

Nea Historia: The Meaning and Significance

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CHICAGO - The Nea Historia is the collectivist form of biography writing Greek Americans have been producing since the 1980s. Rather than follow the traditional single narrative perspective of Western biography Nea Historia accounts offer a collective presentation of everyday life so that the action and even the very perspective of the speaking voice within the biography can change as suits the narrative flow. A case in point would be at the very beginning of "Emily and George" Helen Zeese Papanikolas' biography of her parents' lives (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987). The volume begins with Papanikolas thinking about her mother and father as she is driving her aged mother. Then, without a break or explanation, the narrative voice jumps and is offered by the mother as she thinks about her life.

This orientation not simply flies in the face of long established biographic literary form but also accepted notions of possible reality. Yet, this approach is spontaneously emerging from an ever growing number of Greek American writers. That these writers have no contact with each other only underscores their common experiences as Greek Americans. Sociologically the critical point is that these accounts, which now form a sizable group with no sign of disappearing as self-selected narrative form, provide an unexpected insight into shared notions of being Greek.

Obviously from an outside point of view these Greek American authors are blurring a number of distinct Western literary genres: autobiography, community history, bi-

nations of kinship relations (including koumbari), exact mention of home villages in Greece, where relatives live/d both in Greece, America and around the world, church affiliation, notation of the business or profession of persons mentioned, participation in wars, recognition of different generational viewpoints and habits, and a proliferation of very exacting details such as street addresses, distances, times of day when specific events occurred, the cost of various items, and even the seasonal availability of wide variety of items. There has even been a tendency, in various historical accounts for the writer to list items of importance. Not every one of these features needs to be in an Nea Historia volume to make it part of this genre. A mixture of the above is really all that classes these books together.

For those readers who never studied the Greek language it should also be noted that in Greek the word 'historia' is simultaneously the root for both English words: history and story. Deborah Tannen, in "You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990)" has noted that the Greek American conversational style of first and second generation Greek Americans often mirrors those of their Greek forefathers. Much has been written in the social science literature concerning Greek allegiance to home villages, regionalism, and their general insular natures. Could it not be that the Greek American autobiographies jump back and forth from one person to another as simply unconscious literary extensions of these other social expressions of collective identity?



The Muse Clio, depicted in the above millenia. Since the '80s she has favor

ography, fiction and the memoir. In the Greek American Nea Historia, the merger of and active selection from various distinct literary forms allows the writer to focus their narratives on a small group of persons and working from that base craft an account that more exactly recreates their personal experiences of not only recalling the past but their sense of everyday life, as well.

Clearly Greek Americans live in the same physical world we all do. What is markedly different, and these now roughly 200+ volumes obviously testify, is their intended readers. Most but certainly not all of these volumes are privately printed. While self-publishing has much to do with editing and the overall process of being published by an established literary agency -- it also is very strongly tied to who will be given (and who will be denied) a copy of the final published book.

Aside from what a non-Greek might understand as a multi-voice narrative there are in fact other constant elements: detailed expla-

Seen in this light these collective-biographies offer us a better means to understand, sociologically, the commonly heard Greek phrase, apo pou eise; e.g. 'where are you from?' While it is generally understood that the speaker is asking which village were you born in, that is what part of Greece are you from, ultimately more is implied.

In Greek the idea of one's dikos by definition names an individual's closest personal family and friends. The private circulation of many of these Nea Historia volumes mirrors this close personally select group of closest family and friends. Given that these volumes are privately circulated it is very likely we will never know how many have been or will be published.

All these issues were brought home to me with great force when I read Apostolos N. Athanassakis' review of "My Life in the Furnace" by Panayotis Tranoulis (New York: Pella Publishing, 2005). Mr. Athanassakis opens his review with these lines: "There are probably hundreds of autobiographies written

by Greek immigrants in the U.S. Although some of them have been published for very limited circulation by various cultural Greek associations, most of them remain unpublished. A few are in the hands of relatives; some have become archival material in various libraries." After this point, Mr. Athanassakis offers his overall review of Tranoulis biography.

Let us examine closely these opening remarks. The "various cultural Greek associations" publications are the innumerable directories, telephone books and fraternal organization publications that have been issued for decades. To cite but one of a virtually endless stream of such publications we can name the relatively recent: "Greek heritage and biographies: Order of Ahepa, District 14 convention, St. Paul Minnesota, 1985 (St. Paul, MN: Ahepa, 1985)."

Given my personal experiences it also seems that Mr. Athanassakis is himself speaking from everyday encounters with unpublished authors and their relatives by his

ce of Greek American Autobiography



painting, has inspired Greeks for
and Nea Historia biography efforts.

main vague and only offer approximately 200 volumes, when speaking about how many Greek American biographies, Nea Historia style or no, exist. Because Greek Americans are privately printing these books as well as having them issued by some of the largest publishing conglomerates on the planet.

I personally own 112 different volumes that fall under the broad and general category of Greek American biography. And let me be clear. I am not including community histories or any variety of those publications issued by "various cultural Greek associations" that Athanassakis speaks of in his review. Then there are some 80 to 90 books I have discovered by searching on WorldCat (and elsewhere) that are catalogued as biographies that I have not seen. The continuing wild cards, and this can not be over stated, are the privately printed biographies. So, the figure of 200 Greek American biographies published since 1980 is, I believe, a conservative estimate.

So, while in a certain sense Mr. Athanassakis's statement that "There are probably hundreds of autobiographies written by Greek immigrants in the U.S." is correct it gives the wrong overall impression by not making the critical distinction between full length individual autobiographies/biographies and the small paragraph long vignettes one reads in Greek American directories and fraternal press publications.

Mr. Athanassakis also notes that some biographies "have become archival material in various libraries." Once, more, a neighborhood library search can locate Greek American documents of this

lish translation of this book by his son George Karampas which was privately published in Cincinnati, Ohio sometime in 2006. This 150 page memoir offers a vast sweep of events and persons and is dedicated to Aspasia Karampas the wife of the author.

On first glance Demetris G. Karampas' book would not seem to have anything whatsoever to do with Greek American biography since his account is of his life in Greece. Mr. Karampas, while he had a brother, son and other extended kin living in the United States only visited the United States, never lived here.

So, why even bother to cite this book, at all? While Demetris Karampas' focus is always his life and his village the rest of Greece and its turbulent history also fill his narrative. As do brothers, brother-in-laws, his son George, grandchildren and beloved friends in places far from his village of Vrontama such as Valparaiso, Indiana; Dayton Ohio and even Canada and Australia.

While Mr. Karampas always speaks directly to the reader (as one would expect from any European or American autobiography) we do find many of the other features seen in the Nea Historia accounts such as exhaustive detailed explanations of kinship relations, very precise geographic discussions of who and what happened, mention of where relatives live/d both in Greece, American and around the world, discussion of the business or profession of persons mentioned in his history, his participation in first the war in Anatolia, then the Second World War in Greece and, later the Greek Civil

statement that "most of them remain unpublished. A few are in the hands of relatives." Again, from my personal experiences, this is the kind of material most likely to be lost to history. Fearing that they may be cheated in some way (usually monetarily) Greek authors and their relatives do not trust anyone and the manuscripts are simply lost or never circulate which is as good as throwing them away.

So, if this material is so difficult to come by or remains unpublished how can we arrive at any sure sense of how many exist?

Internet service is now available at every public library in the United States. In searching for a book or other item held by a library a patron must use the WorldCat, e.g. World Catalog for library collections, not only in America but often quite literally the entire planet. All one has to do to find Greek American biographies is to type in that phrase in the search block and wait for the biographic books and other materials to come up on the screen. If this is the case then why do I re-

kind as well.

After all this broad discussion I would like to focus on one historical account that, I believe, rides the cusp of standard historical account and the essence of the Nea Historia. On the surface Demetris G. Karampas' memoir appears no more than a recollection of his life in Greece. But more is at work here.

The opening paragraph sets the tone and purpose of the entire volume: "I am circulating a limited number of copies of my book entitled "MY LIFE - Biographical Historical Recollections" printed in Athens, Greece in June 1990: "I do not aspire, with this publication, to paint a self-portrait or to profit financially. My aim is to present to the members of my family, to my close friends and relatives, and to every reader of this book certain events from my personal and family life, the way I lived them in my village, Vrontama—Laconias, which I love so much. May all who read this book come to their own conclusions and retain whatever is useful to them."

This quote comes from the Eng-

War, along with very exact details including what Mr. Karampas calls statistics which are lists of fellow villagers' names who were killed in World War II and the Greek Civil War.

How can so many of the features found in Greek American memoirs since the 1980s also appear in this privately circulated history of a Greek villager whose English edition was not available until 2006? Are these just the details found in any memoir or biography written at any time in history?

After reading a wide array of these biographies, I believe, that there are enduring cultural perspectives and styles of expression found in Greece, among Greek Americans and perhaps other Greeks in the Diaspora in the style of autobiography, biography, and memoir they are now writing.

All we need do is begin to read more of them and see what this emerging commonality can tell us about collective sense of self and history.

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