

SUMMARY

Interview with **Maria Vovos**

Interviewer: Helen Haltis

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The interview was conducted in Greek.

Maria Vovos (nee Metrou), was born on the 17th of June, 1917 in Ermoupolis on the Aegean island of Syros. Her father, a soldier was married for barely a month before he had to return to his post in northern Greece. When Maria's mother found out she was pregnant, her mother-in-law sent a letter to her son telling him that his new bride was pregnant. It was bitterly cold and he developed pneumonia and soon died. However, before he died, he held the Holy Mary's Icon and pointed to her image and said if the child is a girl he wanted her to be called Maria or Peter if a boy.

At the child's christening her Godmother announced the name of the girl, Maria, and this was confirmed by the priest. The paternal grandmother, full of rage because the girl was not named after her, Damaskini brought the ceremony to an abrupt end. Maria was given two names Maris Damaskini but this did not appease the grandmother and she did not allow the Godmother to dress the child with the outfit she had bought as per tradition.

As soon as they returned home, Maria and her mother were undressed to their petticoats and instructed to leave the house for good.

Maria's mother went straight to her parents. Here her father took Maria and gave her to his wife Kalio, and instructed his daughter (Maria's mother) to get out of the house and never to come back.

Kalio went out, gave her daughter a skirt and a blouse to put on, gave her some money and told her to catch the ferry to Piraeus. She was then told to go to her aunty Marigoula (Kalio's sister) who lived in Piraeus.

There, her aunty connected her with the Malikoutis family who had a young baby but its mother could not breastfeed it. Maria's mother became the ideal wet nurse.

Once settled she brought Maria to Athens and placed her with Nitsa, a cousin of hers. She however, took the child and left it at the front steps of the local Orphanage. It was sheer luck that aunty Marigoula who was employed there, arrived soon after, recognised the baby and took her home immediately. Maria's mother was very happy but the people she was staying with organised for young Maria to go back to Syros with grandmother Kalio where she was raised. Perhaps they were making sure their own child was not going to go without breast milk.

In the meantime Maria's maternal grandfather became very ill. Overcome, perhaps by feelings of guilt and a deep sense of remorse, before he died he approached the man who truly loved his daughter, (Maria's mother), and arranged for them to get married. This gentleman in fact, had visited her on her wedding day (to Maria's father) and publically

announced he would one day, marry her, even as a widow. After they married, Maria's mother continued to be the wet nurse for the Malikoutis baby and they in turn gave her new husband a job in their Ceramic Factory.

In Syros Maria attended the local primary school but being left handed her teacher hit her with a cane constantly, even re-aligning the bones of her hand causing her great pain all her life. Soon she traded school for a job under the auspices of her grandmother's sister, who was employed at a local weaving mill. Maria's job was sweeping and collecting floating pieces of cotton, but later she was given a fixed job on the bench.

One of Maria's aunts gave birth to a premature baby and asked her mother (Maria's grandmother) to come to Piraeus and help her. So at the age of 12 Maria went to Piraeus with her grandmother and together with the aunt gained employment at the Skonakis' Public Baths while the grandmother looked after the newborn. Their job was to clean the premises and help patrons dress and undress. In return they would receive tips and grandmother would keep all the money. This was the only money they received for their services.

When Maria was 16, her grandmother Kalio wrote a letter to her son in Australia asking him to return home. In her letter she included Maria's photo, deliberately trying to show him how things had changed since he left. Indeed, he migrated to Australia when his sister had Maria, perhaps to avoid any unpleasant gossip that was going around at the time. He lived in Thevenard and worked as a fisherman with his boarder and partner Stamatis.

Returning home was the last thing in his mind, instead he organised Maria's marriage to his partner Stamatis. Stamatis was born in the island of Syros but spent his teen years in Alexandria, Egypt, before he left for Australia. At the age of 13 Stamatis onboard a merchant ship, delivered wheat and flour to Syros. He had arrived on the island coincidentally, the very day Maria was born. Fate had sealed their union in that instant, Maria has stated.

At the age of 16, Maria and Stamatis declared their engagement (even though they did not meet each other until 1935) when Maria turned 18 she joined him in Thevenard. After the engagement Maria returned to Syros to her grandmother and worked at the local cotton mill again. Maria remembers the island as very prosperous having not only a large merchant shipping industry but also tanneries and manufacturing, particularly cotton mills and making and exporting products including fabrics, linen, work trousers and leather goods. It was the richest island in Greece she feels. Unfortunately this terminated with the destruction caused by World War 2.

Stamatis sent Maria money for her fares when she finally boarded the ship 'Eugenia' bound for Australia. The plan was that they would stay in Australia for five years and then return to Syros (a similar expectation for some Greek migrants). For most however, this did not eventuate.

Maria's first stop was after leaving Greece was Alexandria, where she met with Stamatis' extended family and spent a few hours with them. Fremantle was the first stop in Australia. Maria, confident and bubbly, impressed the local Greek settlers who came by in case there were any new comers from their region who could convey news about their loved ones back home. Here they stayed long enough for Maria to be taken to lunch. She also helped a young girl with her appearance taking her to the hairdresser and helping her to buy a dress (the girl was coming to Australia to be married) to the utter delight of her father who offered Maria a beautiful bunch of flowers. She even had a marriage proposal by a young Italian settler. "This

will be a case of a threesome”, she responded through her interpreter, “We’ll need another person to help us communicate with each other”. “Go to your destination”, the young man’s father said to her. “If you don’t like what you find there, here is my business card. Just give me a call on this number and I will come and pick you up on my plane” he said, offering her another bunch of flowers she recalls.

Maria’s next stop was Adelaide, where her uncle’s wife was waiting for her (she was not of Greek background), with an interpreter. They took the tram for Port Adelaide and then by ship to Port Lincoln which reminded Maria of the Greek islands. From there they took a train to Thevenard.

Her uncle's wife it seems had plans of her own. She wanted Maria to marry her nephew, who had a cattle station, not Stamatis. Maria though, went ahead as planned and married the man she came for. She was not disappointed she said. Everything was a rush however as the priest had to come from Adelaide with Maria to conduct the wedding of two siblings before Maria's wedding. Stamatis had already bought the wedding dress and Maria and her uncle's wife bought the veil, wedding crowns and all other requirements in Adelaide. They had forgotten however, the all important candles and so had to use a very small, rose coloured one at their wedding ceremony. Even the ceremony itself was brief because the priest (as he explained), was not familiar with it all. From this point onwards Maria became his official chanter every time the priest came up from Adelaide for any occasion.

Stamatis continued with his fishing, his expeditions often lasting for a week and the catch was taken to Port Lincoln, placed on ice and from there it was distributed interstate. Later he worked for a big fishing merchant in Port Lincoln for a while, but he got sick and was advised to leave the fishing industry. After 25 years, the family which included 7 children, relocated to Adelaide where Stamatis gained employment at Holden.

Before Thevenard, Stamatis worked at the Smelters in Port Pirie for a brief period. He then joined the Merchant Navy delivering grains to Adelaide from the surrounding areas for export.

When the family came to Adelaide, Stamatis developed unpleasant gambling habits that even the extended family became alarmed about and kept an eye on him.

At Maria’s instigation they bought a house at Lockleys in 1950 for three thousand pounds. As there was a housing shortage at the time, Maria, like many others rented any available space, while her children, especially while the girls were still young. One of her boarders Billy, was employed at David Jones, and helped her girls to find work there, rather than working at factories. Soon all children reached working age and were meaningfully employed to supplement the family income. Any money that came in was most welcome for they had to pay thirty pounds per month for their home loan. Stamatis was only earning eight pounds per week at Holden.

Boarders were charged one pound per week rent and Maria did their washing. In one large room she had four bunk beds, accommodating four young men, plus one more outside in the sleep out.

In the mid 60s, after more than 30 years in Australia, Maria's sister sent a letter to Stamatis telling him that Maria's mother was not well and was dying. She was asking for Maria and as Stamatis had promised Maria's mother, he would bring Maria back to Greece in five years

time. He wanted to oblige her as 30 years had since passed. Maria knew that they could not afford a trip to Greece. At the end of the school year (Despo and Billy were still at school), Stamatis borrowed money by mortgaging his car, their son and sons-in-laws put in some money and they surprised Maria with a return ticket to Greece. Maria was so shocked that the family had to call a doctor. Maria was now able to see her dying mother and also visit the parents of her sons-in-law in the islands of Ikaria and Rhodes.

Maria was very happy to return to Greece but she was taken aback by the economic deterioration of Syros. There were she recalled, lots of weaving mills and tanneries in addition to the Merchant Ships and the Fishing Industry. It was in Syros she stated with pride, that the 8 hour shift was first introduced in 1918, and later spread all over Greece. However she lamented, Syros was now a mere shadow of the vibrant island that she once remembered.

Her first trip was followed by a second one, then her last a few years later. After Stamatis had passed away she admitted "I'm constantly homesick", as she expressed her deep love for her birthplace.