

Greek Tobacco Moguls in America

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PART 3

NEW YORK. - The meteoric rise of the Greek cigarette makers in the United States from the 1870s to the 1920s is often treated as a freakish economic boom for a small number of individuals with little long term consequences for Greek American history. Nothing could be further from the truth. In terms of strictly commercial history, these Greek tobacconists employed literally hundreds of their fellow countrymen here in North America. Diaspora Greeks from not only North America but the Balkans, Asia Minor, North Africa, England, and elsewhere were also employed in this trade, and very often by the same companies. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the blurring of classical Greek images with those of North Africa and the "Oriental" Middle East created a complex set of stereotypic images still seen to this day.

To date, the accepted position has been that once large American Tobacco companies bought out first the S. Anargyros Company in 1900 and then the Melachrino in-

terests in 1913, the Greek hold on the industry collapsed. Implied in most Greek American accounts is that, with this alleged collapse, the actual period of Greek control was all too brief to have anything but a passing influence on the stage of world history. This being the case, it is not surprising to discover that the advertising motifs first initiated by the Greek merchants are never taken into consideration. Let us survey the question of the demise of the Greek-owned companies and then take up the issues surrounding advertising.

THE SALE AND DEMISE ARGUMENT

The American tobacco mogul James Duke's American Tobacco Company Trust bought the S. Anargyros Company in 1900. But James Duke was no one's fool. Rather than absorb the Anargyros Company directly into his trust on March 28, 1900 "[T]he Greek immigrant's enterprise was incorporated as S. Anargyros Inc... the amount of stock issued was \$450,000, which was taken by the American Tobacco Company at par... By October, 1906 it stood in the books of the American Tobacco Company at a book value of \$1,575,000 or three and a half

times in par value," Author Michael Contopoulos, in his book "The Greek Community of New York City: Early Years to 1910," notes.

Mr. Duke, the book continues, realizing that "the name of S. Anargyros, used in connection with certain brands of Turkish cigarettes, is a very valuable reputation," and that "not a little of the popularity of these brands would have been sacrificed had the name of the American Tobacco Company been substituted for that of S. Anargyros."

While the Sotirios Anargyros Company was one of the largest Greek-owned cigarette manufacturing companies, it was certainly not the only one. Other Greek-owned companies were purchased by American-owned companies. But the real question should be, what did those Greeks do with the money they received? First, let me quickly interject, not all Greek merchants sold out completely. The Stephanou Brothers received cash but also stock in the new companies.

But other Greek businessmen simply reinvested. Take for example Miltiades Melachrino, another of the successful Cairo-based

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cigarette manufacturers who came to North America. In 1904, Melachrino opened a branch factory in New York City, where he began making his Egyptian style cigarettes with ultimately the Melachrino No. 9, the slightly larger Melachrino No. 4 and the Plus Non Plus Ultra Cigarettes brands, his most popular selling cigarettes. Melachrino sold his company, along with all of these brand names, to the Tobacco Products Corporation around 1913.

Unlike Sotirios Anargyros, who retired to Greece, Miltiades Melachrino eventually started a second cigarette manufacturing company in New York.

Sometime in the 1920s, Mr. Melachrino, started a second company, where his new brand names Crocodile Cigarettes, Miltiades Cigarettes, and Silver King Cigarettes were made in Factory No. 1016, in the Third District New York from 1923 until 1928. He advertised, according to James A. Shaw's website "Jim's Burnt Offerings," that this new company had "No connection with other firms."

And let us not forget that many of the smaller companies (and their Greek employees) never stopped producing high-quality tobacco products in North America.

The 'demise' aspect to "the meteoric rise and fall of the Greek cigarette makers in the United States" argument is that after 1920, American consumer interest in Turkish blended tobacco cigarettes fell off sharply. How odd that, at the same exact moment that the American Companies finished buying out the largest Greek-owned companies, American consumer "interest" in Egyptian-style blended cigarettes began to wane.

It is surprising really, in reading Greek American accounts of American actions, in terms of our history, how little



vertising claim for his Egyptian Deities brand, which he called "The Utmost in Cigarettes," was directly addressed to his clients: "Dear Sir: No matter how much he pays, only one man in sixteen can smoke cigarettes rolled from Ghyubek, the most fragrant of Turkish tobaccos. Turkey cannot produce enough of these exquisite leaves for everybody. So scarce are they that the best tobacco plants yield but one of the upper or Ghyubek leaves to sixteen of the coarser leaves below. So out of the millions of cigarettes made, only a small percentage can be exclusively of fragrant Ghyubek. These glorious Ghyubeks— richest of all Turkish tobaccos in the aromatic oils that give flavor and fragrance—we set aside to be used in our cigarette deluxe, Egyptian Deities. This exquisite tobacco is then aged until it develops a wonderful fragrance and flavor that having once tasted, you will never forget. If you wish to experience this glorious fragrance, insist upon having Egyptian Deities. Yours very truly, (signed) S. Anargyros (www.wclynx.com/burntofferings)."

The American executives bought the Greek-owned companies, along with the brand names of various cigarettes, hoping that the established reputations of these products would make them money. Which they did. Then, the new American owners cheapened the tobacco-blends used. The Greek-owned own companies that never changed the quality of their tobacco blends, such as Melachrino's second United States Company or the (so-called) "smaller" Greek-owned companies, went on making and successfully selling premium cigarettes well into the 1990s.

ADVERTISING THE ORIENT

The tobacco advertising seen in all the current media still present the same series of scenarios set in the early 1900s. According to Madison Avenue, cigarette smoking can guarantee: romance and adventure; that smoking is a leisure activity of the social elite; and among other things, that social acceptance can be had by taking up smoking.

Cigarette advertising certainly has other motives and issues it conveys but let us stay with just these aspects of this product.

How were these ideas conveyed? By



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North Africa. At the same time, these same companies touted the fact that they were selling "Turkish tobacco." In the very first accounts of Greeks in the United States, one often reads of the average American being unable to distinguish be-

columns, Arabs on horseback, Greek Classical statues, Egyptian Sphinxes, and/or Greek and Balkan peasants harvesting tobacco.

What James Shaw calls "Blue Nile Orientalism" was the advertisement

de Elegance held at Pebble Beach, California, a box of Melachrino displayed on the seat would be appropriate."

Besides all this colorful early 20th Century Greek-Turkish-Oriental cigarette advertising, America's fascination with Middle Eastern motifs included Irving Berlin's 1913 song "In My Harem," and Rudolph Valentino's 1921 movie "The Sheik." Space does not allow for the citation and discussion of sociological studies from the early 1900s, when Americans were honestly confused between media images of Greeks, Arabs, South Americans and others. How the Greek-owned cigarette advertising figures into those wider studies also awaits systematic consideration.

READINGS AND CULTURAL RESIDUE

I have, perhaps, cited too many sources in this series. Aside from the books that I have quoted (which are all readily available from your public library or for purchase at your local bookstore or the Internet), I was unable to consult what appears to be one major reference source. "The History of the Greek Cigarette," by Manos Haritatos and Penelope Giakoumaki (Athens: Hellenic Literary and Historical Archives, 1997), which has over 400 pages with 1,250 colored photographs that spans a 100-year history, citing over 1,000 Greek cigarette-making companies around the world (c.f. www.elia.org.gr). The Hellenic Literary and Historical Archives is responsible for the especially fine "History of Greek Photography, 1839-1960," by Alkes X. Xanthakes (Athens: Hellenic Literary and Historical Archives Society, 1988), and many other groundbreaking publications.

Internet searches on "Greek cigarettes," or special names such as "Melachrino" or "Anargyros," result in literally hundreds of available sites. Aside from such random searches, I cannot recommend highly enough James A. Shaw's fabulous "Jim's Burnt Offerings," website. Shaw's site provides over 175 illustrated web pages on the social history of the cigarette in North America (www.wclynx.com/burntofferings). Two other sites worth investigating are "The Richard W. Pollay 20th Century Tobacco Advertising Collection"



Egyptian-style Turkish tobacco cigarettes were being manufactured in New York City, prominently displayed on every pack/box or tin graphic with a historically inaccurate and culturally confusing mishmash of messages.

fault is ever found with a Native-born American. This is especially true with the tobacco business. As the alert reader will have long recognized, nowhere in this three-part series have I mentioned the kinds of tobaccos the Greeks so artfully blended.

Part of this is a consideration of space. (This is a newspaper article not a book one takes to the shore to read on holiday). The other is the enormity of the types of tobaccos blended and the considerable parts that make up the individual varieties of tobacco species selected.

To cite but one small example, in 1910, Sotirios Anargyros' personal ad-

surveying the print and billboard advertisements, the graphic designs seen on cigarette packs/boxes/tins, and by the free premiums offered by the various cigarette companies, we can see how these images were constructed and conveyed.

As James A. Shaw writes: "[T]he graphic artists who designed Egyptian style cigarette packs relied on Englishman Owen Jones' Grammar of Ornament for inspiration. His folio of over 3,000 examples of ornaments was first published in 1856. Jones had used his training as an architect to reproduce the ornate designs that he found while traveling in Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and India. The talented Mr. Jones not only provided artists with accurate patterns of temple ornaments, but also a guide for aesthetic discipline or artistic good taste (www.wclynx.com/burntofferings)." One example of this artwork would be the Murad brand, which was first established by Sotirios Anargyros in 1904 and which continued to be produced until 1971.

Citing Owen Jones' volume can help to explain the basic graphic motifs but not their combination. The Greek tobacco merchants hired advertisers to create artwork for them that merged and presented simultaneously Classical Greek statues with settings and scenes from

between one foreigner and from other.

Between 1880 and 1920, millions of new foreigners arrived on American shores. At precisely this pivotal moment in American cultural history, Greek tobacco merchants set into motion a whole series of stereotypes related to tobacco, many of which are still widely held to this day. By adapting existing motifs, these merchants expanded upon Western ideas of Egypt, Greeks, the Middle East, the "Orient," masculinity, the physical process of smoking, as well as the nature and culture of Greeks.

And, as we have already read, American executives fully realized the advertising images first established by the Greeks sold cigarettes. So the images and the underlying themes initially promoted by the Greek merchants were not only retained but also, in some instances, expanded upon.

Therefore, these high quality, Egyptian-style oval blended-Turkish tobacco cigarettes, then being manufactured in New York City, prominently and intentionally displayed on every pack/box or tin graphic with a historically inaccurate and culturally confusing mishmash of messages. Greek signatures such as Anargyros, Antoniedes, Melachrino, Vafiadis and others were prominently displayed on these packs, boxes and tins of cigarettes. Offsetting these names were minarets, Egyptian temple

Ornamentation, was the advertising result of all these images and such a mixture lasted from roughly 1900 to 1920. But as the big American companies bought out the premium Greek companies, the images began to gradually morph. It was a time when one could easily see: "[H]andsome Arabian stallions, the ruins of desert temples, or realistic geometric art from a mosque were occasionally pictured on advertising used to sell Egyptian style cigarettes...The small tobacco manufacturers producing the minor Egyptian cigarette brands didn't advertise much. When they did, oftentimes the result was superb art that was the equal of ads produced by the major cigarette makers (www.wclynx.com/burntofferings)."

Exotic settings in far off lands were not the only promises suggested by cigarette advertising. Issues related to social prestige and acceptance can be seen in the Murad brand advertisement, which always suggested "Be nonchalant, light a Murad." This Sotirios Anargyros' Murad assured social prestige when they advertised "Among men whose cultivated tastes are an inheritance from generations of refined surroundings—the name Melachrino is a familiar one" or in yet another ad: "For those of you who enjoy showing your supercharged S.J. Duisenberg speedster at the fashionable Concourse

advertising collection, where some 8,000 slides document "tobacco advertisements, tobacco industry issue ads, and anti-smoking ads" (<http://tobacodocuments.org>), and www.VintageAds4U.com, where one can actually see the advertisements of the Greek-owned cigarette companies. From the very early 1900s onwards, these often full-page advertisements appeared in various American publications around the country, such as "Scribner's Magazine," "Theatre Magazine," and the very popular "Leslie's Weekly."

The cultural residue of the Greek tobacco merchants can be seen in numerous forms. Any day of the week you can buy your own collectable pack, box, or tin of Anargyros, Melachrino or most of the other Greek-produced cigarette brands on the Internet at eBay or any of the other antique sites.

A new idea can be found at www.zazzle.com, where you can order a full-color Murad cigarette box reproduced on a white T-shirt (with S. Anargyros' signature as prominently displayed as ever) on it.

Rather than a lost moment in Greek-American history, the rise and transformations evident in the establishment of the Greeks in the American tobacco business have yet to be fully charted. All that is required is a willingness to look and an open mind as to what properly constitutes Greek-American history.

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