

Early Anti-Greek Attacks In New York

By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

When I was small boy my yiayia (grandmother) told me that, whenever one of the old Greek men entered the room, I was to stand up and give him my chair. On more than one occasion, when I didn't move fast enough, my yiayia reminded me by pulling me out of the chair. This sign of respect was not an empty gesture. Even in so small a thing as offering these men a seat was an acknowledgement of all that they had suffered; all that they were forced to sacrifice so we could live well.

During the late 1880's through the early 1900's Greek immigrant men were being attacked for any number of reasons all across the country. The accounts which follow document strictly the attacks against Greek street peddlers in New York City. For those who might think these were insignificant affairs, exaggerated and embellished by self-serving Greeks, I have elected to take these accounts directly from the pages of the New York Times. You can decide who was the victim and who the criminal.

DEATH BY PEDDLING

Anyone who thinks that walking with or standing next to a pushcart for 12 hours or more a day is not demanding physical and mental work is just crazy. One example of the physical stress involved is "George Zambris, 50, a Greek peddler, of 67 Cherry Street, who died in Gouverneur Hospital, having been found unconscious on the pavement in front of 59 Roosevelt Street. Although the temperature ran no higher than 84 during the day, the air was most oppressive, and reports from the various hospitals of the city told of numerous prostrations (August 31, 1900)."

That the newly arrived Greek peddlers had large amounts of money on their persons was quickly understood. Greeks were frequently attacked. "On March 11, 1898 (Patrick) Murphy is alleged in the company with James Nevey, Frank Dunn, assaulted Demetrius

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Calogeros, a Greek peddler, at 437 East Thirteenth Street. Calogeros died in Bellevue Hospital on March 18. The three others were arrested and convicted of the crime. Murphy escaped, fleeing to California. He returned to this city recently, and became intoxicated last night, thus falling into the hands of the police (January 15, 1899)."

Many other such examples could be cited.

THE GREEK RIOTS

The terms 'riot,' 'raid,' and 'mobs' are often used to describe large street fights between Greek immigrants and assorted others. It seems that, at times, these attacks fed off each other so there would be cycles of attacks where riots in different parts of the city would occur, one after the other. The locations of these 'street riots' will surprise many a born and bred New Yorker.

The inherent racism and total disregard for the victims can be easily read on May 15, 1901: "Messenger boys owned Broad Street for about half an hour at noon yesterday, and mischief ran riot, much to the discomfiture of pushcart peddlers and 'curb' brokers. Two boys stole some bananas, and the Greek peddler started to avenge his loss. In half a minute Broad Street, from Wall Street to Exchange Place, was filled with boys, issuing from nearly every doorway, to take part in the excitement by tipping over pushcart after pushcart, until the unhappy Greeks fled wildly.

"Not a policeman was in sight, and a 'curb' broker went through Exchange Place and New Street to Wall Street and back again in an unsuccessful search for one. This same difficulty occurred during the noon hour on two previous occasions, when boys used their leisure time to upset pushcarts. A number of brokers grabbed offending boys, but quickly allowed them to go.

"Finally, the reserves from the Old Slip Station arrived, and the crowd scattered in haste. The only other incident was the arrest of an elevator boy from one of the office buildings, who froned to his orief after he hit

ing for trouble, started a riot at the fruit stand and fish stand of James Dekaco, a Greek vendor, 74 years old, yesterday, at Surf Avenue and West Eighth Street on Coney Island, and before they were subdued, the reserves from the police station were called out, and there was a great deal of excitement...

"The row started when eight strong young men refused to pay for certain refreshments that they had received at the stand, and the aged vendor, who looks like a man of 40, and a very vigorous one at that, called his assistant to his aid, and tried to force them to do so. They laughed at him and commenced to wreck the stand.

"Several Greeks from near-by stands joined in a battle royal, during which all the wares on the stand were pressed into service... Sgt. Dooling called out the reserves and came on a run with ten men. They had a very lively time for a while, but ultimately succeeded in arresting Joseph Walch, 24 years old, of Thompson's Walk, Coney island; James Mantell and Patrick McCarthy of 447 Surf Avenue, who were locked up and charged with being drunk and disorderly, and will appear in the Coney island Police Court today for trail... The fruit stand was completely wrecked so also was the proprietor."

The sheer unexpectedness and complete ugliness of these street ri-

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ots was also depicted on July 11, 1907 when a crowd attacked a small collectivity of Greek vendors in Harlem:

"Fifteen Greek peddlers of ice cream sandwiches were on their way to their homes through 100th Street last night, when one of the men knocked down a little girl at Madison Street. It was an accident and the

his man, that his victim was a policeman in plain clothes.

"Deputy Commissioner Devery was in the financial district later on looking around. He seemed to regard the riots more or less seriously, and said that the only way to prevent such affairs was to keep pushcart men out of Wall Street. He added, 'There should be no beltin' down here. A person don't know what sort of gentleman he's hitting.'"

A FREE FOR ALL ON CONEY ISLAND

It was a summer day, August 11, 1903 when the "Riot at Coney Island" occurred. Even through this account attempts to offer a full description of this street fight, its snide use of language was clearly meant to poke fun at the event and the Greeks.

"Eight large and muscular men, looking like longshoremen and look-

child was not hurt, but a crowd of men and women attacked the peddlers.

"From the windows of nearby houses were hurled flower pots and heavy iron kitchen ware, which fell alike on the heads of the peddlers and their assailants. Someone telephoned Police Headquarters, and when Capt. Corcoran and the reserves drove up in a patrol wagon, there were several hundred persons crowded around the peddlers.

"Joseph Goldstein, 30 years old, of 63 East 111th Street, was cut in the arm... The police arrested Solza Zeliciouz, 30 years old, of Park Avenue and 110th Street, charging him with the stabbing.

"At almost the same time, there was a fight at 125th Street and Lennox, which tied up the car lines on both streets for half an hour. Deonsios Deimis and Louis Odonogas have peanut stands at that corner. Stephan Duves, Nicholas Scofas and Peter Ovis generally keep their peanut carts a block to the east, but last night moved up to the busier corner. Deimis and Odonogas met them with a shower of stones, picked up from where the street is being repaired. In the fight that followed, the nose of Ovis was cut from his face. The five peddlers were arrested."

In considering any of the "Greek riots," it is prudent to read between the lines, since many of these attacks seem likely to have been orchestrated by officials or street gangs who had not be paid their extortion bribes.

It must have been a very tense summer in 1907, since "Leonidas Damon of 29 Madison Street, a young Greek, was locked up in the Oak Street Station last night on complaint of 16-year-old Agnes West of 31 New Chambers Street, who said that, on two occasions, she had noticed that he had followed her on the street. Of course, when he was arrested last night, a crowd threw things at him and his captor all the way to the station. The girl simply asserted that the young man had followed her, and had Policeman Lake watching her as she went walking last night... (the reporter goes onto suggest that) when a young gentleman follows you respectfully, isn't it a sign of love at first sight, and should I speak to him first? He seems to be a nice young man."

That such spontaneous, pronounced and fierce violence would erupt so indiscriminately against these Greek immigrants speaks volumes as to their social standing within their local community.

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