

KON PANAGOPOULOS - A MIGRANTS REFLECTION

The Voice from the Pavement - Peter Adamis



Kon Panagopoulos. I first came into contact with Kon Panagopoulos whilst he was a volunteer gardener with the Oakleigh Greek Orthodox community.

Kon was born in a windswept and mountainous village called Metaxadia on the 10 November 1928. The village was located in the southern part of the Peloponnese in an area called Messenia, Peloponnese, Greece

His parents Elias and Konstantina worked the family fields raising sheep, goats and vegetables to feed their family. Although conditions were harsh for those in countryside, they were spared the difficulties faced by those living in the cities and main towns of Greece during the Great Depression.

Kon said that the total population of Metaxada was approximately 325, made up of about 65 families with an average household of five per home. Metaxada also known as Sapriki. A name given by the Turks during their occupation of Greece. Despite the better conditions of those living in the countryside compared to their cousins living in the towns and cities, Kon could still remember going without food and water during the difficult times. (My understanding is that with some additional research using online tools, a better understanding of the village may be reached, but readers may have to read it in the Greek language.)

He remembered on many occasions when he would live only on bread and a little water that he would find and of these he would sometimes share it with his dog who was also his companion when looking after the family flock of sheep and goats. People in village were ingenious in surviving and it was not uncommon to see people wearing rubber sandals made of car tyres due to the lack of money and suitable footwear.

During the summer months when water was scarce, Kon remembered sliding down the sides of deep ravines to reach water and then slowly climbing back to the top with water to provide nourishment to his flock. Finding suitable pastures to feed his flock and sustain himself from starvation, Kon would be on the move constantly during these difficult and lonely times .

At other times he would nearly freeze to death during the winter months due to the lack of suitable clothing and equipment and it was not unusual to be sharing the same shelter if any with the flock around him to keep him warm. Kon confided to me, that despite the harsh and inhospitable environment, his childhood was a happy one and in any case he had nothing else to compare it with to come to any other judgement on his surroundings.

When you consider the hardships the Hellenic people suffered in the past, one wonders whether it has similar traits to that of the monks in the Syrian desert who lived on bread, salt and water for long periods and yes it is true that when man is faced with in difficult circumstances will find ways and means of surviving in any harsh environment. Life may have been tough, the elements not always kind, but on reflection he felt that he was fit, healthy, with few cares in the world, alive and content with his station at that time. Although mind you Kon said, a little extra food would not have gone astray.

Whilst working as a shepherd, during the Civil war between the Royalists and the Communists, Kon was fired upon by one side or the other just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Depending upon where he took his flock, he was still prey to both sides as they would want to murder him in order to obtain his flock to sustain those intent on killing him. This meant that in order to survive he would have to take different paths and routes in order to avoid any group no matter which side of the civil war they may have belonged to.

He was but a simple man who wanted nothing to do with politics and in any case he had no idea what the civil war was all about. It is of interest to note that despite the civil war tearing the country apart and setting brother against brother, father against son, and the civil war did not affect Kon nor did its politics affect him in any way. He was simply trying to survive the elements and minding his own business during difficult times. Yes life was certainly tough for those who took a neutral stance during the Greek civil war.

The Civil war also interrupted the education of many youngsters like Kon and was through sheer luck that he managed to complete year six Primary school. He did not have the luxury of attending a secondary education, but returned to the fields and taking up employment as a shepherd for the next ten years. His grounding of values and ethics were instilled into him by his parents and the extended family and his faith in orthodoxy was strong. It was this grounding that gave him the courage to seek out means of developing himself above the station of a shepherd.

After the Civil war had been over, he was selected to undertake training as policeman at the age of twenty one. One may gather that he was selected for this training as he had taken no active part during the Civil War and therefore was not tainted by its politics. Kon found the training of being a policeman, tough, gruelling and exhaustive, unlike the environmental conditions he had endured as a shepherd in the village. It appears that those years o hardship in the hills and valleys near his home town whilst a shepherd had prepared an hardened him for new adventures and opportunities.

Despite the ideological and Spartan training, Kon did well and embraced his new working environment. He learnt new skills which enabled him to survive under any condition and in fact assisted him later in life. In 1950, his first posting as a policeman took him to Yannina, Epirus in the north of Greece for a twelve month posting. (I found this of interest to me as my own father was stationed in Yannina at the same time as a young soldier).

On completion of that posting he was transferred to Olympia in the Peloponnese for a four year period. After completing his term of duty as a policeman, he was discharged and he returned to his parents in the village seeking employment to assist his mother and father. Employment in Greece was scarce after the Second World War forcing the younger generation to seek work in other countries such as America, Canada and Australia.

Kon however was for a short while able to find the odd job here and there to make ends meet. It did not take him long to realise that he would also have to migrate if he was to survive and make a decent living. His time as a policeman had made him realise that there were other means and opportunities available elsewhere. A life that other than offered by the village and the surrounding towns and as such he was determined to leave the village environment and seek his fortunes overseas.

When he did make some enquiries he found that his passage to Australia was blocked as a result of Egypt under Nasser had closed the Suez Canal to shipping. It was time of rising nationalism in the Arab world and people around the globe were asserting their rights and throwing off their colonial masters so to speak and seek self autonomy and independence. A time of much confusion, resettling of displaced people huge migrations to countries where employment opportunities were bountiful except his in his own beloved country of Greece.

Kon was never a quitter and this setback did not deter him from his objectives. He was persistent and made further enquiries until he was able to find a ship that would take him to Australia. His determination, commitment and persistence finally paid off in 1959 when he was able to find a ship able to navigate through the Suez Canal and then onto Australia. A trip that normally took migrants around four to five weeks depending on the elements.

In Kon's case it took him about a month, he finally arrived in Melbourne Australia. He was met at Port Melbourne pier by Vangelis Panadazopoulos and friends and took him to live in Fitzroy for approximately twelve months with other Greek families. After a short period of acclimatizing to his new environment, he found employment with the PMG and worked long and hard to overcome his lack of the English language. Although Kon lived with friends, he was single and longed to find a partner to settle down and begin a family.

It happened one night that after returning from his work at the PMG, he was taken to one of his friend's home where he was introduced to his future wife Giannoula. To cut a long story short, it was not long before he left the suburb of Fitzroy and relocated to Albert Park where he married Giannoula Filipopoulos in 1960. It is of interest to note that Giannoula had also migrated to Australia and had come from a village called Maniaki in Messenia, Greece. Maniaki is situated very close to the village of Metaxada.

According to Kon, who loved history and was quite knowledgeable on the subject said of Maniaki and its connection to Papaflessas. Maniaki is a historical village where Papaflessas, a former priest turned revolutionary leader, fought against the Turks and fell alongside his men in an 8 hour battle.

It has also been said that after the battle, The Egyptian, Ibrahim Pasha ordered his men to find Papaflessas body, ordered them to clean and wash it. After the body had been cleaned, they leaned it up against a tree and then in admiration for a valiant adversary, the Egyptian Pasha exclaimed to those present. *"Now there is a true man"*. For a better understanding of Papaflessas, its best to conduct one's own research in to the subject as he was such a fascinating individual for his times.

Husband and wife worked to make a decent living, saving money for the future and to achieve their dreams and aspirations. In 1961, Giannoula gave birth to their first son Elias (Louis). Kon worked for two years with the PMG and was considered an excellent worker by his supervisors. In fact his employer would often take him aside and advise him to slow down as they did not wish him to suffer burnout and then lose him as a result of his hard work. Despite the excellent working conditions, salary was poor and Kon decided to leave the security of the PMG for a higher paid salary with the Commonwealth aircraft corporation. Kon enjoyed the work, the people and the environment so much that he remained for eight years.

As time wore on and their status improved, Kon and Giannoula like many others who had migrated during the same period, yearned to return to their place of birth. It was not an easy decision to make for his family as they had created a comfortable and loving environment in their adopted country. However, they felt that they had to return to satisfy themselves that now that they had accumulated sufficient funds to begin their lives anew in their country of origin. Another factor that he took into consideration, was that he had been diagnosed with kidney problems and it was felt that a change of climate would ease the pain and suffering he was having.

Therefore in 1971 Kon left the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation and took Giannoula and young Louis to return to Greece to live in the village of Metaxada, Messenia. One cannot imagine or fathom the emotions that they may have felt returning their place of birth, but like all good things life has a habit of bringing reality to the fore. In the initial stages, everything was fine and idyllic in the village. Life was much simpler, less stress and life appeared more bearable.

Gone were the daily routine of going to work early in the morning and coming home late at night. Gone were the days of trying spending time with the family and maintaining a certain lifestyle. Here in the village they could relax and take life as it should be taken. The family lived on what they produced and young Louise attended the local school. Whilst in Greece, Kon took the opportunity to undertake an operation on his kidneys to remove the kidneys stones which relieved his stress.

However after some five years of living in the village, the family like many other who had returned, found it difficult to readjust and yearned to return to Australia. Kon was dismayed that despite the long hard hours that he had put into a business venture he had undertaken, it was not providing sufficient income for his partner and himself. During those days, the family would often sit at home and wonder what their friends would be doing in Australia.

They missed the company of their friends, the shops, the parties, the outings, the life and the work. They found to their dismay that Greece was not what they had expected and as other had found before them, that Australia had in fact become their home. It was to Australia that they felt that Louise had a chance of being educated, it was Australia that offered hope for their future and that Greece at that time had not progressed to the stage where it could offer them something for the future. Thus, for the second time in their lives, Kon and Giannoula migrated to Australia.

In 1976, after preparations had been made, they said their farewells to those they were leaving behind, and the family returned to Australia. They first went and lived in Carnegie with relatives for some months before renting a flat in the suburb of Oakleigh. With the savings that remained, they were able to put a deposit for a home and soon they moved into their current residence in Willesden Road Oakleigh where they still live today.

Kon was also managed obtain employment with vehicle parts manufacturer working as a machinist, ensuring that the machines were operating efficiently. During this time Giannoula gave birth to their second son Tasos. At work, the environment was tough, difficult and unlike anything that Kon had experienced before. Gone were the days of the PMG and the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation and good managers. Kon now was faced with poor managers, racial prejudice and poor working conditions.

Supervisors lacking management experience made life difficult for Kon and others working in the plant. Life became so bad that he suffered a nervous breakdown and ended up in hospital. Kon spent some time in hospital recuperating from the stresses suffered at work. Work Cover and policies currently enjoyed by workers of today were not apparent nor in existence in these days and stress was difficult to prove in those days.

Kon carried with him documents which he showed me promising me not to reveal its sources as he was afraid that his past employers would hound him yet again. I assured him that his past employers could not touch him after all these years and that laws were in place to stop any harassment. Although my words reassured him, I felt that he was still concerned that his employer or supervisor would come and get him. Suffice to say, Kon still carries the scars of those days and he has been unable to be gainfully employed again. It has been through my own bitter experience to find that depression along with unresolved scars associated with this illness more than often lead to death if they are not dealt with in its early stages.

Now that Kon had retired he found the time to reflect on the past and tried hard to push the miseries of the past behind him. However, there are many times where he is haunted by the memory of brutal supervisors standing over him and bullying him into submission and threatening his life. He remembers well being brow beaten, harassed and put down by his unskilled and uneducated supervisors who failed in their duty of care towards him. Kon said to me that although he had these haunting memories of the past, he and his wife's struggles to raise their sons were not in vain. He pointed out to me with pride, his two sons have done well in life and did not have to suffer what he endured throughout his life.

Kon lived the remaining years of his life with his wife Giannoula in the suburb of Oakleigh and spent his time volunteering his services as a gardener at the College and other times, visiting friends, shopping in the local Oakleigh mall, working in his garden growing vegetables and just enjoying life in general. There are many lessons to be learnt from Kon Panagopoulos story and I for one hope that his life story becomes enshrined for future generations to remember that the quality of life that they enjoy now are as a result of the millions of migrants like Kon who left their homeland for a better life. I don't believe that we should take what we have to today for granted.

Postscript. *At the time of meeting Kon Panagopoulos I was the Business and Public Relations Manager and responsible for overseeing all of the community's administration, financial liquid assets and infrastructure. Throughout my working life, I had made it a rule to get to know every individual that worked with me and/or for me in order to develop further their skills and knowledge and to become a more productive employee.*

I last saw Kon Panagopoulos in Poath Road (Hughesdale) on a corner street near a little cafe that had gone to have a cup of coffee with Con Zois (Vice Principal) and Steve Zafiroopoulos (Head of secondary), both colleagues from the Sts Anargiri College (now Oakleigh Grammar). He looked gaunt, tired and very worn out. My heart went out to him because I knew I could do no more to help him out and to bring closure to the nightmare and demons within him. The only consolation that I can have from any of this is to have written his story as a perpetual reminder for future generations on how cruel man can be to another.

The negative experiences that Kon suffered and his arrogant supervisor would never be tolerated today. It was brought to my attention a few months later that Kon Panagopoulos had died. I really don't care what the medical reports may have written about him for in my opinion he had unresolved issues that could have been resolved. I reflect back to our chats and I put down that he died as a result of severe depression, a broken heart with the inability to obtain the justice that he so rightly deserved. It was as if it was a cancer slowly eating away at him over the years. May he rest in peace and that his story endures for future generations.



The Voice from the Pavement - Peter Adamis is a (not for profit) Journalist/Commentator. He is a retired Australian military serviceman and an Industry organisational & Occupational (OHS) & Training Consultant whose interests are within the parameters of domestic and international political spectrum. He is an avid blogger and contributes to domestic and international community news media outlets as well as to local and Ethnic News. He holds a Bachelor of Adult Learning & Development (Monash), Grad Dip Occupational Health & Safety, (Monash), Dip. Training & Assessment, Dip Public Administration, and Dip Frontline Management. Contact via Email: abalinx@netspace.net.au or via Mobile: 0409965538