

## SUMMARY

Interview with **George Stavrinakis**

Interviewer: Helen Haltis

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**The interview was conducted in Greek.**

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George Stavrinakis was born on March the 13<sup>th</sup>, 1934 in the small village of Vikio which is located in the northern part of the historic island of Chios. George remembers going to primary school consisting of approximately 80 students. Today, he laments the school is shut down due to the diminished population. Like George, they have migrated to other countries or have moved to larger cities.

After he completed primary school, George went to live with his grandmother and assist her with the farming activities. He didn't want to attend high school like his other four siblings who all finished it, because he did not have the brains he said. His two brothers pursued careers in the Merchant Navy, with the older becoming Captain and the other Second in Command.

Up to the age of 16 George helped his grandmother with the ploughing of the fields, the growing of cucumbers, attending to the 300 bee hives and the collection of honey and looking after the livestock. She was a hard worker he recalls, but very lonely as her husband had died early.

George's father was quite entrepreneurial. He delivered a variety of primary products and other goods, in and out of the island for a living. As he did not own a boat, he hired one together with the services of a captain in order to move the load at hand from port to port. His mother on the other hand, ran a shop where she sold things that her husband brought in, this included cucumbers, honey and other products from the grandmother's farm. Their combined effort earned sufficient money for the family to enjoy a good standard of living. Even during the war years "we had no problems" George stated, and he remembers his childhood being carefree and happy.

At 16 years of age, George went to the Ionian island of Kefalonia and attended the local Trading School to become a builder. The course lasted for 10 months and it was completed successfully. When he returned to Chios, he worked in the building industry for a short while, helping to restore or rebuild damaged houses, some by a recent earthquake. This did not prove to be the ideal occupation, so he made the decision to join the Merchant Navy alongside his brother delivering mineral ores.

His first stint ended before one year was completed. The ship was sold to Japan for scrap metal and he was forced to return to Chios. There he worked in the building industry again for a brief period of time, until he found the opportunity to embark once more. In total, George worked in the Merchant Navy for almost six years, and visited practically every continent loading and unloading mineral ore, wheat and whatever was required.

His remuneration was 11 pounds per month which was mostly spent on personal needs and wants as they visited the various ports and stayed there for a few days. Occasionally he would send some money back home but there was not much left over.

George's memories of that chapter of his life are not the best because the captain was a bit mean and obstinate. Once he recalled the ship was heading for disaster, as it moved towards the path of a cyclone. Despite the warnings from a nearby ship it kept going, until the Steward threatened to throw the captain into the sea. Also when in port he often withheld the crew's wages, making life difficult.

As a result, when the ship reached the port of Wallaroo, South Australia in early 1960 in order to get a load of wheat for Europe, George with two others came to Adelaide and visited the Greek Consul General and laid a complaint about the Captain of their ship. The Consul General wasn't very sympathetic and the three left and wandered around Hindley Street. Their mind was made up. They were not going back to the ship. Luckily they came across John Hortatos, a Greek migrant, who helped them to find temporary accommodation.

The next day, George met a migrant from Chios who helped him find a permanent place to live and found work for him at the foundry of McKay, which was located near the Soccer Stadium.

George met his future wife Fani within a day or so after he came to Adelaide. It was love at first sight, at least from his part even though the girl was barely 15 years old. Her mother, a deserted wife with three young girls, gave her consent and within months they were happily married. George's eyes still light up when he talks about his wife, radiating sentiments of fulfilment and contentment. On the funny side of this, he remembers well the day he took his young wife to a cafe in Franklin Street for a coffee, only to be stopped by two policemen demanding to know what he was doing with this young girl. The Marriage Certificate George had with him saved the day.

George worked at the foundry for two and a half years, but one day he had an unfortunate industrial accident where he burned himself and lost the sight of one of his eyes. Rather than sympathy and support George felt the management showed cynicism and contempt while trying to avoid responsibility. First they accused him of being an illegal immigrant since he had jumped ship and threatened to have him deported. They even reported him to the Immigration Department and the officers came to the factory to take him away and send him back to Greece. He was then pronounced a communist and consequently undesirable and more reason to have him deported.

This accusation, George suspects stems out of an incident that took place in Karachi, Pakistan. While the ship he was working on was unloading, another ship, from Poland pulled in carrying many Greek citizens expelled by the Greek Government because they were communist sympathisers. George treated them to a traditional Greek coffee, and this he believes stigmatised him for life, 'thanks' to one of his co-workers he suspects, who reported him to the Greek Authorities as a sympathiser.

George however, had reported to the authorities when he had jumped ship and so was a legal immigrant. He was married to a local girl with the knowledge and permission of the Immigration Department (because she was under age) and so had done nothing wrong. They did not have a leg to stand on in the matter, thus he was awarded him a small compensation for the loss of his eye.

George was always up front with the Authorities, especially the Immigration Department, and adhered to the letter of the law for which he had and still has a lot of respect. This he stated, helped clear his name on a number of occasions.

After the McKay incident, George worked predominantly in Barmera and Berri as a fruit picker for three years. Later he heard there was more money to be made cutting sugar cane during the six month season. He, together with his brother-in-law, their wives and two other friends joined forces and together they signed a contract to harvest the sugar cane of a large farm in Innisfail, Queensland. This was hard work but financially rewarding. Over 5000 workers of many nationalities went for the sugar cane season that year but less than 1000 remained as it had been a bad year weatherwise, which made cutting the cane very difficult. Often they would run ahead of the predetermined schedule which spelled out how much was required to be delivered to the mill on certain dates, and George would hire his services out to neighbouring farms for extra money.

About five months into their first season, George's son (who had been left back in Adelaide with his grandmother) was afflicted by acute pneumonia and was hospitalised. This forced him and Fani to return to Adelaide, fearing the worst. Luckily there was a happy end and before long they returned to Innisfail spending collectively two years there. Their memories of the place are pleasant as they mingled with the local Greek Community and made new friends. Innisfail George remembers, would attract a number of itinerant workers of diverse background that transformed it into a colourful multilingual place.

When the sugar cane season was over, George was back in Adelaide and chased any job available. He worked briefly for Millers, Wunderlich Windows as well as George Shearers. Two years after the Innisfail experience, he joined Simpson Pope and he never moved again until he retired 22 years later, receiving the customary gold watch on his 20<sup>th</sup> year of continuous service with the company. The only negative in all this was an injury he sustained to his leg as a result of hot metal falling on it. He ended up in hospital for two months and his leg required extensive plastic surgery.

George is deeply satisfied with his life in Australia and very happy that he made the decision to abandon ship and call Adelaide home. However, he thinks he is an exception to the rule, believing that sailors did not look for opportunities to escape and settle in places they visited. They look forward he said, to the day they retire in their own home surrounded by their loved ones. He admitted though, that he helped eight others over the years like himself to settle in Adelaide, raising the ire of the Immigration Department which threatened to impose a \$500 fine on him if he didn't conform.

Returning to Greece for good is out of the question for George. "This is my place", he stated, "This is where my immediate family dwells". He acknowledges that his relatives still live in Greece and it is always nice to keep in touch but he gave the impression he disliked the prevailing system. George did want to go back to Greece and visit his family, but he had not completed the compulsory National Service that all Greek males have to do and was afraid he would be conscripted into the army. So he waited until he was in his 50s and knew that he would be too old for the armed forces. While there, he enquired about his military service status and offered to pay whatever was needed. "You are too old" they said to him. "What are we going to do with you, just feed you?"

The four week holiday was extended to six weeks and upon returning to Australia and going back to his job, he found that he had been dismissed, since he was away for more than the

four weeks he was untitled to and had failed to notify the company. Luckily he had an excellent rapport with his supervisor who fabricated a good excuse and his status was restored.

On reflection George feels life in Australia has been very good because the Greeks helped one another in all matters. The creation of the Greek Orthodox Community of SA and the building of Greek churches and the first Kafenio [coffee house] were instrumental in creating opportunities for them to meet and interact, to exchange information and recreate, to share concerns and plan future directions. Soon, the Greek language schools were implemented to complement their role. Young children were introduced to their parental language and culture in a more formalised way. George made sure his children attended and later, when the grandchildren arrived, he made it his duty to ferry them to and from Greek school. His son's children however are missing out, as George no longer drives so he can't transport them. This of course is reflective of the changing nature of needs and priorities, between generations.