

Traditions of a Greek Community:  
Their Effect Upon Folk Ideas

by  
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Folklore  
Dr. Sweterlitsch  
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On Sunday, April 13, 1980, I aspired after some folklore of the Greek community in Burlington. The church is their base of unity, thereby making them a more centralized group to work with and locate. In America, there has recently been a surge to retain one's heritage and ethnicity, as opposed to acknowledging the ~~forerunning~~ melting pot theory. I attempted to research the Greek customs and traditions and their degree of retention to get a sense of their attitudes, and what is considered significant to their culture.

From 10 to 12 o'clock I attended a service at the Dormition of the Mother of God church, located at 600 S. Willard Street. Following the service, the members congregated in back of the church on their way out, greeting each other good morning. Some of them noticed that I had not been a full participant in their worship service and I quickly became introduced and made my purpose known. Athena was very willing and anxious to talk with me and the first interview was conducted the next day, Monday, in Bailey Library. On Tuesday, I met with her again, this time recording the interview.

Athena Tzavaras, a freshman<sup>\*</sup> at the University of Vermont majoring in Dental Hygiene, was born in Burlington. She currently resides in Essex Junction with her parents and her younger brother, Costa, 17. Her father had been sponsored to come to America in 1950 at the age of 16. It was during this

time (1940's-50's, after the war) that Greece was experiencing economic and social hardships which prompted many of the younger generation to find a new and opportune lifestyle. He first began working in New York City as a dishwasher, later progressing in the restaurant business. Her mother came to Montreal in 1955 and worked as a hospital aide. They later met in Chicago at a Greek celebration and married in 1958. As Athena pointed out, family ties were strong with those still in Greece and much of her father's earnings were sent to them. The language barrier was at first a problem for the newcomers to America, but daily intervention and the need to communicate forced them to acquire the English language.

Athena has stressed the value of carrying on the Greek culture. It has become especially vital since she is part of the next generation that the culture depends upon to transmit tradition. The Greek language continues to be of great importance in preserving the culture. It has also become a subject of discrepancy and conflict with some Greek-Americans. Panos D. Bardis states that there has been a division concerning this issue into the traditionalists and the modernists.<sup>1</sup> The modernists advocate using English in the liturgical service since most now speak English. Dr. Andrew Kopan views that the language of the church must be the vernacular of the people.<sup>2</sup> Bardis, however, sides with the traditionalist point of view, deeming it inconsistent of Kopan to instill preservation of the Holy Orthodox Faith, but

not that of the Greek language. "Both religion and language are human interventions, both are major components of culture, and both have something of value to offer."<sup>3</sup>

In Burlington, it seems that the church holds the traditionalist viewpoint concerning the Greek language, as I observed that the majority of the service, called the Divine Liturgy, was conducted in Greek. An English translation was given only with The Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the scripture reading, and a part of the sermon. At the end, the Priest also requested help from the parents, so that educating the children can be done in Greek as well in English. Athena learned to speak and write Greek as her first language and did not learn English until she began kindergarten. She does not remember the process of learning a new language but says that ~~the~~<sup>it</sup> must have been some difficulties. She now speaks both languages fluently and intends to start her own children learning Greek.

The transmission of Greek culture is probably most obvious when viewing the holiday celebrations. Many of the same American holidays are celebrated by the Greeks, but the uniqueness of their culture lies in how they are celebrated. Everything might seem to be highly ceremonious, but the significance of each ritual is filled with symbolic meaning.

Probably the most special occasion for the Greeks occurs at Easter. During Holy Week, from Palm Sunday to Easter, each day is recognized by a certain event. Many preparations are made, including the red-dyed eggs and the lamb stew that

Athena mentions. The eggs are colored only red which denotes Christ's blood when he was speared. The women of the household prepare the lamb stew and use all its parts except the hooves and tail. The head is cleaned and boiled down for the broth. The other parts are finely chopped and stewed. It is all mixed together with spices and an egg sauce. Though Athena is familiar with this process, she says she can't stand to do the preparing, but "it's the best stuff I've ever tasted!" The lamb is symbolic because it is often used as a sacrifice in the Bible.

After the midnight mass on Saturday, the feast begins and families will join one another to share thier special preparations. In addition to the stew and eggs, Athena's family prepares Easter cookies from a special recipe. The party begins at about 2 a.m. and can last many hours through the morning , complete with singing and dancing. In the tradition of cracking the eggs, one person knocks their egg against another's and good luck is extended to the one with the strongest egg.

Another significant date to Greek culture is August 15, when the passing away of Mother Mary is recognized. Here begins a two-week fast followed by feast and festivity. The sacraments--marriage, baptism, and Holy Communion--are other rituals performed with traditional symbolism. The fact that these celebrations have survived the decades indicate that Greeks in America are more resistant to change than some other groups. Religion is the base of Greek life and their atti-