

THE POST WAR GENERATION - BECOMING AN AUSTRALIAN STAYING GREEK A POINT OF VIEW BY A CHILD OF THE FIFTIES ERA.



Abalinx Peter Adamis 8 August 2015

I attended a recent lecture at the Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne and Victoria at their new building located in the heart of Melbourne. I must say I was impressed with its architecture given the space it was previously located. I congratulate Bill Papastergiadis the current President and his management committee for embarking on a fiscal adventure that will hopefully lay the foundations for future generations of Australians of Hellenic origins.

It was a typical Melbourne August evening, where the streets were paved with a shimmering light emanating from the rain that had fallen on the ground moments before and illuminated by the streets lights. Not one to be afraid of the rain, I welcomed it as I always feel alive when the elements of nature and I collide in a mutual and compatible relationship. I say this as I had was fortunate to have parked the car only minutes away from the Greek Orthodox Community building and did not have to scarp for shelter from the drizzle of rain.

I entered the lift and up we went to the Mezzanine floor where the lecture was being held. I chuckled to myself as I saw posters and other advertising material displayed on the walls, one of which I smiled to myself. It was ITHEA and organisation that was being managed by my good friend Peter Jasonides (Pontian Lion). I was pleased to see that young Peter had climbed the dizzy heights within the Australian Hellenic community and that finally he achieved the status that he had richly deserved.

I chuckled even further when the posters reminded me when Peter and I world together for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese Welfare organisation under the umbrella of "Employment Training Connection. Had the powers to be allowed Peter Jasonides to act upon his projects and concepts the organisation under his leadership would create it into the most efficient non Anglo Welfare organisation within Australia. It was not to be but that did not deter Peter Jasonides from reaching his life ambitions.

Now, one would wonder what has this to do with the lecture and why the digression? In the first place, I love to take the reader on a ride when reading articles with a little digression here and there to make it more interesting and confusing to the palate. Secondly the short digression enables me to introduce the presenter of the lecturer of whom I had never met nor heard of in Hellenic circles and yet I clearly demonstrating my ignorance of who is who in the Australian Hellenic zoo so to speak.

The best introduction I can give the lecturer is to quote Wikipedia of which is not always the best place to obtain information but it's the best under the circumstances:



"Nicholas Doumanis is an historian of Europe and the Mediterranean world. Born in Australia in 1964, he studied at the University of Sydney and the University of New South Wales, where he acquired his PhD. He has lectured in European history at Macquarie University and the University of Newcastle, and is currently an Associate Professor of History at the University of New South Wales. He is a former editor of The Journal of Religious History, a recipient of the Stanley J. Seeger Fellowship at Princeton University, and an Australian Research Council Fellow at the University of Sydney. Doumanis was awarded the UK Fraenkel Prize for Myth and Memory in the Mediterranean". He is also the author of a number of books. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicholas_Doumanis

Upon alighting from the lift I entered a warm, well lit room which had been reorganised as a lecture room full its full placement of stage, props, screen microphone and a registration table for new comers. It was welcome cry from the old building which suffered from the cold and the ravages of the outside elements. The organiser was busying himself running to and from ensuring that the lecture environment was set, which reminded me when I had to give presentations in my role as a Warrant Officer in front of peers and in my civilian roles a manager.

Making sure that all the items were in place, that there were enough seats, concerned how many would turn up, would it be a success, did we have enough condiments to cater for the guests, did we expect any recalcitrant guests, was the lighting ok and a host of many other minute items that a coordinator of such events had to consider. Mind you I had to perform and any errors would be seen as a negative and cast a mark against my integrity and credibility. As I found a seat in the back where I could have a better vision of the room, I wondered if the same thoughts had gone through the coordinator mind.

Once I noticed that the lecture was about to commence, I took out my mobile and began to record the lecture for future reference and to ensure that any article is based on fact rather than a figment of my imagination. Nicholas Doumanis began his presentation by stating that History of the common man whose origins began in the village had not been written and that history had yet to encapsulate their contributions and life stories within the fabric of Australian society. A great opening that captured my imagination and that of a captivated audience.

Many I may add were aged fifty plus with a sprinkling of the odd youth here and there. He went on to speak about a particular migrant who had been born in a village in the North of the Peloponnese and migrated to Australia where he had worked hard to improve his station in life and that of his family. It was a story familiar to many of us in the audience and we wanted to hear more of what he had to say.

The life cycle of the migrant who arrived in Australia appeared to follow the same pattern as many others had done from other nations that had shed its poor and underprivileged to Australia. The characteristics were: Village, trip to the port of departure (by ship), arrival in Australia, welcomed into a culture that was alien to them, worked at various jobs, saved money for a home, married, children, obtained a trade, became self employed, educated the children, enhanced the business, relocated to a larger home with a big backyard, emulated his environment to that of the old country such as having a gardens that had vegetables, olive trees, fruit trees and grape vines).

Thus over a thirty year period the average migrant had achieved a success that was not possible given the same period of time. They had reached the status of a middle class family with a small business to boot and therefore became a valuable contributor to the Australian society. Those that went onto bigger and better things such as the entrepreneurs, judges, politicians, authors, sporting greats, businessmen and women, Defence Force, Health and medical industries, community, media, entertainment, Unions, Welfare, Religious, Training, and government departments have been recorded and their stories published. All of them having contributed to this home we call Australia.

During this struggle to reach a comfortable life the average migrant family had to take on menial jobs at the start and advance themselves by developing their skills and knowledge and therefore enhancing their status in life. This was easier said than done as it meant huge sacrifices on the part of everyone which in some cases created negative environments that were not conducive to the long term health and well being of an individual. These would manifest themselves later in life, such as mental health, gambling, personal traumas, work place stress, neglect, insecurities ad a host of other life dilemmas which entailed prolonged visits to the psychiatrist and psychologist well versed in such matters.

Nicholas Doumanis also pointed out that although it was common knowledge that migrants had transformed Australia, Australian historians did not know much about the Greeks (or about the other migrants) and did not know how to express that transformation into the annals of history. Therefore Nicholas Doumanis felt that it was important that a history of the average migrant should be thoroughly researched, catalogued and books written to cover this important era of Australian history before it was too late.

At this point of the lecture I wanted to get up and say that he was generalising as other authors had touched upon the subject, but Nicholas Doumanis covered this by stating that,

yes authors a covered the migrant era but it was only about those individuals that had achieved greatness in their respective fields and nothing about the common migrant. I must say that I had to agree with him except for the author "Price" who many years ago had covered this very aspect but had not gone onto write about the common Greek migrant.

It is fair to say at this point that for the past thirty years I had been quietly collecting personal stories of individuals because I too had recognised some years ago that the average Greek migrant stories had gone unwritten and would be gone forever. There were some attempts at schools where children were encouraged to write about their parents and grandparents migrant journeys but that it had come to a stop and that there was no coordinated effort to gather all the stories under one umbrella. I also reminded myself of the Latrobe Dardallis archives under the tutelage of Professor Tamis that housed many thousands of records as well as those that were compiled by Mimis Sophocleous who was located in an upper story office in Lonsdale Street.

The lecture did not stop there but went on to explain to the audience how the passage to Australia was obtained. He said that there were two forms of passage, ne being an assisted passage and the other where a migrant came under his own steam. In both cases however funds were exchanged in one format or another. The assisted migrant passage meant that when they arrived in Australia they had to work their passage off until it was paid.

The migrant who paid his way did so by borrowing the money and paying it back and/or selling his personal assets in Greece. Whatever the case may have been all migrants no matter their circumstances or status in life all went through the migrant camps which were former military camps, Such as Watsonia, Northam, Bonegilla and others to name but a few.

It was a harrowing experience which was fraught with worry and stress and not understood by succeeding generations when their parents told their children "we came out to Australia for a better life in order that you can have a good education and do well in life". I remember as a child being subjected to this time after time until it became second nature.

I would be told this at a time when I had misbehaved or had done something that was not compatible with my parents understanding that the world had changed and that they had to change with it in order to survive in a culture to that one was used to. One must have to take into account that many migrants had brought with them the insecurities of their previous environment, a country racked by civil war, their superstitions such as the evil eye amongst others, the food, cultural and community habits, religion and at the same time find means of sending back money to relatives in order that they too could survive.

Nicholas Domanis ended the lecture by saying that insufficient research was being undertaken and that it was imperative that more work was done to bring to light the many migrant stories of the common man and woman into the limelight. He did however touch upon the many migrant brides that had come to Australia to marry husbands those they had never seen and that their stories on the ships of which there were a few such as the Kyrenia and the Patris in the early fifties.

At this juncture my mind went to our North American cousins, brethren, friends and families and wondered whether they taken the time or made the effort to record the common migrant stories or did they too succumb to the seductiveness of a whole new way of life and fail to record them. I thought of those in South America, South Africa and in the distant lands of Russia and hoped that someone what the courage, commitment and determination to record the Hellenic Diaspora story of the ordinary man and woman.

At the conclusion of the lecture many of the audience wanted to ask questions that needed answers and Nicholas Doumanis was only too happy to answer. I for one was most impressed and I say that honestly as I am not one to be influenced by those who profess to be an expert on a subject only to find that they were shallow. Nicholas Doumanis was not one of those lectures and I feel that we shall hear more of him in the future.

I approached Nicholas Doumanis at the end of the lecture and gave him my card and hoped to hear from him in the future. My parting remarks were jokingly said that "I had heard that Sydney his home town was an outer suburb of Melbourne." He smiled as we shook hands and made my way to the lift for the homeward journey. I must say that the Melbourne Sydney rivalry is till strong even amongst the generation of Australians.

Disclaimer: Apologies to the purist for the poor grammar and punctuation.



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