

# Thoughts on March 25th: We are Greeks

By Steve Frangos

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All four of my grandparents were the grandchildren of slaves. I have met Anatolian Greeks, Greeks from what is now called northern Greece, and even individuals from some islands who were all born slaves. So when the annual observation of March 25th occurs as a Greek national holiday, I always think of those individuals first. My enduring memory of those people has shaped my life. They told me many things. Still, it's what I witnessed which has stayed with me. Those 'Old Greeks' never gave up. They overcame all obstacles to provide for their families. Nothing stopped them. Ever.

When I was in Greek school, the room was encircled with line-drawing portraits of the heroes of the Greek War of Independence. Framed and hung so that they looked down upon us were Bouboulina, Rigas, Ypsilantis, Koraes, Makiyiannis and the venerable Kolokotronis. Not unlike the icons which lined the walls of our church, these martyrs for freedom stood eternal vigil. But in true Greek fashion, we were told that even these heroes, just like the saints, were common people. And Greeks being Greeks, we gossiped about their lowly births and not insignificant human faults.

As I traveled on the bus to Greek school and looked at all the faces around me, I realized that those portraits of heroes showed people who looked like Greeks. When I was young many of the old men still had the large moustakia (moustaches).

The clothes I saw the people wearing in my books on the Greek War of Independence were often in the old photographs my grandparents and other Greeks proudly hung in their houses.

Even the worst parts of the Greek War of Independence, which I eventually read about since I did not hear about any of this in Greek school, when Greeks fought Greeks rather than join together to completely throw off the Ottoman yoke, made sense. My whole life, I had observed Greek fighting Greek.

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All of this, I could reckon with.

Even the placement of Lord Byron's portrait on my Greek school wall, in a place of honor along with all the other heroes, fit into my worldview. As General Makriyanis said, there were always only very few Greeks, as I experienced on the streets of Chicago. Having Phil-Hellenes along side us was also part of my everyday life. How many businesses did I know where the most trusted worker who stood next to the Greek owner day after day was an African American or someone who had come from Poland, but spoke fluent Greek. More than one of these men corrected my Greek when I spoke to them.

In like manner, just as in the folksongs I heard on old 78rpm records which spoke of the beautiful Karagouna maiden, or the Turkish girl with the veil across her face, more than one of the Old Greeks I knew were married to non-Greeks. But rather than the barefoot Vlach beauty by the fountain, she was a German or Lithuanian woman who called my name when I entered the shop and offered me some of her homemade koulouria.

The city of Chicago itself offered me other images of my grandparents and the Old Greeks. I went to Lane Technical High School which, like many other city buildings, is filled with murals painted by WPA (Work Progress Administration)-sponsored artists. These brightly colored murals offer towering scenes of men stripped to the waist working in smelters, steel mills, logging camps, railroads and scenes of the American Far West.

The muscles of working men with thick hands swinging hammers and building America, all scenes from the stories I had heard from my grandfathers and the rest of the Old Greeks about their early life in Ameriki. I would spend my high school days surrounded by those flowing murals and then get on a bus and travel to Greek School where, from the very tops of the rooms, the old men of the mountains - "the shepherds of freedom," as Harry Mark Petrakis has called them - looked down on me.

Much has changed from these days of my youth.

When once we spoke of the seemingly endless names of Phil-Hellenes, we now hear of the attack

warranted deceitful lies engender. I was born in North America. My Greece has always been the Greece of the Diaspora. I have gone back to my ancestral villages and visited my relatives many times.

But I now feel that even greater distances have been traveled - that the stories of those ancient champions offered to me during my childhood, and those I hear of today, are so far apart as to be virtually on different planets.

Where is the society of Greeks I grew up with? Why do all the academics who used to lecture as part of my Greek school March 25th programs so many years ago now say we are not descended from our Grecian forefathers? That they were never really Greek and that the lands in which all those old people I grew up was never truly Greek?

A lie is a lie.

Work, sacrifice, loss of life - all are as real as direct experience can get. Good and evil do exist. I have experienced them both, and so have you. So why do Greeks anywhere allow our history to be taken prisoner? Why are our direct experiences of being Greek not admissible to the academy or to politicians?

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The commercialism of America, "the easily life," as I used to hear some of the Old Greeks joke about it has the vast majority of us fooled. At no other time in the recorded history of man has this kind of American lifestyle existed. It can not last. Greeks who had to fight for every penny wish to shower their families and friends with their bounty. Ah, but beyond their immediate dikous tous (their own), they will not offer a dime. Dikos mas (one of us), in Greek social life, is defined as those family members and friends who collectively constitute one's core social group.

Greeks are very careful not to point out to non-Greeks that, for any number of reasons, one's own can also exclude an individual's own biological family - that indi-

such concepts are recognized.

Actually the 'political' divisions among Greeks in America and across the planet all become far more understandable when everyday beliefs and values versus civic institutions are brought to bear on both history and enduring social issues.

The Greeks have never been a political nation-state as the northern European models understand such a term. While much could be said about how even European and American models of democracy have hidden economic agendas, Greeks experience and express their political selves in ways which are in no way, shape or form Euro-American. Individual choice has always been at the root of being a Greek.

## OUR COLOSSAL CULTURAL HERITAGE

We have been given a colossal cultural heritage. It came with our individual family's daily lives, almost as an afterthought. But just as the old Greek saying reports, "life is not free."

Our way as warriors need never be with guns and bombs. This watering the tree of freedom with the blood of heroes is now shouted out by those who never go to battle, but who lust to rule over others. We must be Greek in our clear understanding that politics is not what's being presented by politicians. As Greek Americans, our great forthcoming war is dual in nature, just as we are of two cultures. Our battle is against both everyday politics of consumerism as the only true American way of life and our old Greek cultural forms.

Every March 25th, Greeks lecture each other about brotherhood and unity. And just as predictably, every Greek Independence Day, Greeks fight about who marches first in the parade. All the infighting must end, or we will suffer cultural suicide, not just here in Ameriki, but also in Greece. There is no third option.

Greece was once a political nation-state where 95-98 percent were ethnic Greeks (or so the claim was made). Today, with over a million Albanians; 200,000 refugees from Poland; and others from the Middle East, Greece is experiencing cultural and social challenges daily, such as it has never seen. If truth be told, Greeks in Greece are facing the very same questions Greeks in America are facing: e.g., "How do



Alexandros Ypsilantis, left, and Odysseas Androutsos, right. Ypsilantis helped plan the revolt in the Peloponnese, and first raised the revolutionary flag in the Danube lands in February 1821. Androutsos was one of the greatest military minds of the Greek Revolution. He held back a force of more than 3,000 Turks with the aid of only 100 men in the battle of Gravia.

not mean joining a group, and then shouting the slogans you are told to scream. It means thinking the problem through on your own. It means taking a stand and doing something in the real world.

The heroes of the Greek War of Independence taught all of us a

great lesson. We do not need heroes. We do not need leaders. We can rise up, identify and solve our own problems without anyone's instruction or permission. That is what the Old Greeks I grew up did. They established Greek America with their own efforts.

The only way we can continue our Hellenic heritage anywhere is to be as bold, relentless and sure of heart as they were.

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1944), during a banned National Liberation Front (EAM) demonstration of approximately 250,000 people in central Athens, an outbreak of shooting by rightwing militants, security forces and British troops outside the Hellenic Parliament in Constitution Square against the unarmed mob resulted in 28 deaths (including a six-year-old boy) and 148 wounded, and triggered full-scale fighting between the National Popular Liberation Army (ELAS) and the Greek Government.

Despite the initial British position of neutrality, British troops began supporting Government forces in Athens, aided by British artillery and aircraft. This marked the second phase of the Greek Civil War, which became known as "Ta Dekemvriana," alluding to the fact that it took place in December.

With battles still being waged in the rest of Europe, civil strife in Greece created grave concern among the Allies and even brought Winston Churchill to Athens on December 25 to preside over a conference of the Allies, including the Soviet Union. Although the Soviet Union did not actively foment civil unrest, since Greece fell under the British sphere of influence (as decided at Yalta), they did not con-

rie was replaced by anti-communist general Nikolaos Plastiras, and a ceasefire was agreed by both sides.

By February 1946, the Greek Communist Party (KKE) reversed positions and decided to mobilize a military struggle against the Government. The Greek civil war entered its climax, and hostilities continued until October 1949 - more than two years after the proclamation of the Truman Doctrine March 12, 1947).

ELAS, still under communist control, had reorganized, and was renamed the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE). The average citizen - peasants in particular - was almost always caught in the crossfire. When DSE partisans entered a village asking for supplies (often at gunpoint), citizens could not resist. Likewise, when the national army came to the same village where citizens had given supplies to the partisans, the latter were dubbed communist sympathizers and suffered the consequences of beatings, imprisonment or exile.

By early 1947, Great Britain, which had spent 85 million pounds in Greece since 1944, could no longer afford this burden. At this point, President Harry S. Truman announced that the United States would step in to support the Greek

the Greek monarch and Government about important issues, such as the appointment of the prime minister. Many citizens resented what they termed as the United States' "meddling" in Greek national affairs, and continue to blame many political events, like the 1967 military coup, on the United States.

Nonetheless, President Truman publicly recognized that Greece played a much more significant role in the outcome of World War II, as opposed to Turkey, which maintained a suspicious neutrality which many viewed as support for Axis forces, and only entered the war on the Allies' side a few months prior to the end of hostilities. In his speech, Truman stated, "The circumstances in which Turkey finds itself today are considerably different from those of Greece. Turkey has been spared the disasters that have beset Greece," but noted that the integrity of the Turkish Government "is essential to the preservation of order in the Middle East."

Former Greek Prime Minister Constantine Karamanlis (uncle of current Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis) asserted the importance of the Truman Doctrine at the unveiling ceremony of the Truman statue, which was donated by AHEPA, in Athens: "If the Greeks want to survive as a free nation,

## Full Senate Votes to Expand VWP, Greece M

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and tourism, benefiting our economy and competitiveness for years to come. This is a smart move that will advance America's strategic interests," he added.

The House of Representatives passed similar legislation on January 9 (299-128), although the House bill does not include provisions for VWP expansion. Both bills are now "in conference," which means both Houses of Congress are

pate in the VWP, and a willingness to cooperate with the necessary security requirements, no new countries have been admitted since 1999.

President Bush recently called on Congress to expand the VWP to deserving nations and has previously identified 13 countries as potential candidates for future participation. These include Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia

Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

The American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association, the country's oldest and largest grassroots Hellenic heritage organization, has been pushing Bush Administration and Congressional officials to expand the program for the past several months.

Alexandros Mavrokordatos, left, and Theodoros Kolokotronis, right. Mavrokordatos was a key political leader in the Greek Revolution. A Phanariot, his political shrewdness helped muster support for Greek Independence across Europe. He presided over Greece's first national assembly, Kolokotronis, "the old man of Moras," was a brilliant general and arguably the single most important figure in the Greek War of Independence.

pundits from around the world. It is one thing to realize as an adult that the real politics of everyday is an ongoing battle which must be endured, and quite another to come to terms with the feelings such un-

childhood can have a fallout and never speak or see each other again over a single conversation.

The internal fighting among the Greek heroes of the War of Independence makes more sense once

which aspects of our lives and actions make up that heritage?"

Focusing narrowly on the issue of speaking Greek to be a real Greek flies in the face of actual Greek history. Being a patriot does