

OAKLEIGH A HELLENIC PAST AND PRESENT

The Voice from the Pavement - Peter Adamis 27 march 2013



Oakleigh looking North

Today I went to Oakleigh for a medical appointment and in doing so I took the opportunity to visit my elderly parents and a quick visit to "OERXI" opposite "VANILLA" in the Oakleigh mall.

Driving to the Oakleigh mall, I went to my favourite haunt for a quick breakfast of (wait for it) a "quick plate of souvlaki, washed down with an English breakfast cup of tea" As I was eating, I glanced around the mall and my mind went back to 1973. A time when my parents first moved into the Chadtsone/Oakleigh area from Windsor Prahran.

I was in Malaya and Singapore at the time and was spared the logistics and administration of the family relocating to the eastern suburbs. I remembered well, how drab the buildings were, and the very few shops with a Hellenic flavour. In 1979 on return from my second stint in Malaya, I was posted to Melbourne as a soldier, my wife and I with our two sons lived in Oakleigh south, finding lodgings owned by a Greek. Our home was located beyond the railway bridge near where the supermarket stand today.

Oakleigh had by then a number of shops catering to the Greeks and it was evident that more Greeks were selling their old homes and flocking to the Chadtsone, Oakleigh and Clayton regions, amongst other neighboring suburbs. It was a time of a new Hellenic awakening with the Church and other institutions being built and planned.

In 2005 when I was the Business and public Relations Manager at the Oakleigh Greek Community, the Oakleigh shopping precinct had by then begun to blossom into a truly Hellenic region, with its bright and colored cafes, taverns, restaurants, markets, and a myriad of other shops catering to its Hellenic patrons. One could walk down to the Oakleigh mall and purchase anything Greek that one desired, from clothing to food and other produce whether it was manufactured here in Australia or imported directly from Greece.

The Oakleigh Greek community had by then created a master plan first devised under the spiritual guidance of Father Moutafis, a much loved man throughout his parish. Father Moutafis along with the committee had created the master plan to build office buildings, cafes, car parks and other amenities that would attract businesses such as travel agencies, financial institutions, printing industries, real estate, welfare agencies and even provide office space for the Greek Consulate at competitive rental prices. Alas all of this was to fade away at the early demise of Father Moutafis.

This left a spiritual and leadership vacuum that could not be filled by succeeding clergy or community members. Suffice to say, my thoughts were suddenly jolted into the present by the arrival of two good friends where a discussion soon ensued. My two friends were arguing as to who was going to take responsibility for a speeding ticket.

Was it going to be the driver who was driving the vehicle on behalf of his mate who asked to be driven, or was it the responsibility of the owner of the vehicle who compelled his mate to drive the vehicle in the first place. Listening to the two friends I could not but help burst out laughing for I was witnessing a classic robust and passionate discussion over a trifling matter as what was the right thing to do.

To an outsider one would think that it was full on "punch up" between two rival factions and that it was the end of the world. The driver was stringing the owner on and the owner knew that the driver was stringing him on but neither would budge. After about 45 minutes of haggling, the driver made a big show of it that he was doing the owner a favor and reluctantly signed the speeding ticket.

The fine was one measly point, but to these two mates, it was all or nothing. Had we lived in the pre War of Independence era, who knows when the muskets and sabers would have been used to settle matters and old scores? I for one looked at them and just loved the both of them and for my own "Greekness". Why because they were Greek despite all the years of living in Australia, they still remained Hellenes within.

Today when one walks through the mall in Oakleigh one can be forgiven for thinking that he is back in Greece at some "Plataea" watching the world go by. The Youth being young and extroverted, the mums and dads with their children, the elderly shuffling past from the market, the waiters doing their rounds, shop keepers dressing their widows, a few students "wagging" school and the "manges" slouching in the doorways with a smoke dangling out of the corner of their mouths ogling the "birds" (women) go by.

All of this under the watchful and judgmental eyes of the oldies sitting outside on chairs with their little tables at Chez-Maria, Oresi, Vanilla, Nickos and other smaller taverns and cafes, twirling their korboloi, drinking Greek coffee, smoking their cigarettes and making the odd and profound statements to impress their audience or whoever maybe in the vicinity.

Some of the oldies may well have been instrumental in attracting other Greeks and also in creating business ventures. Who knows, but what is certain is that some wanted to sit in the sunlight enjoying a cool breeze that may infiltrate the corridors of the mall and others just wanted to be seen and heard.

Will Oakleigh survive and still have a Greek presence or flavour in 50 years from now, who knows for even ten years can be a long time. What is certain though is that while the young still reside in Oakleigh and surrounding districts, the Church, Sts Anargiri College (now Oakleigh Grammar) and businesses remaining under Greek ownership, that possibility may still be there. On the other hand it could go the way of Lonsdale Street in Melbourne or worse still like Astoria in New York (USA) which was predominantly Greek in many aspects.



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