

**This is an interview with George Apostolou. It's being conducted on the 15th of November 2012 and the interview is taking place at George's home. The interviewer is Joanna Tsalikis and the interview is being conducted as part of the Greek Migrant Experience Oral Histories Project - an OEEGA initiative. Funded by the Australian governments "Your Community Heritage program - Sharing Community Heritage Stories". Also present is Mrs Helen Haltis facilitating the recording equipment.**

**As indicated in the Oral History Handbook:**

**Punctuation: Square bracket [ ] indicate material in the transcript that does not occur on the original tape recording. Sentences that were left unfinished in the normal manner of conversation are shown ending in three dashes, - - -.**

**Welcome George thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed by us today.**

Thank you for asking me.

**May we start by asking you to state your full name.**

My full name is George Apostolos Apostolou but I have dropped the Apostolos the middle name off so I go by the name of George Apostolou. I was born in Egypt on the 9th of the September 1944. I was one of triplets the other two were Themistocles and Harry [Charilaos] and also have an oldest brother Peter, Pareskeva, who is four years almost to the day older than I. Born in Alexandria, Egypt just towards the end of the war.

**You said you were one of triplets there was another little boy.**

There was Themistocles yes, Themistocles was the first one of the bunch that came out and then there was Harry and finally there was me, there is 20 minutes apart between the three of us, between the first and the third and Themistocles had - actually my oldest brother Paraskeva - caught whooping cough while he was at kindergarten and of course it being an infectious disease we all finished up getting it. Worst of all was Themistocles and the medication was very much limited in those days because most of it was going to the front lines of the war so unfortunately at the age of 10 months old he had passed away. It was, I think it took a bit of time to sort out whether it was Themistocles that had passed away or I passed away because we were very much identical to the extent that even mum couldn't tell us apart, they had to put name tags on us to tell us apart.

**So you were identical twins, [triplets].**

Well yes.

**With the same features.**

With Themistocles but not with Harry. He was different, different completely.

**I suppose those sad things would happen.**

It is, it was sad.

**The lack of medical ---**

Yeah but, I guess the fortunate part of us being triplets, it helped to get dad out of the army because he became a father of four and no father of four was to go into the front line so he served his, well, no father of four was to be enlisted actually and after our birth he served his time, last three or four months at the embassy in Alexandria just as a guard there.

**So the number of children actually determined his war service.**

Depending yes, correct yes.

**Can you tell us a little bit now about your childhood in Alexandria.**

Childhood in Alexandria, I grew up in a very much Greek environment. Alexandria being a very multi-cultural, multi-national city at that time. Each community virtually had their own schooling, hardly anybody, any European, would speak the local language, it was up to the locals actually to learn the European languages in order to communicate and go about their businesses. I attended the Greek primary school at Alexandria, Τοσίτσεια σχολή [Tositsea school], it was called and completed that. I went as far as year six, before we migrated to Australia in 1957, so at the age 12 it was when we had migrated to Australia.

**The multi-lingual aspect of the culture is quite a fascinating part.**

It was very fascinating overall. Part of the entire system because bear in mind that Egypt at some stage was under the British rule so most of the laws were British. All the exchange and financials were based on the French. Industry, heavy industry was either German or Italian and the Greeks were very much merchants in shipping, in cotton and food stuff and that.

**So these were also to do with understanding the languages of commerce and business I suppose.**

Well it was nothing really for us to change from one language to the other depending on where we were and what dealings that were taking place at the time. Transactions were in French because the majority of people were French and it was in Greek depending on what industry you were dealing with.

**Did most of the Alexandrian Greeks speak French?**

Most of the Greeks from Alexandria would speak anything up to 7 or 8 languages.

**That's extraordinary.**

It wasn't only for the Greeks the same thing happened with the Italians and the Germans and the Maltese. They would speak as many languages as what the Greeks would. It was very much international sort of city.

**Very cosmopolitan.**

Very cosmopolitan.

**And a very rich, very rich cultural in its diversity. I am wondering if you can give us a bit of an insight into the foundation of the Greeks being in Alexandria, for example what was your parents ---, how did they come to be there.**

Greeks have been in Alexandria and they had many dealings ever since the times of Alexander the Great but going back in the, about the 1700, I think it was or the late 1600's Greeks had settled very densely in Alexandria and through that they created their own community. There was something to the tune of about, I don't know, probably about twenty churches, about seven primary schools, three or four colleges and there was a high school both for male and females. There were orphanages for males and females, there were what they call *συσσίτια*, which were feeding areas for the poor, irrespective of whether you were Greek or not the community was providing daily food.

**Humanitarian aid.**

Humanitarian aid in a sense yes.

**So an advanced society in that sense as well.**

Yeah we were not really a poor family we were not a rich family we were just middle ground family and dad was born in Asia Minor, Apostolis his name was, he was born in Asia Minor in 1922 [1911]. After the wars in Asia Minor he found himself with his mother and his brother aboard a boat they were setting to Alexandria, [as refugees], and

in 1922 at the age of eleven he landed there. He did his schooling over there, he did his trade, which was motor mechanic with a tool maker, as tool making was also part of the motor mechanic trade qualifications then, and as a young man he travelled all around Africa doing all sorts of jobs that he could find. Finally in 1936 or '37 he had returned to Alexandria where his mother was and his brother and that's where he met my mother who came to Alexandria via her aunty. She was sort of semi adopted by the aunty at the age of 12 and she left Cyprus at the age of 14 and went to Alexandria to live with her aunty and through my mother- in-law, because she knew the aunty, they got to know each other and in 1938 they married, in 1940 they had their first child my eldest brother and 1944 they were hoping for a girl and finished up with a further three boys. (laughter) Yes as I said we were a middle class sort of family with the typical Greek family values and traditions.

**Did these traditions being part of the Diaspora, were there variations in those traditions as opposed to the mainland Greeks? What's your view on it?**

Well, I don't know. First time I'd been to mainland Greece was ten years ago, sorry yes, ten years ago in 2002 so I didn't have much to compare. Although we have family, cousins and uncles over there, we never really ventured to go there. Although we did go to Cyprus at the age of eight and I met my mum's parents. We stayed there for a period of three months holiday and I revisited there in 2005 and strangely enough the same time in 2005 I went back to Egypt after 50 years away from the place and I was amazed and so was my daughter to be able to trace the steps although a lot has changed from when we left Egypt. Alexandria was just on a million people, nowadays it is nine and half million so you know, the main core of the place still the same, the same planning still continues which Alexandria's plan is actually based on the Alexander's cape.

**That's interesting.**

So

**Not like Lights, Colonel Lights view of Adelaide.**

No.

**I am wondering if you can give us an insight now as to when things started to change under Nasser. What was the political atmosphere?**

Things started to change in 1952 and that was the time when they exiled King Farouk and [General] Nageibb took over. He was an army person, but he maintained very

friendly with the European communities and so forth because he was aware that his people were not ready to govern themselves to a certain extent. Two years later, he was tumbled by Nasser. Nasser's view was that Egypt should be for its people and it's true and you have got to admit that some of the Egyptians in a sense were really foreigners within their own country, in some areas, because of the European situation. As I said I went to a Greek school, primary school, there were Greek churches, there were Greek clubs, there were scouts groups, everything, it wasn't just for the Greek community. every community was exactly the same. The Italians had their own schools and churches and high schools. The [French and] British were the same.

**So people lived harmoniously.**

It was very much in harmony and the only people really, that Nasser wanted to get out of the country was the British, the French and the Jews. We all developed a fear not we, we were very young to think of any fear but I think the elders feared that what was coming would be that for them to be forced to become Egyptian citizens which in that case meant that they would not be allowed to leave the country or to move as freely around the country as what they were.

**And that would have entailed a loss of identity as well.**

Yeah, not so much a loss of identity. It was the enforcement of citizenship which meant you had to be naturalized Egyptian and then of course there were very few Egyptians would travel, unless it was for schooling purposes, for education.

**So this naturalisation would have applied even to the people ----**

It would have applied across the board.

**Even if people had been there for generations.**

It would not made any difference, bear in mind that most of us Europeans were there on a residency basis. Your residency was renewed every five or ten years, so if they didn't want to renew your residency that means that they would force you to become a citizen, so, a lot of people left just before the residencies became due. They went all over the place and Greeks, [who] generally left Egypt were very lucky because of the knowledge of being multi-lingual so they found good positions overseas in Europe or in Greece, South Africa, Canada, U.S.A. They went everywhere and of course some of them, good majority of them came to Australia as well. The reason we came to

Australia was because dad's brother uncle George, he came to Australia in 1946 so we had someone to come to, I guess.

**Was Australia – did it hold any appeal for your father at all. Did he know much about Australia?**

We didn't know much about Australia really. I don't know, the feelings were the same with most Europeans at the time, I don't think anybody knew very little about Australia then. They knew there was a place called Australia somewhere down south down under but you know I don't think many people knew but there was a land of opportunity and dad thought that by bringing us here we would have the opportunity to, for education and become ---

**So when did you, when did your father make the decision to come. Did you come as a family?**

We came in as a family including my grandmother who lived with us. That's my father's mum, she always lived with us as far back as I can remember and she was with us. All five of us or six of us came across. We flew over in fact we took a five day journey to get to Darwin from Cairo.

**Five days!**

Five days, there were no jets in those days, everything was turbo propeller planes and we sort of hopped from one place to the other, some areas for refuelling mainly and the longest journey was from Darwin to Sydney that took thirteen hours by a four-engine plane with propellers.

**Where were you stationed in Australia before Adelaide?**

We landed in Darwin first, first step into Australia. From there we went to Sydney, then we caught a train to Melbourne where uncle George was waiting for us at the station and Melbourne was our destination and we stayed. Because of language problems, I dropped a couple of years of primary school and went back to 5<sup>th</sup> grade at good old Yarra Park Primary.

**Was that difficult for you at the time?**

Yes, and no because I had started learning a bit of English at school. See in Egypt you start learning languages at school from 4<sup>th</sup> grade onwards and I did French and English - not that much really different than French and in some of the pronunciations and meanings of words and I could speak a little bit of Italian and read a bit of Italian so it

helped. But it was difficult because the pronunciation again, you know you have got a different dialogue of the English that we had learnt was more the English - British-English than the Australian-English - and so there was a bit of a problem in the pronunciation but we managed. From primary school we went to technical school and I took --- Those days you had an option at technical schools to do a dual course one for trades and combining with trades you could do additional subjects to go onto commerce. But it was handy because you learnt a trade and I tell you what, it has helped me a lot both in life [and work], I can do a variety of stuff on my own, carpentry and plumbing and sheet metal work and that, I can read mechanical drawings and engineering drawings and so, that has helped me greatly in the various positions I held in my employment.

**You mastered a lot of skills.**

You do, you do.

**Now when was the move to Adelaide made?**

The move to Adelaide was in 1969. [In 1966, I married an Adelaide girl, whom I met through athletics]. We always were with the community, involved with the community in some form or the other. We were both young athletes so I joined the - when I came to Melbourne - there was a [League of] Greeks of Egypt Association which I joined them and we became members of that and we started playing basket ball and table tennis, and volleyball and became part of the group there. Then with schooling, again basketball and football, both soccer and Australian Rules and so I was very much of an athlete and I did a lot of athletics as well.

**Was there a particular sport?**

In 1958 there were the games called Panhellenic Games which something in the tune of anything between 600 to 800 Greek youth would gather and meet at the different capital cities and whether it be in Adelaide, Melbourne or Sydney and they would come from all over Australia and we would meet and compete with each other and one of those game I was competing against my brothers in-laws, which I knew very well and through them, I met their sister which finished up marrying.(laughter)

**What was her name?**

Maria, Maria she too was an athlete and we met in those Panhellenic Games in Adelaide in 1958/59 - something like that.

**Was there a particular sport that you excelled in, and that she excelled in?**

Maria excelled in sprint events both in 100m and 200m I too, did that but I also played volleyball and basketball, basketball I played up to the age of 38. Competitive basketball, top level basketball what is now the national teams, used to be the state teams and I played within the state team league.

**Okay so you settled and married Maria in Adelaide?**

I married Maria yeah, we corresponded for two years and I proposed to her and we married in Adelaide and moved to Melbourne because that was the home base and we stayed in Melbourne for three years and that period of time we were looking to build our own place, at that stage we were staying with mum and dad. They had a huge house, five bedrooms or something or rather so there was no problem for us and it helped us greatly in our finances, in savings for a deposit for a house. But when we started comparing prices in building, Adelaide was more than a third cheaper to build in Adelaide a house than to build in Melbourne so on one of our holidays to Adelaide we decided to buy a block of land up at Windy Point and within two months Maria changed her mind, it was too dangerous for her. She was afraid of snakes and bushland out there and she was thinking how she was going to park the car coming down the hill or going up the hill so we moved from one hill to the other hill. We moved from Windy Point hill to the Bedford Park hill. (laughter)

**So that determined where you would live, because she was so afraid?**

It would determine where we would live and that thanks to my brother in law George who was an engineer, he drew up the plans for us and so it cost us nothing for the plans and he did the supervising of the building and so we finished up in Adelaide. In fact this household here, we build it in 1973. From '69 to '73 we were renting various places around Adelaide and in 1973 we built this house and been here ever since.

**So we are at 9 Milton Street, Bedford Park. Let's look at your professional life now George. You obviously had a lot of skills and a very good education. What did you end up doing in Adelaide work wise and very active in the community?**

After the high school or technical college commerce that I finished, I enrolled into Swinburne Technical College which is now Swinburne University in Victoria and it

was the place where most of the accounting courses were being held and commenced my accountancy course over there on a part-time basis. When we moved to Adelaide I continued with Adelaide University and completed my course there and got a position with an accounting firm Mucke and Pickering in Currie Street. Within a short period of time there, I think it might have been early '69, by August '69 one of the senior partners, Langcake his name was, he called me into his office, I thought I did something wrong but he advised me that he had an acquaintance who worked in the international firm of ACI, Australian Consolidated Industries, and they were about to set up a new company and they were looking for a young accountant and he had recommended me to them.

**How old were you at the time?**

I was just 24.

**So it was quite a young age to take on a large position of responsibility.**

I was going in for everything really, I was involved in shares, I was involved in finances, auditing etc.

**Ambitious young man.**

And did a lot of auditing while I was in --- so I had plenty of experience in the accounting field and I joined ACI in 1970 and I was one of the youngest executives actually of the company at the time and I stayed with them for eighteen years and in fact I probably would have still been with them. It was marvellous. It was a company that really assisted the personnel to advance and I did internal courses both in management and safety. Things that took place fifteen years later across other industries and of course it was the only company that, at the time, that had computers, in fact they were doing all the Canberra Government stuff at the time.

**So it was quite a progressive company.**

It was very progressive and they were very helpful to the employees.

**I just want to go back a little bit now because when you arrived in Australia you were how old, thirteen?**

I was twelve.

**Twelve. It must have been a bit of a culture shock but being such a young person you obviously adjusted very well to the cultural changes and I am wondering how the rest of your family adjusted to that?**

Well, it was - for us kids, for the younger Harry and I were, that is the triplet and I, - it was much easier because we had cousins about the same age and it was easy for us to move on. We mixed well with the cousins and their friends, Australian friends and so forth. My eldest brother Pareskeva, he had, he did a signalman's course in Egypt through the British naval forces and he got the rank of 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant in the category and so he was looking for a job here to go into the armed forces. Unfortunately my grandmother didn't want him to be there, to go there, she had the final say and he never went there because at that time there was quite a bit of friction around the world and she feared that coming, survived two wars and seen the exodus from Egypt she sort of was a bit fearful and so he went ahead and did an apprenticeship as an electrical engineer.

### **How did you mother adjust?**

My mother, I think, - dad was okay because he could speak the language and although - he was employed at General Motors' on the night shift and as a tool maker and it was something that he was familiar with and he enjoyed it - but mum was the problem because mum never moved away from home. She was a house keeper type thing and she never worked in her life and of course when we moved out to Australia she, there was a necessity for her to go out and work and she did go out and work, but she found it very difficult and challenging in adjusting, although she didn't stay at work for too long. A couple of years I think then my grandma passed away so she had to stay home and look after the men troops that she had.

### **George, we know it's been a career of great achievement, I don't want to embarrass you in any way but in our preliminary interview you mentioned a lot of different things you gave to the community and were instrumental in terms of helping to establish the Greek Egyptian Community in South Australia. Can you talk a little bit about that?**

I wasn't instrumental in that. That was established in 1951 by a group of friends sitting around a coffee lounge, they decided instead of meeting at a coffee lounge they should meet at a permanent venue. So in 1951 they formed the Greeks of Egypt and Middle East Society of South Australia Incorporated and they had a standard house of Mr Perdikis' house. George Perdikis was the first President and he also held all the meetings over there. Slowly they carried out a variety of functions, most of them fund raisers in order for them to obtain their own premises, which they did in 1956. They bought the place on Richmond Road, Keswick

**That's GEMES. What we call GEMES. [Greeks of Egypt and Middle East Society]**

What is now Richmond Road, it used to be called West Beach Road then. And they bought a house which had a very large garage at the back and that garage became the assembly hall for them and in 1958 they knocked that down and they extended it to the boundaries, from one boundary to the other and there have been renovations ever since, every committee that has gone there has added their view to it as well. Quite a nice place, very central these days, actually, there are three other associations that are housed within the premises, they are the Greek Cultural Month of South Australia is housed there, the Glendi Festival is housed there and also NUGAS the students' union.

**Now you were president there for a few years there too, as well?**

I was president there for about twenty years and sorry, I was president for fourteen years but I have been a member of the association since 1970.

**Can I ask in that fourteen year period you probably would have seen a lot of changes in the community and I'm just wondering what are some of the highlights or some of the significant things that you recall or perhaps were involved in, can you talk a bit about that?**

We managed to have a group of, a youth group with anything up to about eighty members. Unfortunately, the way this youth group was set up was that they would have their own bank account and the main committee would have their own bank account. That created a bit of friction between members and the young. The youth group were having functions which were very successful, of course the parents were pushing the kids to succeed but unfortunately the older members were being disadvantaged in a sense, although, any monies that the youth group managed to accumulate they had spent within the premises but a lot of people didn't see it that way. They competed in the local athletics, tennis, table tennis, volleyball, basketball, they had groups of people in teams competing in the local competitions here in Adelaide for a long period of time. They have numerous trophies of their efforts and successes. So when I came in I tried to get the group together and we did for a little but again committees change and things change.

**It is very difficult isn't it to sustain young people in that kind of organisation.**

It is, it is, mainly because my main, I will come back to that in a minute, the problem is the people that set up the various Greek Associations in South Australia, they served the needs of the immediate needs what they needed at the time, they didn't really look

much into the future. Now of course the elders are disappearing, a lot of the associations finding problems maintaining membership and the youth unfortunately, you still have those older people, they're not giving the youth the reigns to govern and youth being very active and very forward they say their views and a lot of the older members don't agree with it and of course the older members still outnumber the youth and slowly they disappear. And they disappear from say about the age of fifteen to about the age of twenty-five, twenty-eight and once they marry and settle they sort of drift back to the associations but that's been the trend.

### **It's a bit of a circular thing?**

It is. It is. It will take, people say to me how did you people manage in Alexandria to do, to be what you are and be as Greek as, as much Greek as you are. You need to remember that in Alexandria the Greek community was there for over 200 years and we're talking of Australia communities generally that migrated to Australia 50, 60 years, there's still a long way to go for those communities to come to that level where Alexandria was. My dream is that one day we will have a Greek Centre in South Australia that will accommodate all Greeks and specifically the youth. We have a lot to give to the community, to the greater community but unfortunately until, there are splinter groups within the greater Greek community in South Australia, until those groups find their senses to see where the need is, we are not going to achieve very much. The other thing of course is a lot of the associations, all the assets they have accumulated, what is going to happen to them when the elders go, where is it going to go?

### **It is an important question?**

It is. I mean okay, there is home for the age and the Greek Centre in the University of Flinders but that's not going to be enough. I think we need to find ways and means where, we can go back and say to the future generations whether they are Greek, Italians, Australians, Vietnamese, Chinese or whatever, this is what the Greek community has been able to give to the South Australian greater community and unfortunately I don't see that happening at the moment.

**So, it is certainly a very important question you have raised George and I think it's good that you raised it as part of your talk because it is something you feel strongly about.**

I am pushing it out there. There is a handful of us that think along the same lines and we are pushing it but there is still hard lines, hurdles to overcome.

**It's being really interesting listening to your story George I guess what I would like to---**

I didn't tell you about my daughter.

**No, I was going to say, I was going to ask about your offspring. You have got one daughter?**

I have one daughter, she is actually number three, we're unfortunate to have had a couple of miscarriages in the process of getting to Michelle but we got there and Michelle is the apple of my eye, as they say. She is a brilliant young lady, she has just finished her Business Masters, last Friday and she is still celebrating and she tells me that's the end of her schooling but I will believe it when March comes along and she hasn't enrolled into something. That is of course her 4<sup>th</sup> degree, so she is by profession a radiographer she works at Flinders she is one of the senior radiographers down there.

**She obviously has been inspired by her dad.**

Well, in a sense I think she might have but, she has taken both from my side and her mother's side of her athletics ambitions. In 2000 - three months after passing of Maria, her mother ---

**Maria passed away quite young didn't she?**

Yes, she passed away at the age of 56. She [Michelle] got nominated to represent Oceania in the world games in Madrid so, sorrows or no sorrows I packed up my bags and followed my daughter to Madrid and watched her compete in the triple jump event. She came ninth or tenth but she has continued, she has been South Australian champion for triple jump for a number of years now, also long jump. She also does couple of sprint event 100m and 200m and but nationally she only concentrates on the one event, [Triple Jump] and recently she took up cycling, so she can compete at the Tour Down Under next ---

**So she has inherited your sporting prowess as well by the sounds of things.**

Yes, she is a very independent young lady and I guess the fault is mine in a sense, because having the one child you always tend to remind them of the fact, anything that we did as a family she was part of the conversation and participating in all decisions and that, so now she is very much an independent person.

**George, are there any other significant things that you would like to mention as we finish up, I am sure there a lot of things in your life. I know that you are a JP as well.**

Yes, I am a Justice of the Peace, I have been for a number of years. As I said I love assisting people, I love helping people within the community whether it be any nationality it doesn't really matter. I did help out in the establishment of the Greek Child Care Centre at Hindmarsh and also at the [Greek] Home for the Aged, I was a director there. I have also been a director of a credit union back in 1970 where there was a tight squeeze of labour and everything and we at ACI had to change the thinking of employment and so forth. We retrenched quite a number of people in fact from about 1200 or 1300 the numbers had dropped down to 800 and of course a lot of those people that were retrenched had commitments and in order to help them out we formulated the cardboard credit union which those that were parting company, we had given them one percent higher interest than what the bank were paying so we managed to deposit the money with the credit union and those that needed the loans to pay for some of their commitments, we lent it them at a one percent interest cheaper than what the banks and other lending institutions. I was there for fifteen years as a director until I finished my services with ACI and resigned from the position, I like helping out where I can.

**And you have also been involved with the Greek Cultural Month or the Festival Hellenika?**

The Greek Cultural month I have been involved with that since its beginnings, its origination, its foundation. I am a foundation member to that, together with a couple of others who are still in the committee and that has been going now from strength to strength, for the last twenty-one years and always thank the South Australian Government and the Greek Government for their assistance, initial assistance and ongoing assistance with the various grants and funding that they provide for us . We are not big, but we manage to put up very decent performances I think. We have cracked through to the mainstream of art in South Australia and we are very much recognized as, the top act, if you want to put it that way, on the cultural activities in this state. We present quality programmes and in the end it has paid off, a lot of work but it pays off.

**That's wonderful. Look thank you very much for your time today George.**

Pleasure, thank you for giving me the chance ---

**Is there anything you want to add before we finish and that we might not have asked you about today? What would you like to finish with?**

I don't really know, I don't think there is much more to say after all, I did say. Again, thanks very much.

**It has been a very rich experience listening to you talk George, so that's wonderful.**

I must say that I have been lucky through my employment and through the contacts in the community that I have. I have met a great number of people that I have drawn their knowledge and experience and I hope that what I have learnt from these people I have put into practice and help others accordingly.

**Wonderful, thank you very much George.**

No problem