

SUMMARY

Interview with **Dimos Hronopoulos**

Interviewer: Helen Haltis

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The interview was conducted in Greek.

Dimos Hronopoulos was born on the 26th of February, 1933 in Mesohorion, commonly known as Mesohori. It was a small village located between the two popular coastal tourist destinations of Pylos and Methoni at the point where the Ionian Sea meets the Aegean. He was the last of four children in his family but he also had another four step siblings as his father remarried after the death of his first wife.

Dimos' family struggled with the land which was undulating and rocky. More importantly the family's land was limited and divided in small segments dispersed in different locations. There they grew olive trees and vines, kept a small number of animals and grew a variety of seasonal vegetables. Quite a variety Dimos states, but everything was in short supply forcing his father and later the boys to work in richer peoples farms in order to supplement the family income.

The timing of Dimos birth coincided with difficult economic circumstances for the region. The entire economy of Greece was not faring any better. Mesohori boasted some 70 children at the time and thanks to Andreas Sygros' Philanthropic Organisation, a school was built so they could finish their Primary Education. Dimos laments he could not finish that properly, due to lack of teachers, as they were unwilling to serve in provincial impoverished regions. Today the building stands as a reminder of history only as the people of Mesohori gradually moved away.

As a young teenager Dimos would hear the stories of people in the village who had either left for places like Canada, America, Germany and Australia, or were thinking of emigrating. His father's two brothers were already living in America. The local Prefect (referred to as the Mayor) was often delivering applications for migration, because there was a constant demand for this.

When he was 21, Dimos made up his mind to join the migrating queue and he, together with a few others, applied for Australia through the ICEM programme (*Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration*). He met the basic selection criteria because he was of good general health. He also carried the appropriate weight and his hands were hardened and full of calluses, an indication he was used to hard work. He was definitely an ideal applicant for this programme. He laughed at the memory of one of the co-applicants who although was work hardened, was underweight. "Go and eat a couple of serves of spaghetti ", an officer said to him", and top it up with a litre of water before we weigh you again". It worked and he was accepted to go to Australia.

Upon receiving the paperwork accepting his application to go to Australia, Dimos went to Athens and reported to the authorities the day before he was due to sail. Everyone had to have

a shower, men first and then the women and children. There would have been about 100 men all in the shower together and Dimos suspects the shower was a form of fumigation as all the migrants came from farmland villages, rearing farm animals and growing a variety of grains. They were then lined up and checked to make sure nobody had any hernias evident.

In the morning the successful applicants were put onboard the Italian ship *Castel Felice*, divided on gender lines, and placed in large communal rooms in groups of 20 and a maximum of 60 people. Certainly not the ideal conditions to pass the 28 days of the trip although Dimos didn't have any great expectations. Rough existence was always part of his life; in fact his entire reaction to things was devoid of feelings, robotic in a way. Not much emotion was shown when he left Greece and he never externalised any concerns, any apprehension he might have harboured in relation to this trip.

When they reached Fremantle they were given their passports back, their Australian Identification Card as well as a booklet (in Greek) containing basic information about Australia. Dimos read it but that's where it ended. Was he impressed, did he compare this new place to the one he had just left? He didn't seem to care.

The next stop was Port Melbourne where they were met by the Australian immigration staff that took them by bus to the train station and sent them to Bonegilla. A day later they moved about one hundred of them to Brisbane via Sydney, and on to Ayr in Queensland where they were met by waiting farmers. The tobacco farms were their final destination. Dimos and a newly acquired friend followed their boss who took them straight to work, which included spraying of the crop and collecting and processing the tobacco which was ready for picking.

This mission lasted for a month and a half but both enjoyed the experience. Their boss was friendly, he would take them to the local store to get their provisions and he gave them the freedom to collect potatoes from the farm and cook them. He even invited them to spend Christmas with his family. Perhaps he had a soft spot for them for he had spent time in Kalamata (the Capital of Dimos' Prefecture, Messinia) as a soldier. The only thing he found strange was the boys' habit in cooking their potato chips in butter rather than lard.

Their remuneration was 10 pounds for a five day week with free accommodation. When tobacco picking finished, they were given the choice of either going or staying on and working for the daily rate of three pounds, if the work became available. His partner though, had already made contact with people he knew in Melbourne and had decided to move there. Dimos then contacted Spyros, his cousin, who had moved to Adelaide and within a week he was down knocking at the door of the address he was given at West Terrace. To his surprise and utter delight the landlord was a Greek migrant from a neighbouring village, who helped him find accommodation at 71 Brown Street which later was renamed Morphett Street. This place remained his official residence until 1960, at which time he moved into his own house as soon as he married. The rented place was owned by the "Old Lady Savvena" a Cypriot migrant, well known in the Greek Community. She operated a shop on the ground floor and used the second level as sleeping quarters, charging boarders 25 shillings each per week. All she did for them was to change the bed sheets; the rest was entirely their responsibility. They cleaned, they cooked using a coin operated stove, and they washed their own clothes.

One of his co-boarders was working at Holden and took him there as Holden required workers at the time. Holden offered its employees 30 Shillings on top of their weekly wages, for any extra employee they introduced. Dimos wasn't very happy there however, and soon he left and joined the workforce at Chrysler. The money however was not as good, but the

atmosphere was much happier because he was surrounded by his friends. This was only a temporary employment though with the company hiring and firing employees on a need basis. Consequently, Dimos was out of work again and this time he chased whatever was on offer in the area of fruit and vegetable picking in the Adelaide Hills, or around the Myponga area. With the help of the Unemployment Office, Dimos went to Port Lincoln where he worked for the local EWS, first digging trenches and later working as a painter. One year later during his holiday break, he returned to Adelaide to meet his brother, Fanis, who had joined him in Australia and was currently living at Goodwood with other compatriots.

While there he became interested in working for the PMG, in Mount Gambier, but by the time he returned to Port Lincoln to terminate his employment there, it was too late and he missed out. Instead, he went back to Holden for about two and a half years and then was accepted at Chrysler again. Here, he spent the next 24 years until the age of 65 when he retired.

When he returned from Port Lincoln Dimos met his wife at a local function and married her in 1960. They moved to a house which he had recently purchased. Subsequently he joined his brothers-in-law and went grape picking, at Loxton, for a few seasons (from 1960 till 1972), while his two young children, Yannis and Sophia attended North Loxton Primary School for a time. At the same time Dimos kept his full time employment with Chrysler. He had developed excellent rapport with his immediate supervisor and was allowed to leave when the grape season started. At the end of it, he would return and resume his duties there again. Grape picking gave him the opportunity to make some very good money although the season was limited.

In 1973 Dimos returned to his birthplace and was pleasantly surprised with its overall improvement. There were no longer dirt roads and stones, and the houses were furnished with all modern devices. The only thing that affected him was the term 'xenos' (foreigner) which they attached to him. Apart from that, his stay was pleasant, but Mesohori he realised was no longer his home.