

# Nicky Zographos & the Greek Syndicate: When Mysterious Greeks Ruled the Riviera

By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

CHICAGO. As far as American popular culture is concerned Nicholas Dandolas was the greatest high-stakes gambler of all time. Known the world over as 'Nick the Greek', Dandolas came to personify the refined professional gambler. Legend and lore has it that Dandolas was a well-mannered gentleman who frequently spoke of Greek philosophy as he gambled for hours on end. A devoted friend of movie stars and street hustlers alike, Nicholas Dandolas, who gambled away millions of dollars during his celebrated career, died a pauper. In reading about Dandolas' life, within the broader circumstances of his times, we soon discover that 'Nick the Greek' was not the only Greek of his generation that the general public in the United States or Western Europe recognized as a world-class professional gambler.

Nicolas Zographos (b. 1886) was the undisputed leader of the Greek Syndicate, a collective of gamblers who regularly toured the most fashionable and exclusive casinos of France. The core group of gamblers who formed the Syndicate were Zographos; Eli Eliopulo, a fellow Greek and uncle to Zographos' wife Yola Apostolides; Zaret Couyoumdjian, an Armenian from Smyrna married to a Greek widow, Mme. Karadakis and Athanase Vaglianos, who was once identified as "a member of what had been the second richest family in Europe after the Rothschilds." François Andre, who, at that exact moment in time, owned the exclusive club Cercle Haussmann in Paris, would later become a member of this group when Vaglianos left. Over the next forty years the Syndicate, with Zographos always as the undisputed leader, would become the most consistently success-

ful gambling cartel in history.

As proof of this claim, Zographos, at the time of his death in 1953, was said to be worth an estimated \$5,000,000. Whether this number was a tad exaggerated or not, it was certainly far greater than Dandolas' overall negative worth. Yet, just as Nick the Greek and his gambling exploits entered into American popular culture so too, in time, did those of Zographos and his Syndicate become the stuff of European legend.

The fame of all these Greek gamblers had much to do with the times. In North America, the mad-cap era of the Roaring Twenties and Prohibition helped to launch Dandolas' career. In Europe the decade 1919-1929 was an era of carefree extravagance. As the Nineteenth Century turned into the Twentieth,

Continued on page 7

To subscribe call: 718.784.5255

e-mail:

subscriptions@thenationalherald.com



# Nicky Zographos and the Greek Syndicate: V

Continued from page 1

the French government finally allowed gambling in the three resort locations of Deauville, Cannes and Monte Carlo.

The real impact and significance of how the Greek Syndicate operated on a daily basis was established in 1922 at the Grande Semaine casino in Deauville. Zographos sat down at the baccarat table, took the bank and quietly announced, "Tout Va," which roughly translated means, 'the sky's the limit.' Taking on several players simultaneously Zographos then went on to win the reputation that brought gamblers from around the world to test themselves against him and the Syndicate. In a very short time, he created the legend that only a Greek was prepared to accept any stake of any size in a casino.

Now no one can win every time at any game. That is why the five professional Greek gamblers pooled their resources. Undoubtedly, two factors served the Greek Syndicate well. First, Zographos was a mathematical genius. While "still in his twenties Zographos put his mathematical skills to work to master the mathematics of gambling, specializing in the game of baccarat...Zographos had a staggering memory; he could memorize every hand that was played throughout a game of baccarat in which 312 cards are used. He was therefore almost able to predict the last few cards to be drawn. He could generally gauge the fluctuations in the odds favoring the bank and would know the odds of drawing the cards he needed and adjust his betting accordingly ([www.jackpot.co.uk](http://www.jackpot.co.uk))."

The second was Vaglianos' mon-



called 'the Riviera.'

Wherever the physical location, the Syndicate always operated in a steady, predictable and workman-like manner. Taking turns between the afternoon and evening sessions of baccarat, Zographos most often played during the evenings while Zaret Couyoumdjian played the afternoon crowd. Aside from their daily gambling the Syndicate also served as bookmakers. This allowed the Syndicate to know, more often than not, how much money the high rollers were holding.

For the rich and famous the Riviera constituted the premier location for the glitz and glamour from the early 1900s until World War II. The prominence of European royalty assured the notoriety of the Riviera. The Duke of Windsor, as a trend setter among the European royals, is credited with establishing these new resorts as the play ground for the rich. Among those who soon came every season were

and if I am not mistaken at least two of the Aga Khans; Prince Sultan Mohammed, (1877-1957), the 48th Imam (17 August 1885-1957) and Prince Karim Al Husseini (b. 1936), 49th Imam of the Ismailis (from 11 July 1957), the Sultan of Morocco, the Crown Prince of Italy and many many others.

Aside from all these kings and ex-kings there was a generous peppering of dukes and viscounts such as the Duke of Westminster and Lord Beaverbrook, along with a host of Indian potentates. Multimillionaires included but were not limited to André Citroën, Frank Jay Gould, Jack Coates, Stavros Niarchos and several Rothschilds. Politicians such as David Lloyd George, Winston Churchill and Senhor Ross, the Chilean finance minister were also to be seen among the casino crowd. Naturally, each new season also promised the arrival of Hollywood movie stars and a host of stage performers such as Charlie Chaplin, Ronald Colman, William Powell, Gloria Swanson, Josephine Baker, Maurice Chevalier and many others, including eventually, Maria Callas.

Unexpectedly, the French Riviera is also the location where a number of feminist social taboos were first successfully challenged. The Mediterranean casino pools and beaches were the site where the one-piece bathing suit for women was premiered just as decades later the bikini and the thong were each showcased. The casinos of Cannes and Monte Carlo are also the locations where women first legally gambled in public. In language and themes not very dissimilar to the tabloid press of today, dozens of newspaper arti-

ey that helped the Syndicate get its start. Collective skill and collective wealth allowed the daring Greeks to 'establish' themselves in the casinos. If you're asking yourself why these Greeks were allowed to gamble in this flamboyant style you should be aware that all losses were the responsibility of the Syndicate while all profits were split with the casinos. Add to this the fact that the French government taxed the Greek Syndicate 25% on all their winnings. So, while the Greeks ultimately won vast sums of money they in fact only managed to keep a percentage of their overall seasonal winnings.

The Greek Syndicate followed the rich and famous through what was then a seasonal movement. Essentially the seasonal movement began in Deauville, which is located in northern France along the English Channel, in the early spring then, in the winter months onwards to the southern France coastal resorts of Cannes and Monte Carlo. In the vast majority of press accounts these individual resorts, their distinct casinos and the seasonal flow of visitors, were eventually lumped all together and

the kings of Sweden, King Alphonso of Spain, Ex-King Manoel of Portugal, Farouk the ex-King of Egypt,

cles found in all corners of the United States regularly reported on the lifestyle of the rich and famous



# When Greek Gamblers Ruled the Riviera

## SKY the LIMIT

Unparalleled Gayety Prevails in Gaming Resorts of Europe That Captivate Human Curiosity and Bid for American Dollars With a Display of Dazzling Lights, Girls, Wines and Colors

**SKY the LIMIT**  
 Unparalleled Gayety Prevails in Gaming Resorts of Europe That Captivate Human Curiosity and Bid for American Dollars With a Display of Dazzling Lights, Girls, Wines and Colors

The Riviera has long been a playground for the rich and famous, and in the past few years it has become a center of attraction for the American tourist. The casinos of Monte Carlo, Cannes, and Nice have become the most popular of resorts, and the Greek Syndicate has become a household name.

The Greek Syndicate is a group of men who have made their money in the gambling business. They have built a reputation for themselves as the most powerful and most successful of the Greek-American community. They have been the driving force behind the development of the Riviera as a gambling destination.

The Greek Syndicate has been the subject of many sensational news stories, and its members have become celebrities in their own right. One of the most famous members of the syndicate is the "Greek Spider," a man who has been accused of luring rich women into gambling.

The Greek Syndicate has been the subject of many sensational news stories, and its members have become celebrities in their own right. One of the most famous members of the syndicate is the "Greek Spider," a man who has been accused of luring rich women into gambling.

## Did the "Greek Spider" Use American Bait to Lure Rich Women into Gambling?

The Audacious Dramatic Drama of the Winking Pucknell Snake, the Wily Gaming Troupe, and the Loozy Ladies Who Lost.

**Did the "Greek Spider" Use American Bait to Lure Rich Women into Gambling?**  
 The Audacious Dramatic Drama of the Winking Pucknell Snake, the Wily Gaming Troupe, and the Loozy Ladies Who Lost.

The Greek Syndicate has been the subject of many sensational news stories, and its members have become celebrities in their own right. One of the most famous members of the syndicate is the "Greek Spider," a man who has been accused of luring rich women into gambling.

The Greek Syndicate has been the subject of many sensational news stories, and its members have become celebrities in their own right. One of the most famous members of the syndicate is the "Greek Spider," a man who has been accused of luring rich women into gambling.

along the Riviera.

Zographos and the other members of the Greek Syndicate feature in dozens of these sensational news stories. In a prime example of this kind of celebrity journalism, Zographos (known as 'Nicky' in any number of these tales) is labeled the "Greek Spider," when he was falsely identified as the person responsible for women gambling in the casinos.

Full page newspaper accounts with photographs, illustrations and catchy titles are devoted to the Greek Syndicate where Zographos, in particular, is frequently crowned the "World's Biggest Gambler,"

1960s.

Any passing citation of the Greek Syndicate as they are portrayed in popular culture would have to include the 1933 Hollywood musical, 'Flying Down to Rio,' the first film pairing of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rodgers.

That the debonair manner of James Bond, at the baccarat table both in the original novel and later films, is consciously modeled on Nicolas Zographos is as well known to the student of popular culture as it is often surprising to learn for the modern Greek American reader.

In "The Life of Ian Fleming: The Man Who Created James Bond" by

proud with the right word—"the suckers."

What complicates the study of the Greek Syndicate and the popular culture images of Greeks as gamblers even further is the fact that Monte Carlo, the undisputed premier casino district in Europe, was operated after World War I by none other than Sir Basil Zaharoff (1848-1936) the Greek multimillionaire. Today, few recall that Zaharoff quite literally saved the very existence of Monte Carlo.

Zaharoff's "...association with Louis II of Monaco led to his purchase of the debt-ridden Société des Bains-de Mer which ran Monte

American newspapers from New York to California abound with news accounts of 'gambling duels' between the Syndicate and American millionaires such as Frank Jay Gould and/or internationally recognized Europeans like André Citroën. As bookmakers the Greek Syndicate made as many headlines as they did from their persistent winnings at the casinos. Unquestionably the popular culture legends and portrayals of the Greek Syndicate spring from such accounts.

A partial remedy for these tabloid stories is "None but the Rich: The Life and Times of the Greek Syndicate," by English journalist Charles Graves (London: Cassell and Company, 1963). Graves puts the book as devoted to Zographos and the Syndicate but the volume really just incidentally circles the lives, prominent instances and often individual games of Zographos and company. "None but the Rich," is in point of fact a kind of overview exposé of the big French cashos, Deauville, Cannes and Monte Carlo from their beginnings as the exclusive resorts of the extremely wealthy until the late

John Pearson, we learn that Nicolas Zographos was "one of Fleming's earliest heroes" and that "not long before he died, Fleming actually began a short story in which James Bond met Zographos (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966). Pearson offers this brief passage from Fleming's unfinished short story where this meeting takes place: "...It was like this, Mr. Bond,' Zographos had a precise way of speaking with the thin tips of his lips while his half-hard, half-soft Greek eyes measured the reactions of his words on the listener...The Russians are chess players. They are mathematicians. Cold machines. But they are also mad. The mad ones forsake the chess and the mathematics and become gamblers. Now Mr. Bond.'

Zographos laid a hand on Bond's sleeve and quickly withdrew it because he knew Englishmen, just as he knew the characteristics of every race, every race with money, in the world. "There are two gamblers...the man who lays the odds and the man who accepts them. The bookmaker and the punter. The casino and, if you like'—Mr. Zographos's smile was sly with the shared secret and

Carlo's famed casino, and the principal source of revenue for the country. He succeeded in making the casino profitable again. At the same time, Zaharoff had prevailed upon [French Prime Minister] Clemenceau to ensure that the Treaty of Versailles included protection of Monaco's rights as established in 1641 (wikipedia.com)." Just as American and European news stories featured seemingly endless news accounts about the Syndicate, so too did article appear about Zaharoff as the mysterious multimillionaire owner of Monte Carlo's casinos.

Nick 'the Greek' Dandolas, Nicky Zographos, Sir Basil Zaharoff and the entire Greek Syndicate collective were once world status celebrities known in the smallest towns and hamlets across the planet. How these men and their lives devoted to games of chance led to the creation of stereotypes and legends of Greeks as the greatest gamblers in the world has yet to be fully explored and understood.

Readers interested in contacting Mr. Frangos are welcome to e-mail him at [grecianmon@yahoo.com](mailto:grecianmon@yahoo.com)