

GROCERY STORE GREEKS

By Steve Frangos

PART II

During the 1920s and 1930s, Greek vendors made a definite impression on the general American public. We can be sure of this since we know composers of Tin Pan Alley songs listened to Greek grocers. The song "Yes, He Have No Bananas!" was written by Frank Silver (1896-1960) and Irving Cohn (1898-1961) after they heard a Greek fruit peddler say the title line to a customer.

The opening lyrics from the original 1923 sheet music are:

*There's a fruit store on our street
It's run by a Greek
And he keeps good things to eat
But you should hear him speak
When you ask him anything
He never answers "no"
He just "yesses" you to death
And then he takes your dough--he
tells you:
"Yes, we have no bananas, we have
no bananas today"*

As this one extremely popular example illustrates, Greeks in the gro-



Tom Rapanos, Clark Street store, late 1920s/early 1930s, Chicago, Illinois

under the Morris Avenue elevated train track for \$12.00 a week. Spiros Rapanos did not stay in the grocery

Tom drove to the far southside of Chicago to pick up fresh produce from the wholesale market, thus giving his

Eleni spent many hours securing the legal paperwork to bring her three cousins to the States. Aside from the immigration paperwork (both Greek and American), the plane ticket needed to be purchased and the signed guarantee of a job for all three men had to be provided. This was yet another stipulation that had to be met before the government would issue the visas. George Kokalis agreed to give the three young men jobs at his Paulina Street Sure Save grocery in Rodgers park.

All Eleni had to do was get the signature on the immigration form from the manager of the store, one of Kokalis' nephews. Eleni went to see the nephew to get the signature, but he just waved her aside saying he would do it after lunch. Angry, insulted and facing a deadline on the paperwork, Eleni followed him to the restaurant and stood by his table until he signed the papers.

Yet hard as Anastasia and her extended family worked to bring the three young men to America, events in Greece changed their plans. Dimitris, the oldest of the three young men, was so close to being drafted that he signed onto a boat going to Australia. Only Nick and Bill arrived on Christmas Day 1955.

The Supermarkets

cery business were easily recognizable to the average American. Aside from the neighborhood Greek immigrant grocer himself, this undertow of era-specific stereotypes was fed by a steady stream of newspaper stories on the Greek wholesalers, who were often depicted as 'apple kings,' 'peanut kings' and other such honorifics.

But the lone Greek grocer had a much different life than these few 'produce kings.' The success of Greek immigrants that one hears so much about today only came after considerable efforts. No Greek immigrant's life was a straight line of work, but a succession of different jobs. The Rapanos family and their extended kin provide a representative range of experiences for those Greek immigrants who worked in the grocery business.

Family Grocery

Anastasia Rapanos would recall that upon her arrival in Chicago she found her brothers constantly working and fighting -- and not necessarily in that order. The brothers lived and worked together on Chicago's southside. Years of struggle, frugal living, and the stresses of adapting to American life had taken an acute toll on the four men. By all accounts, Anastasia's presence served to calm and regulate the brothers' lives.

In 1925, Anastasia married Zafiris Haralambopoulos. At that time Zafiris owned a one-third interest in a small cafe in Antioch, Illinois. After selling their interest in the cafe, the newlyweds coowned a grocery store with the Passinis family in Libertyville, Illinois from 1926 to around 1928. In 1932, Zafiris left the grocery store and got a job as a dishwasher in a Chicago restaurant

business. He moved to the Southwest and eventually owned a string of gas stations in the deserts of Arizona and Southern California. A driven man, Spiros lost all his wealth gambling. In his golden years, Spiros had a fine home in Twenty-nine Palms, Arizona and left a modest bequeathal to each of his many nieces and nephews.

Harry Rapanos owned a succession of stores, was partners with others, or worked for his fellow Greeks. Harry retired in 1936; his last grocery store had been in Oak Park, Illinois. A fine artist and inventor, Harry once devised a successful hundred-year calendar. The family still recalls with regret that at the time of his death all his superb pencil drawings of the Parthenon and Greek landscapes were stolen.

Alexandros Rapanos never owned a grocery store but worked with his brothers. Eventually, Alexandros moved to Midland, Michigan, where he owned a bar first and then a succession of other businesses. At the time of his death he was a millionaire. In 1937, when Alexandros Rapanos left his brother Tom's grocery store to live in Michigan, Zafiris took over his job. While Alexandros had made \$25 a week, Zafiris only made \$18. Zafiris worked at his brother-in-law's grocery until 1942 when he went to work for the Chicago Water Department. He would work for twenty years as a rough laborer.

Tom Rapanos stayed in the grocery business the longest. Tom eventually moved his grocery to Clark Street and then to 7503 Greenview Avenue, both of which were located in the Rodgers Park neighborhood on Chicago's extreme northside.

At a time when few Americans, and even fewer Greeks, could afford a car, Tom owned a Ford Model-T. This was far from an idle luxury. Every few days,

store an edge over other Americans in the neighborhood. The Model-T was also used to make deliveries.

But obviously, a Model-T Ford was not designed as a Greek grocery delivery vehicle. So Tom took out the passenger and back seats to fit all the produce and delivery bags. With no passenger seat, his wife Anthoula had to bring a small box to sit on whenever she rode in the car. Tom sold his last grocery store sometime in the 1940s. Throughout the early 1950s, unable to stay at home, Tom spent the last of his working days selling hotdogs from a pushcart.

In the early 1950s, Anastasia worked hard to bring her youngest sister Krina's three sons Dimitris, Nick and Bill Pappas to the United States. In the aftermath of the Second World War and the Greek Civil War no one knew what to expect. This project involved the entire family. The Displaced Persons Law made a number of requirements mandatory. The three young men would have to have an apartment waiting upon their arrival. Anastasia and Zafiris owned a home with their daughter Eleni and their son-in-law Dinos. But since the two couples occupied both of the building's two floors, government bureaucrats decided there would be no room for the additional family members.

But Zafiris was not to be deterred. The Rodgers Park neighborhood where the two families lived was less than a block from the shore of Lake Michigan. The foundations of the house were literally built on sand. So, Zafiris got under the house and dug out the space needed for a basement apartment. Working with Dinos, the two built a basement apartment, which had a front and back door, two bedrooms, a kitchen and a full bath. Dinos built the kitchen cabinets in the garage behind the house.

Today, while not receiving much press outside their local areas, there are quite a number of Greek-American-owned supermarket chains that are now a part of the prosperous urban and suburban landscape. A branch of the Kamberos family now owns a chain of Treasure Island Supermarkets throughout northern Illinois said to be worth over one hundred million dollars. To cite but one other example, the Demoulas Supermarkets, along with their Market Basket chain in Massachusetts, is another of the multimillion dollar Greek family-owned chains.

Bill Pappas just retired this year as manager of a Treasure Island Supermarket. Nick Papas, a produce buyer for this same supermarket chain, is unlikely to ever retire. In the 1970s, Nick secured a part-time produce job for Eleni's son Stavros, who later arranged to have his brother Zafiris take over the same position when he left.

Little did those Tin Pan Alley composers realize that the young smiling Greek grocer they so causally lampooned in song would one day become a millionaire. That these same people would never suspect that the immigrant Greeks were also artists, inventors or would seek to work collectively to overcome the adversities that were so common in the American workplace is also understandable. Those Greek grocers only showed the Americans what they wanted them to see.

From international import/export houses to the corner family-owned grocery store, Greeks in America remain a force to be reckoned with. By focusing on the general experiences of one extended family of Greek grocers, we can learn something of this wider-collective history.