

George Katinas Interview Summary Kingston Greek History Project

Interviewee: George Katinas

Interviewer: Angeline Boswell

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Location: Greek Orthodox Church in Kingston

Summary created by Angeline Boswell

Background:

- 1963 born in Canada; 1965 parents went back to Greece; 1982 after high school he came back to Canada.
- George was born in Canada, but he doesn't remember it. He first remembers being in Greece as a child. He always felt it was something special that he was born in Canada, although he wasn't really sure what it meant – except that it was a faraway country his parents lived in once. His father could speak English, his mother often used English words... so he could see traces of Canada in his parents.
- he had the benefit of having Canadian citizenship, so after high school he worked for a year, earned money, and then bought a ticket to come to Canada. He had his parent's memories of the place which in part informed his decision to come here.
- George's father was born in Canada; his grandfather came to Canada in 1912 – he had a candy store in Smith Falls in the early 1920s.

Coming to Canada:

- *How did you decide to come to Kingston?*
 - As a baby, George was baptized by the Kingstonians Alex and Ethel Lambropoulos. His parents lived here at some point; and his father had close friends such as Fil Menikefs, and the Karkoulises. He recognized that he had a **network** here that would support him if he came to Kingston.
- *What was it like coming here?*
 - it was hard because he couldn't anticipate what he would find here. He was all alone, which he had never been before – away from immediate family and close friends. The language barrier was difficult as well. He took some English classes before he came here which were insufficient. People spoke too fast in reality. The climate was very different. It was cold, and he was used to warmth – having access to the sea, etc. What was hardest was that he was used to having a close knit support network in case anything happened. Now, he was uprooted and had little support. He had to push himself to make his own connections, rather than relying on his family.
- *Did you find yourself needing to be glued to Greek people/communities because of the language barriers?*
 - Although George craved anything Greek, he didn't surround himself with only Greek people. He was working at a Greek restaurant. But he tried to expand and

surround himself with Canadians. From George's knowledge of Greek immigrant experiences, people tend to make connections through Greeks for employment and community. His story was different – he kept himself a bit apart from the community. He kept in touch with Greece through letters, etc.

- *What were you doing when you came to Canada?*
 - when he came, he had no other skills apart from what he learned in high school. Easiest thing for him to do was to find work through his **connections**. He had a connection with Tom Annis, who found him a job as a dishwasher at his Olympic Harbor restaurant. George was staying with Alex Lambopoulos, his godfather. He was also taking English as a Second Language classes. Through learning English, he found he was able to access more of the culture.
- *Do you remember your Grandfather/Father telling you their immigration stories? Do you see a big contrast between yours and theirs?*
 - as a kid, George would visit his grandfather who would tell him stories about his life in Canada. The main theme of his stories was what a wonderful country Canada was – how organized it was. He was a bit critical of Greece, and “crazy about Canada”. He would describe the stores he owned, would give him drawings of his store, etc. His father, who had a reverse immigration story (to Greece), wouldn't speak about his immigration story as much. George's story is different than his grandfather's because he **wasn't an economic immigrant**; he didn't *have to* leave for any reason apart from interest in Canada. This is an important distinction that changes the whole story.

Life in Kingston:

- *Did you experience culture clashes?*
 - His initial impression was that Anglo-Canadians were colder. They were not as warm as Greeks, even though they were welcoming. For example: he would always buy his friends' drinks at the bar, but they would never buy his drink, or take turns paying. There wasn't that expected reciprocity. His initial reaction was that there was no “**philotimo**”. He was critical about many little things, such as mannerisms. He even found a clash in how elderly women dressed – they usually are dressed in black with head scarves in Greece, and he saw elderly women wearing pants and bright colours! He came to understand that these are different cultural expectations. “It takes you a while to realize ‘here is different’,” and he needed to adapt and learn the unwritten codes of the new culture. For example, buying everybody drinks would not be normal here – it would be overly generous and would not be reciprocated.

Marriage, Children...

- *I understand you have married a non-Greek?*
 - George met his wife at Teacher's College. They were married a couple of years later. At first, he thought it would be difficult to marry outside your culture. You need to do a lot of work – it isn't as simple. Things don't flow as easily, because

of difference in expectations, in temperament, in religion, in language... Perhaps it could have been less work to marry a Greek/Greek Canadian, but this work makes you a better person and the relationship stronger to be overcoming obstacles.

- *Did you try to preserve the Greek language and culture through your daughter?*
 - Ever since she could speak, he wanted to impart on her the Greek language as a vehicle for the Greek culture – to give her something important. Of course this started before she was born, when they were thinking of names and he wanted to give her the name Athena after the goddess of wisdom and war. What made it difficult to teach Athena Greek is that he was the only parent speaking Greek. But he was aware of the studies done on the benefits of raising children to be bilingual, so he wanted to teach her Greek. He decided not to enroll her in Greek school because he felt he could better spend the time teaching her Greek at home. He had his parents ship him Greek baby books. He would even read English books out in Greek translation. He wrote the alphabet out on the tiles of his home's patio, and he would point to tiles and Athena would say the letter. The benefit of Athena knowing Greek was **emotional rather than logical**. She would also have a **distinctive identity and some roots** that she could rely on, and “use them to sustain her”. Now, he can see those benefits. He could also establish a personal connection with her through sharing Greek language. She isn't fluent, but she understands and has a simple vocabulary. She can read Greek, which is important to George. He had a dream that they would be reading Greek poetry together someday. Still, they had a special connection and shared moments through learning Greek. She would make jokes about the Greek letters, doodling on them as a kid. She can also communicate with her relatives in Greece now which is very important.
- *Did you find the fact that you were from another country strengthened your insistence on keeping the culture?*
 - Yes, being from somewhere else, you want to preserve your distinctiveness. Your culture might feel threatened when you're in a sea of Canadian culture. They baptized Athena as Greek Orthodox, to help in keeping this culture. He taught Athena the national anthem, even if he isn't a nationalist. He realizes it might be silly to do it, but it is still felt important.
- *As a related question, do you find that Greeks in Canada hold onto their culture tighter than Greeks in Greece do?*
 - Yes, it is something that George has realized. When he first came to Kingston and observed the Greek Canadians, he thought they were a bit ‘backwards’. He felt they were adhering to cultural norms that were eminent in Greece 20-30 years ago. Just as he felt a need to pass the language to Athena, the Greeks in Canada felt a need to keep their traditional dancing and celebrations. He was surprised to see people wearing Foustanellas (traditional Greek costume skirts for men), because people in Greece don't do that. He also found the **morality** of the Greeks here to be **more strict** than in Greece. His sister in Greece could date, but girls

here couldn't. He also found it funny too the way that Greeks would Hellenize English words or would Anglicize Greek words.

Involvement in Greek Community

- *When did your interest in the history project begin?*
 - Access to libraries was something he did not have to a wide extent in Greece. Would go there all the time; eventually he started wondering why there were so many resources about Ancient Greece but not Greek communities today. This question was always in the back of his mind. He became interested in oral history; he attended a workshop about how to conduct oral history. He loves the 'democratization of history' – to record the histories of **everyday people** whose stories may be omitted from the usual history we hear about. He loves the idea of storytelling, The Kingston Heritage Fund then had a workshop on grant writing. There, he met Paula Antonakos, and she was very interested in the idea of recording the histories of our Greek community with him. They applied for the grant and got it.
- *How have you enjoyed the project?*
 - It has been very rewarding and interesting. He has enjoyed hearing their stories; he loves being immersed in their lives as they tell you what happened to them. Many can be very emotional and real. He also finds out facts and dates, which are important for historical records. He likes the idea of physically capturing these histories with recordings and photos, and being able to store these forever so they will not be lost. Preservation of stories is important. He always tries to connect what he learns with what is happening around us today in our society. A big topic today is immigration. He likes seeing the similarities – and seeing what we can learn about migration from our own stories. He learned that a lot of Greeks immigrated to Canada illegally. So the idea of who is a legal immigrant is very fluid. Some people who immigrated illegally are now important and respectable people in society – so it is interesting to compare the current migration situation in the world with our stories, knowing we did the same thing in the 1920s.

The Future of our Community

- *How do you see the future of our community?*
 - This is a big question – because we have to ask what a 'community' is? Is it language, beliefs? If he were to predict, though, he can see that the **use of Greek language** and the **cohesiveness of the community** will diminish. He also sees the presence the faith has in the community will diminish. Increasingly, a lot of Greek people are not religious or they don't see the Greek church as uniting them. Instead, they see other factors as uniting them. He wishes there was a model of a secular community that could be made, which is connected to the faith, but not to have the faith at the center of it. He knows of several friends of his that don't use the church as the center of socializing with Greek people because they are not religious. If there were a secular part, the cohesiveness of the community might

continue. Also, young people who are not religious then tend to not be part of the community at all. Just because people reject the religious components, they shouldn't reject everything all together. Orthodox Christianity is a big part of Greek culture, and so it is **very interconnected**. Even though George is not very religious, he decided to baptize his daughter. It is hard to separate the community from the church. Even his non-religious friends celebrate their name day (which is dedicated to a Saint). He wouldn't separate it, but he can see how having religion as the center point might create problems. For example: for funding, we may not get funding from the secular government for any of our endeavors because we seem to be a religious institution.

- *It's like a culture-clash on a large scale... how people organize their communities – if it is church based or not...*
 - Yes. And within Greek communities there are some who agree with this organization system or not. In big cities, there are efforts to separate out a secular branch of the community. George thinks a secular arm of the community called the 'Friends of the Greek community' might be a good idea.
- *This is an important question... how do you define a community? When certain components diminish does it mean the community itself diminishes or does it just shift?*
 - It is hard to quantify what a community is, and what the strength of a community is. We can measure attendance to the Church, number of Greek speakers... but these are all just factors to measure for the health of a community.

Connection to Greece

- *Do you still visit Greece often? Do you keep in touch?*
 - when he first immigrated, he could only come back every couple of years because travel is expensive. He also stopped visiting when his child was born and he was busy. He contrasts 'keeping in touch' now versus in the 80s. Back then, he had to write letters and it took twenty days to get there. He made occasional phone calls but they were expensive. Sadly, the difficulty of keeping in touch makes people forget about each other. The cousins he used to see every day, he wouldn't see more than once a year. There is a Greek saying that says *eyes that are not seen are easily forgotten*. He found this to be true and it was difficult. Now, of course, the connection has changed with Facebook. We can see what each other are doing every day. Of course this isn't as strong a connection as seeing each other in real life, and it should not replace this, but it is better than nothing.
- *Do you find the phenomenon of keeping an outdated version of Greece as your memory of Greece decreases when you are constantly using the internet?*
 - Yes. When you leave a place, you are constantly evolving somewhere else and the place is constantly evolving too. So when you return, it can be disorienting because you didn't experience the changes slowly. It would have been startling. Now, we can see the gradual changes when we are being constantly updated. There are less surprises. There is the idea of 'homecoming' being somewhat dangerous – such as in the myth of Agamemnon when his wife kills him. Things

changed while he was away and he did not anticipate the changes. Of course, this is more extreme, but it can still be dangerous because you might be disappointed. Especially if you are homesick and you hold this **idealized Greece** in your mind and then go back and find you don't have it. In a way, this has happened to him.