

## SUMMARY

Interview with **Nomiki Stouppos**

Interviewer: Helen Haltis

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**The interview was conducted in Greek.**

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Nomiki Stouppos was born on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December, 1937 in the island of Kalymnos. She was the eldest of five children, one of which has passed away. St Nicholas, the village where she was born was rather barren and as a young child she was always looking forward to picnics in greener parts of the island, where she climbed trees and gathered wild flowers.

Her father's illness forced her to cease her studies, at grade 4, as she was required to look after a younger sibling to enable her mother to go to work.

Her father, one of 12 siblings, was born in Asia Minor perhaps Levisi, and was forced to flee, together with his entire family in 1922. Half of them made it to Kalymnos while the other half relocated to the United States of America. Nomiki is not certain of what happened exactly, despite the fact that a cousin from Darwin tried to fill in some details. Somehow, her paternal grandparents when they died were buried together on the island, even though one of them had gone to America earlier. The important thing was that they kept in touch, and often sent Nomiki's family packages containing stationery, fabrics etc, especially her aunty Helen, Nomiki recalls fondly.

Her maternal grandfather came from Russia and was business minded. He ran a fruit and vegetable shop in a top location and because he was up very early to go to Vathi and purchase the freshest and best merchandise, they called him Koukouva (night owl). He also owned a cacique (a small boat) without a motor (Nomiki refers to it as a container) which he'd hire out to sponge divers. He was well to do and Nomiki's mother didn't have to go to work although her aunty Katerina did spend some time at the shop.

At the start of World War 2, the Italians set fire to the boats moored at Lafasi and burned them all, together with her grandfather's cacique. Her grandfather soon developed stomach problems and by 1942 had passed away. She remembers fondly how he'd pass by her window on his way back from Vathi, and throw walnuts and other treats into her room.

Of her maternal grandmother she remembers even less. The only thing she is certain about is that both grandparents died in the family home.

When Nomiki's parents married they were considered to be the most handsome couple in the area she stated with pride. She remembers her father's green eyes and his looks were rather similar to those of Robert Taylor or Russell Crowe she stated. When she was born everyone was over the moon.

Her father worked as a fisherman in winter together with three others, and a sponge diver for the rest of the year. On his first expedition, immediately after the war, he was able to buy a

new motor for his cacique and he was saving the rest so he could buy some land for his four girls.

A typical expedition for sponges would start after Easter and could last till autumn (in the northern hemisphere). The three partners would go as far as Libya and work hard until they loaded the boats, then returned and sold the lot to waiting processing merchants on the island. They in turn, would go through a long, arduous process before the sponges were ready for market. First came the 'pruning' or trimming of the rough parts and the washing, followed by the dipping into chlorinated water. The final product had a honey colour. The sponges were then dispatched to Marseille and England, to be sold.

Nomiki is not certain about the provisions they took with them on their expeditions. She thinks galettes (dry, unsalted biscuits) bought from a local bakery; lots of dry legumes, sugar and coffee were the basic things they would take with them. Fish, freshly caught, would supplement their diet of course.

At the appropriate time young Nomikaki (as everybody used to call her) would go up to a vantage point known as 'Aspa' and gaze at the sea. She wanted to be the first to witness her father's home coming. After all he always brought something special for her, but she said the only thing she wanted was to give him a big hug for she loved him.

One of the fishing trips she recalls, was not very productive, however, they were lucky to pick up floating cartons filled with sealed fortified wine. Nomiki thinks it was Vermouth which was sold for a good profit on their return to the island.

She always remembers him as an excellent provider for the family and a fair man in his dealings with his partners.

At the start of the fishing season her father always brought the best catch for the family, but Nomiki hated fish to her father's displeasure. As a grown up though, she has now taught her children to like fish because she knows how good it was for them.

Nomiki's father became ill when he returned from one of his sponge collecting expeditions. She didn't think it was related to diving. Consequently, any accumulated savings were spent on medical expenses. He soon succumbed to his illness however and one month before his last boy was born. The baby was going to be named Nicholas but the family decided to call him Paul, after his father. After all these years however, family members find it difficult to call him Paul, so the name Nicholas still persists.

Life became very difficult for the young widow and mother of five young children. At times it was hard to put food on the table. Luckily they were well connected and managed to place Nomiki, as the eldest child, in the Orphanage of Rhodes 'Princess Mary', together with the third child, Polyxeni. They used to call her 'Shirley Temple' because she had blue eyes and blond, curly hair. "She was angelic", Nomiki said, "and was everyone's favourite".

This institution was more like a College in Nomiki's estimate. Girls from the Aegean as well as the Ionian islands attended and studied to become teachers. It was run by nuns but they were all educated and taught them maths, music, vocals, theatre, embroidery and sewing. Often they would get orders for embroidery that was sold for a profit for the institution.

Occasionally they were taken on excursions, around Rhodes, where everyone had lots of fun. They even visited as guests an American aircraft carrier, the largest at the time on the last Friday before Easter week. They were taken for a grand tour of the ship, where they were shown cartoons, treated to a beautiful meal and were even given a gift each. Nomiki received two beautiful dolls, one blond, which she gave to Polyxeni who was back with her mum because she was missing her, and the second one of dark complexion, she kept for herself. When Nomiki left for Australia she took this doll with her. She dressed her in the Greek national costume, an identical outfit to her own that she made for special occasions the Community celebrated. She was a good dancer, she said, and she passed her knowledge on to others. The doll now is in the custody of her daughter-in-law because she is the only one that can be trusted with it, she remarked.

Her sister, Maria, was taken care of for a while by a small, new Orphanage which was set up by the local Bishop, in the island of Kalymnos. Later she was accepted as a trainee nurse at the local hospital. It was at this time that the island was visited by Prince Philip's mother (from Corfu), in her capacity as 'The Sister of Charity', and offered to take Maria with her, but her mother refused because of narrow mindedness, Nomiki said.

At the Orphanage, in Rhodes, Nomiki trained as a seamstress but left for Australia before she obtained her Certificate. However her father's wish was for her to become a teacher.

At the age of 16, while she was still at the Orphanage, Sister Anna (a nun at the orphanage) tried to arrange the marriage of Nomiki with her nephew, in America, but it fell through. There was also a local boy, Yangos, who showed a keen interest in her. They never sat together to hold hands or exchange words but her heart would do a flutter every time she saw him. Eventually, he migrated to Australia and although she had no idea of his whereabouts, she dared to hope that their paths would cross and they would get married but this was not to be.

Nomiki was brought to Adelaide by the Gratzis family in 1955 at the age of 17, where she was unofficially adopted and was treated like the other children in the family. She was sent to school, not to work, and had lots of fun going to the shops, the Greek cinema at Thebarton, the picture theatres in the city and to the holiday house the Gratzis family owned at Christies Beach. She also mixed with children of the family's friends, which included John Kiosoglous and the Condous brothers, especially the younger one Stamatis.

Young Nomiki fitted into her new family very well and Despina (Mrs Gratzis) always remained for her, "aunty Despina".

Nomiki's invitation to come to Australia was an act of gratitude towards her mother who looked after Mrs Despina Gratzis' father during the war, right up to the time he was brought to Australia at the age of 93.

Prior to her departure Nomiki went to Rhodes for her medical examination but she still needed to visit Athens so she could complete all the necessary paperwork. Luckily Mrs Monte Papadimitriou, a very kind lady that visited Kalymnos often for her holidays, took Nomiki under her wing and assisted her in completing all that was necessary.

Her (future) sister-in-law, known to the Gratzis family, was frequently asked to match Nomiki up with various eligible young Greek boys. Her response however was "Nomiki will marry my brother-in-law, George". And eventually she did. He was older and "not my

type" Nomiki said, but she warmed to him and agreed, because he was a nice person and later proved to be a family man, an excellent provider and very good organiser with family finances.

Together they had four children and Nomiki became a full time mother. Her sewing skills came to good use and her children were always well dressed. This prompted others to request her services and Nomiki was happy she found a way to supplement the family income.

George, her husband, worked as a shop assistant for about 20 years until he bought a small business called 'Morning Star' next to Clarkson's in Grenfell Street, but which proved not very profitable. He was also a handyman doing odd jobs on the weekends to supplement the family income. Later, at the instigation of his wife, he bought a cafeteria/snack bar business in Gouger Street, where she joined him as the children had grown up and she was able to put her numeracy and language skills to practice.

The business flourished and it enabled them pay for the wedding expenses and support all four children. They also financially supported their parents both in Rhodes and Kalymnos. Then, at the age of 58 George became ill and the business suffered as a result. It was finally sold for \$30,000. A few years earlier George was offered \$160,000 (he had purchased it for \$52,000) but refused to accept the offer, for he always wanted to keep it until he reached 60.

Nomiki visited Kalymnos in 1971 together with her daughter Anna who was only three months old. Her mother had asked for her as she withered away with cirrhosis of the liver.

She spent approximately three and a half months there, visiting her mother, while she had the strength. They visited many Monasteries including the local one of St Catherine and the one at Argos, Peloponnese where two of her mother's sisters were serving. She also spent a couple of weeks with her husband's relatives, in Rhodes.

Everything had changed around the places she knew. The standard of living had also improved as evidenced by the number of holiday houses acquired by local families.

When the three and a half months were up Nomiki's mother summoned her and said, "It is time for you to go back to your children and husband, just leave me the dress you wear, I will place it under my pillow. When you reach home call me, then I'll go peacefully".

Nomiki left Kalymnos on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September, 1971. On the 12<sup>th</sup> she took the aeroplane from Athens to Australia. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of September her mother passed away.

Her wish was granted.