

SUMMARY

Interview with **Antonios Lysikatos**

Interviewer: Helen Haltis

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The interview was conducted in Greek.

Antonios Lysikatos was born in 1928, in Sapounareika, near Leonidio, in the Prefecture of Lakonia. As a young boy he worked with his parents and siblings on the limited farming land the family possessed, growing carob beans, olives, wheat, broad beans and vegetables. Often he would visit his uncle, a small time shepherd where he looked after the animals.

Life was very difficult and he remembers well, days with little or no food on the table, worn-out clothes and no shoes. After World War 2 the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration offered some limited support but it was not enough to address their poverty.

As a result his older sister was given to the local doctor, in Leonidio, to work as a live-in maid. Later, Antonios sent money from Australia for her dowry and she married a very nice young man (Antonios stated with pride).

Antonios like his siblings, had a very limited formal education (only two years at the local Primary School). To support with the daily chores at home however was of greater importance.

After his 19th birthday Antonios was conscripted by the Greek army to complete his two years of compulsory military service. For once, he felt content at the beginning, as all of his immediate needs were being met. He was clothed, well fed and had a proper bed to sleep on. More importantly, he was taken to so many different places including northern Greece as well as Crete, where he met up with so many different people that his horizons were broadened. The downside was that he was asked to spy on his fellow servicemen and report on any dissent which he loathed immensely.

His official army duty was as a Machine Gun Operator. It was because of his training in that area that his services were required in the Korean War. Even though he had completed his military service for almost two years, he was conscripted for a second time in 1951 and was sent to the Korean Front. Onboard an American military ship and dressed in American army uniform, he was placed together with approximately 300 Greek soldiers. This unit was known as the Greek Expeditionary Force.

Upon leaving Greece, the ship went to Turkey to select soldiers for the same unit. This was the ultimate insult to the Greeks who declared their own mini war, and tried to prevent the Turks from getting on board. The authorities were forced to fence off areas and isolate the two groups so they could get to their destination safely.

Once they reached Busan (Korea), they were taken to the war front. Antonios remembers the jubilant faces of the Greek soldiers that had preceded them. Perhaps they were happy because their tenure had come to its end. This was a regular process. Every few months (he thought),

a new battalion was to be called in and the survivors of the previous one were recalled back to their country of origin via America and where they were entertained for a week.

The bulk of the conflict revolved around Big Nori, a mountain that changed hands constantly. Antonios recalls this with a lot of cynicism, believing this to be a case of the powers testing and showcasing their weapons. The dangers for every soldier though were real and immediate. Towards the end of September (the exact date escapes Antonios) the Greek battalion's job was to recapture Big Nori. They were all in position ready to pounce on the enemy, immediately after; one of their comrades was chosen to destroy the enemy's heavy weapons, that was the plan. However, this proved an extremely risky operation and perhaps through fear, he failed to carry through with the task. The enemy soon became aware of their presence and started firing, decimating the battalion where 80 Greek soldiers were lost that day. Their bodies, like all other fallen soldiers, were gathered, treated with ointments and given their last rites by a Buddhist priest. They were then placed in body bags and sent back home with their metallic identity plates held between their teeth.

A short time later and in the same area, Antonios' situation became so desperate that he silently prayed to Virgin Mary to be saved, promising the offering of a candle which matched his height upon his return to Greece. When he was back home, safe and failing to act on his promise, he was duly reminded by Holy Mary herself as he slept on the floor of his parental home. Frightened by the experience and full of guilt he rushed to the chapel and delivered his promise.

In another instance the Greek soldiers had to cross a fast flowing river where a net had been stretched on its surface so they could hold on to and cross safely. When the bulk of the group was in the water, the Chinese started firing at them fiercely. Panic set in and many lost their grip on the net and were taken by the current. Others dived into the river deciding this was their best option to safety. Unfortunately Antonios recalled sadly, there was no guarantee of a happy end, even if you were a swimmer which was not the case for most.

While at the front, Antonios realised how close to death the soldiers were and how they had to employ any trick in order to survive. Once, he remembers vividly a few of them had to bury themselves under their dead comrades' bodies in their endeavour to fool the enemy. The Chinese in his estimate were ferocious and uncompromising. In one hand they held their gun and in the other a bayonet. If they came near enemy soldiers' bodies, they would always pierce them, making sure they were indeed dead.

"Lucky were the ones who did not have the misfortune", Antonios said, "to experience this conflict". His mind shudders as the memories flood back. No wonder he jumped up and down "like a young goat" when it was announced his service to this war was over. "Better poor and hungry, than dead", he thought to himself. Upon leaving Korea the soldiers were taken to New York for 'rest and recreation' by the Americans in appreciation for their help in the Korean War.

Antonios spent the next two years working on the family farm. War memories flooded back though, and by chance while on a visit to the nearby famous Caves of Diros, he saw a young man with no legs in his wheelchair, pushed by a beautiful girl. It was his Commander from the Korean Front being looked after by his sister. "My Lysikatos", cried the man as he recognised his saviour. The two embraced tearfully as their minds wandered back to the past. It was on one fateful day in the trenches that the Commander was badly injured, and

Antonios picked him up and carried him to safety where he was cared for by the medical team.

Life in the village was not getting any better and soon Antonios made the decision to migrate to Australia, despite the disagreement of his parents. His application was followed by the customary medical examination at Nafplio, and before long he was on board the Italian ship *Arosa Kulm*. His was an assisted passage by ICEM (Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration). “Two years”, he thought, would be enough to set him up financially, and then he would return (“but I’m still here”, he laments).

His first Australian Port was Freemantle, a small city that Antonios liked. Then he was taken to Port Melbourne and from there to Bonegilla. “A rather chaotic place” he thought, but he only stayed for a couple of weeks.

His first job was fruit picking at Berri and once this was over he was sent to Keith, where he looked after sheep and cattle. The job wasn’t too bad, but the boss Antonios states, didn’t show much respect for him and refused to take him to the pub whenever he went there, despite the compassionate pleas of his wife. Once he relented, and let Antonios join in but he ordered him to sit at the back of the truck with the dogs. This was the ultimate insult.

At the pub he met up with another Greek Australian who helped him to go back to Berri and work in Mr Spanos’s farm. Later he found employment there with the E&WS and subsequently was sent to Modbury where they were making concrete water pipes which supplied water around South Australia. A camp site had been set up for the employees who were predominantly of Greek background. Antonios operated a cement mixer and he was very happy because this job paid well, but the real bonus was the proximity of Adelaide (city), which they visited often.

After Modbury, he went back to Berri because he liked it there where he did odd jobs for a while, and eventually together with a partner they purchased their own farm. This proved to be a financial mistake and they were forced to sell.

While in Berri, he met Petroula and they married, however she did not enjoy life in Berri and soon they moved to Adelaide to be close to her brother.

In Adelaide Antonios found employment at the Rubber Mills where he worked shiftwork and 12 hour days. A lot of hard and dirty work, he recalled. He always took his work clothes off before he entered the house because of the smell of the rubber on his clothes. This is where he worked until retirement.

During his holidays he always visited Berri and involved himself with fruit picking activities for extra cash. Money was always needed for he never forgot those left behind. First he sent money for his sister (the one that worked as a maid, so she could get married). He also sent money regularly to his parents in order to make their life more bearable.

The local brotherhoods and associations offered opportunities for meeting and celebrating with other Greeks, while the Greek Cinema at Thebarton brought a small part of Greece to them and kept them entertained. The highlight of course, was the annual picnic at Victor Harbour organised by the Messinian Brotherhood.

Antonios visited Greece only once, after his parents had died. There was visible improvement in his village but the places and the people he loved were still there and were most welcoming to him. The hardest thing for him was to part from all that for a second time. "I respect Australia" he said, "for it gave me financial security but Greece is my country and always in my heart", he declared.

Here in Australia he has children and grandchildren who hold good jobs and are proud of their heritage.