

# Growing Up as a Greek-American

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*To my wife, Judith, for her love, patience, and help*



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# Introduction

When Papa came to this country from Greece, he worked in Greek diners, where he enjoyed philosophizing with the customers.

“In this country,” he would say, “you judge a man by how much money he makes or by the kind of job he has. In my village, where there are no jobs and where no one has money, a man is judged by how well he can dance and how well he can tell a story.”

While the four of us kids were growing up, Papa would tell us wonderful stories about the ancient Greek gods and goddesses, the Trojan War, and the *Odyssey*. Like us, he had heard those myths and stories from his father, who’d heard them in turn from his father. This family tradition of storytelling goes back to the time of Homer.

Papa believed that a good story can capture the essence of an incident much better than a detailed factual account of what really happened can. This book is my way of continuing the family tradition.

# Chapter One

## Storytelling

# Papa's Stories

*My brothers and sister and I especially enjoyed Papa's stories about his experiences in the Greek navy and how he fought the Turks during World War I. Here is a story that Papa told us many times. Each time he told it, he altered it slightly to give it a new twist or to improve the ending.*

## **The Rescue**

by Louis Kallas

When the first World War broke out, I joined the Greek navy to fight the Turks. They made me a seaman on a small destroyer. Our captain was from Vatika and of Spartan heritage. Everyone in the crew was from Vatika. We were afraid of nothing!

One day we got a radio message that a British aviator was shot down in Turkey over the Black Sea. He was still alive, and our small destroyer was given the job of rescuing him.

The only way we could reach him was to go through the Bosphorous Strait. That was suicide! The Bosphorous Strait was less than 100 feet wide, with high cliffs and Turkish artillery on both sides.

As we slowly steamed up the Bosphorous, we could see the big Turkish guns on both sides pointing at us. They could have blown us out of the water right then and there, but they didn't. They were laughing at us.

Our captain knew that the Turks were using the British aviator to bait us into a trap. They were playing with us, the way a cat plays with a mouse it has caught. On our way out, the Turks would blast us into a million pieces.

We found the aviator. He was badly wounded but still alive. When he opened his eyes and saw the Greek flag, he smiled and said, “Greek! Thank God.” Then he closed his eyes again.

We carried him aboard and headed back.

We dropped anchor just out of reach of the big guns and waited. There was a slight breeze blowing. I knew that the captain had a plan in mind.

When the breeze died down, the captain gave the order to soak all of our blankets, pillows, and sheets in black motor oil and then burn them!

Thick black smoke poured out of our smokestack and drifted ashore toward the big guns.

The captain then gave us the order to take off our clothes, underwear, socks, shoes—everything—and soak them in oil and burn them too, along with anything else we could soak in oil and burn. We burned everything! The only thing we didn’t soak in oil and burn was the Greek flag.

Soon the entire sky was so black that you couldn’t see your hand in front of you.

We quietly pulled up anchor and slipped by the Turks without them seeing us. We were so close that we could hear them coughing and cursing the smoke.

When we pulled into Cyprus to deliver the British aviator, we were all stark naked, including the captain and the aviator himself. We all stood at attention as they carried him off smiling.

## Same Incident, Two Stories

*Some of the best family stories were told by Mama and her sister, Aunt Mary. Here are both of their stories of an incident that occurred during the Great Flu Epidemic of 1918.*

### **Mama's Story:**

I was twelve years old when I got the flu during the 1918 flu epidemic. The doctor told my mother that there was no hope of my getting better and that I would most likely die before daybreak.

Upon hearing this, my mother rushed out and bought me a new dress to be buried in. It was the first time she'd ever bought me a new dress. (I always had to wear Mary's old dresses.)

During the night my fever broke, and the next morning I was well again. My mother immediately went back to the store and got a refund on the dress that I never got to wear.

### **Aunt Mary's Story:**

When Elsie (Mama) was sick with the flu and not expected to live through the night, our father sat on the front steps of our house with a loaded double-barrel shotgun.

A neighbor passed by and asked, "What are you doing sitting there with a shotgun?"

Papa replied, "I'm waiting for Charon. If that bastard comes here to take my daughter away, I'm going to blow his head off!"

Our father sat on those steps all night, and the next morning, Elsie was well again. Charon did not show up.

*Note: In ancient Greek mythology, Charon ferried dead souls across the River Styx. Today, many Greeks believe that Charon is Death himself.*

## Papoo's Poetry

My mother's family came from the Mani, which is located in the lower Peloponnesus in Greece. The people who come from the Mani are called Maniots. The ability to create spontaneous poetry is relatively common with the Maniots. My *papoo* (grandfather), who settled in Saco, Maine, had this uncanny ability.

One particular day in 1922 would have been like any other day in Saco if my *papoo* hadn't been there to create a spontaneous poem about an incident that occurred in Kalayia's *kafeneo* (Greek coffee house).

Mourmoura, a regular in the *kafeneo*, was sitting in his favorite chair, sipping his Greek coffee, when his dog strolled in and urinated on the *kafeneo*'s spotless floor. A very angry Kalayia (the owner) grabbed his broom and chased both the dog and Mourmoura out of his *kafeneo*.

Before Kalayia put down his broom, my *papoo* made up this four-line poem (translated):

*Ol' Kalayia stands there with broom in hand.  
Mourmoura from this place is forever banned.  
Here, where no one is allowed even to spit,  
Mourmoura's dog came in to do his bit.*

Although the incident occurred a century ago, the Greeks in Saco still recite this poem as if it happened yesterday.

## Voulas's Story

*The family tradition of telling stories is alive and well in Greece. Each time we visit Greece, we are treated to many delightful stories about my mother and father when they lived there as children. Recently, our niece, Voula Haralambopoulos, sent me another family story about Papa.*

I was visiting my aunts and grandmother in the Vatika one Christmas when my aunts told me a beautiful but sad story about your father, Elias (Louis).

When Elias was a young boy, he used to sing a Greek folk song called “*Mia Voskopoula Ayapisa*” (“A Shepherdess I Loved”). It was his favorite song, and he would sit behind the church and sing it over and over again. All of the people in the village knew that it was his special song.

Many years after he left the village to come to America, two old women were carrying water from the well to their homes in the village. As they walked by the church, they heard the song being sung by Elias.

When they reached the village, Elias's family had just received word from America that Elias had died. The two old women crossed themselves and told the rest of the villagers that they had just heard Elias singing his favorite song.

To this day, the villagers tell the story of how the spirit of your father had returned to his beloved village to sing his favorite song for the last time.

# Chapter Two

## The Greeks Come to America

# Cold-Water Railroad Flats

The Greek families that settled in Newark, New Jersey, during the early 1920s lived within four blocks of one another on West Market Street. The houses they lived in were rows of old wooden tenements with one or two cold-water railroad flats on each floor.

These tenements were plentiful and cheap to rent because most people preferred to live in modern apartments that had hot water and central heating. Most of our parents came from small mountain villages that had no running water, gas, or electricity. Every drop of water had to be carried home in large tin cans filled at the village well. So the tenements in Newark were a luxury by comparison. After all, they did have gas, electricity, running water, and indoor bathrooms. What more could anyone ask for?

The apartments were called “railroad flats” because the rooms were laid out in a straight row. The parlor was located in the front of the house, the large kitchen in the back, with two bedrooms in between. During the cold winter months, the front parlor was kept closed, and the children slept in the warmer bedroom next to the kitchen.

In the winter, our lives centered around the huge hot coal stove located in the kitchen. Hestia, the gentle goddess of the hearth, smiled down on us as we sat around that stove roasting chestnuts, drying our wet sneakers in the oven, and telling stories.

It was my job to keep the coal bucket full and to provide the stove with the endless supply of firewood needed to boost the burning of the large chunks of black coal.

In Greece, the children would scour the mountainside for dead branches and broken twigs. In Newark, we were always on the lookout for discarded wooden boxes or crates. Whenever we spotted one, we would drag it home and break it into pieces small enough to fit into the stove. (To this day, when I pass a wooden box or a crate, I get a tremendous urge to drag it home.)

Mama used our hot coal stove with great skill. There were always three or four pots simmering on top and the sweet smell of Greek bread baking in the oven.

No matter how busy Mama was, she always found time to talk to Kyria Georgina, who lived next door. Each morning, after we kids went to school, Kyria Georgina would open her window and call out to my mother, “Ahlayia!” (Ahlayia is my mother’s name in Greek.) Mama had no trouble hearing Kyria Georgina’s loud, high-pitched voice.

Mama would open her window, and the conversation that followed usually lasted for an hour. They talked about what they were going to cook for dinner, any medical problems they were having, the latest gossip, etc.

One morning, Mama was washing the breakfast dishes when she heard Kyria Georgina call, “Ahlayia!”

Mama opened her window as she always did; however, Kyria Georgina was not there. As a matter of fact, her window was closed.

So Mama went back to washing her dishes. A few minutes went by, and she heard Kyria Georgina calling her again: “Ahlayia!” Again Mama opened her window and saw no Kyria Georgina, just a closed window. This time she was puzzled by what was happening.

When it happened a third time, Mama was steaming mad. She stormed next door and banged on Kyria Georgina’s door.

When Kyria Georgina opened her door, she was surprised to see my mother. She was even more surprised when my mother blasted her.

“You may think your little joke is funny, but I don’t!”

“Ahlayia, I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Don’t give me that! You know darn well what I’m talking about!”

At that moment, someone in the backyard interrupted my mother’s tirade by calling out “Ahlayia!” in a loud, high-pitched voice. Both women rushed into the kitchen and opened the window. Again they heard, “Ahlayia!”

My mother called back, “I’m Ahlayia! Who are you? What do you want?”

“Ahlayia! Ahlayia! Caw! Caw!”

That’s when it dawned on Mama that the voice was that of a parrot kept in a cage on a neighbor’s back porch.

“Ahlayia! Ahlayia! Caw! Caw!” It was a perfect imitation of Kyria Georgina’s voice.

Many people referred to neighborhoods like West Market Street as Greek ghettos. However, those of us who grew up in them don't quite see it that way. Those neighborhoods provided us with fond memories and a source for many stories describing what it was like growing up as Greek-Americans.