them.

The journey ended at the Albanian coast where approximately 10,000 guerrillas, many injured, boarded a merchant ship together with all the mothers and their children. Their new destination was Poland. There they spent about a week in a monastery and then they were split. Mothers were taken south to work on farms at low wages, while the young children, about 10,000 of them, Dimosthenis amongst them, were moved north, approximately 1000 km away to Politz to attend primary school and study Maths, History (especially classical

Greek History), Geography and other core subjects. More importantly he learned four languages that included Greek, Polish, a Slavic dialect (claimed to be Macedonian) and from grade three onwards, Russian. After school hours were passed at purpose built dormitories, scattered around the school campus. The whole place was run like a military camp however the children were well fed and well looked after. During the summer school holidays the children were allowed to go by train and visit their mothers but the mothers were not allowed to visit them. Dimosthenis' older brother had been moved to Warsaw because he was too old to attend the primary school.

In 1956 The Red Cross visited the Greeks in Poland and asked them if they wanted to register with the view of returning back to Greece and be reunited with their families. Dimosthenis suspects this was just a ploy, designed to weed out any weak links to the Communist Movement. In fact, his brother in Warsaw was kicked out of school because he expressed the wish to return to Greece. He was sent to the fields to work with his mother. "He was viewed as a liability", Dimosthenis states. "The Party was not going to waste any resources on him". What it hoped was that individuals committed to its cause, learned a trade or skill and when the big moment arrived and they returned to Greece triumphantly, they would be part of the core workforce and get things moving.

Dimosthenis finished the seven years of primary schooling successfully and at the age of 13 was enrolled to study electrical engineering. In 1957 however, his father applied successfully to have his family reunited again. So, nine years after the initial forced move to Poland, the mother and her two sons came back home in their village.

Reflecting back on his time in Poland Dimosthenis does not have many regrets. It gave him a good education, something that he most probably would not have received in Greece, and taught him all he knows about ancient societies, especially Classical Greece for which the locals had a lot of admiration and respect. He also found Greece to be a poorer nation with limited opportunities for its citizens.

Not everyone came back of course. Anyone suspected or accused of having collaborated with the Communists was not allowed to come back. Some made strong connections with the host nation and stayed there for good. Dimosthenis' sister got married in Russia and worked in the building industry in a supervisory capacity. He kept in touch with her and much later, when he moved to Australia, he invited her to join him. She declined, stating that if she ever moved it would only be back to Greece. This was never to materialise as she was killed in an accident soon after.

In Greece Dimosthenis started his apprenticeship as a carpenter and worked in that capacity until the age of 21 when he began the two year compulsory military service. He trained in the area of heavy weapons (driver) and served in Athens, Macedonia and Crete. When his military service was over he found a job as a driver for Mr Alafouzos' Company who was a civil engineer. Soon after, like many young people of his generation, he desired to travel to a wealthier country, work hard for a couple of years and return rich. The choices were America, Canada, Germany or Australia. He settled for the latter.

Wasting no time Dimosthenis successfully completed all the necessary formalities and joined thousands of other young men and women on board the 'Ellinis'. Their destination was Australia, 'the promised land' that would solve their financial woes. Forty four years later, he states he is still here.

Their trip lasted 14 days, and took them through Egypt (Port Said), Suez Canal, with a brief stop at Yemen, where he purchased a radio and then straight through to Fremantle. A friend of his was waiting here. He took him in his car and drove him around so he could get an appreciation of the place. "What a dump", Dimosthenis had thought to himself. Wooden houses with iron roofs, certainly not a sign of affluence.

His next stop was Port Melbourne. Here he was met by his cousins who encouraged him to stay there, since Melbourne had greater job opportunities. His brother Petros though, who had settled in Adelaide a year earlier, the one who actually invited Dimosthenis to come to Australia in the first place, asked him to visit him and if he wasn't keen to stay he could return to Melbourne. The choice was not a hard one. He wanted to stay with his brother even though jobs were scarce in Adelaide.

Lack of English was the biggest impediment in finding employment. It wasn't until a month later that he managed to get a job at a foundry in Kilkenny. A hard job in an unbearably hot environment, he recalls. They used to jump into a barrel filled with fresh water to cool down. This was not what he expected, nor what he wished for.

Petros suggested to him to go and work at James Hardie with him. It was Christmas and there was demand for new employees. He did so, leaving his previous job without giving proper notice and thus missing out on his last payment. At James Hardie he worked for two years then he left to work for a year at a factory that manufactured water pipes. He then moved on to making containers at Norman Wright for another year. "I was chasing places that offered overtime" he said.

Within two years he kept his promise and sponsored his beloved Alexandra to join him but not before the two families in Florina announced their engagement with a big party. She had lied to him though by inflating her age by two years. Officially she was not allowed to enter Australia as she was under age (under 18), but the local Mayor had no hesitation in altering her birth date and solving the problem.

Alexandra arrived in Adelaide in 1968 and they married immediately. She worked for a while at Carrefours and Serafe but as she was under age, she was only getting about \$16 per week compared with his wage of \$32 per week. As soon as she gave birth to their first child, it was decided she would stay at home. It was not worth paying childcare fees. At least, he reasoned, he would have a cooked meal every day on the table.

Their first child was often unwell. The doctors wrongly diagnosed that since Dimosthenis was Thalassaemic (minor) that this was the cause of their son's ill health. The family however were not convinced and suspected the climate had something to do with it. It did not take them long to decide to move to Toronto, Canada where Alexandra's two sisters lived. Besides, Alexandra's father always wanted his three girls to be together. They sold their newly acquired home and furniture in 1973 and off they went. Their son's health didn't improve however and Alexandra felt cold and trapped inside the house. Barely six months had lapsed before the decision was made to return back to Adelaide.

Here they rented a place for approximately three months before they found and bought their current residence. Upon returning to Adelaide their son had a tonsillectomy and all his symptoms disappeared immediately and they added to the family another son and a daughter.

In 1981 they all visited Greece, for the first time and stayed for three months. They all had a very good time. Life was uncomplicated, the locals were enjoying a very good standard of living and the purchasing power of the Australian dollar was very high. Everyone was happy. In 1986 they visited Greece again. This time they stayed for seven months. Deep down Dimosthenis and Alexandra had a strong desire to stay for good. That's what the heart was telling them. The head however reasoned differently, tilting towards the security provided by the Australian system, and it prevailed.

“When I'm in Australia I always think of Greece” Dimosthenis declares “but every time I visit Greece, after a while I miss home in Adelaide. In fact, even in Greece I seem to enjoy the company of Australian Greeks”.

Dimosthenis laments the fact that he didn't make a sustained effort to master the English language. “In every factory I worked there were Greeks, fluent in the language and willing to explain to me everything of importance”, he states. Even after 1981, when he started working by himself as a carpenter and painter, most of the work came from within the Greek community.

Before closing the interview, Dimosthenis reflected on contemporary Greek issues and pointed the finger at the inept, corrupt politicians who have brought so much pain and suffering to the Greek people. “Not that the average Greek is much better”, he said. “They too have become blase, indifferent and even self centred. Perhaps this is in our DNA”. He pointed out how the Greek Community here in Australia is divided. “What keeps us on the straight and narrow is the Australian Law”. He concluded.