



DID GEORGE KOTSIAKOS HAVE AN ANCIENT SPARTAN HERITAGE

Peter Adamis Abalinx 15 October 2017

Today, Maurice and I went for a long drive into the Taygetos Mountains seeking the relatives if any of a chap called George Kotsiakos. George was the Grandfather to Thelma Barwick, wife of Maurice Barwick.

It was uncanny and not programmed that on this day Sunday 15 October being the Birthdate of Thelma Barwick (nee Kotsiakos) that we embarked on this long journey seeking Thelma's grandfather's village.

From discussions with Thelma long before she had succumbed to the dreaded cancer, she would sometimes speak in fond terms of her Grandfather and that his origins were in the vicinity of Modern Sparta. Recently Maurice and I reviewed the few pages left behind by Thelma and found that her grandfather's village was located high up in the Taygetos mountains that could only be reached by goat and donkey tracks barely wide enough to traverse by humans. Today those same mountain tracks have been replaced by a modern road snaking through the mountain passes and covered in asphalt. The other roads connecting the upper Taygetos mountain villages however have retained their original rocky pedestrian track of which agriculture vehicles dare to travel.

As for us, it was a hair raising experience to say the least, for me anyway as I was on the side that looked down the many ravines, gullies and thousand foot drops. At one point we had driven up to 17000 metres high into the Taygetos Mountains to a town named Anvraniti and the most likely place of George Kotsiakos origins.

Maurice had asked for assistance when he was back in Beaufort, Victoria, Australia and I had promised to do what I could. When he arrived we made some enquiries with the locals in the village who advised that the name Kotsiakos may have been a nickname. Undeterred by this we made further enquiries with Carol Kostakos Petranek, a professional researcher in the USA. She is involved with the Washington DC Family History Centre, Family research and Citizen Archivist, National Archives as well as having worked with Genealogist, Family Historian. Carol gave us some ideas to pursue and asked that we try and identify the village if at all possible of George Kotsiakos. Carol also visited me in Pellana while she was in Greece recently and it was great to have met each other after meeting on social media due to joint interests.

During one of our numerous trips to the Northern villages, we were provided with additional information from two unlikely sources. Both of which owned taverns and both were well known in their communities. One was John Glekas in the town of Georgitsi and the other was named Arthur from the town of Vergadeika. In both cases these two gentlemen gave us the clues to head towards a village called the “cottages of Soha” and the village of Soha higher up in the Taygetos mountain range. Both gentlemen also promised to ask members within their network to see if there were any surviving relatives and/or where their whereabouts were. Suffice to say both Maurice and I were excited as the jigsaw puzzle began to take shape and form a picture.

We travelled by taxi to the cottages of Soha where we met with some locals who advised that the name Kotsiakos was in fact from the village Soha, higher up the Taygetos mountains. Undeterred, we made our way up the endless winding track admiring the jagged, mountainous environment filled with fir trees, wild oak, holy, briar bushes, steep ravines, re-entrants, valleys, towering pinnacles of natural rock formations, waterfall structures that still trickled with remnants of previous springs rains and melting snow.

Past the odd olive plantations, numerous streams, huge caverns galore, some which had walls erected to house animals such as goats, sheep and cattle; ruins of a bygone era, miniature churches, isolated cottages some of which were in good conditions while others whose roofs had caved in exposing the inner cells of a once warm and hospitable building. Attempting to describe the savage environment in words is one thing and another to experience the breath taking views.

One must experience the exhilaration and thrill that we were exposed to in order to truly appreciate the magnitude, vastness and beauty of the Taygetos mountain range. Words are not enough. Mind you, the landscape was scarred by the introduction of 21 century technology and it was not usual to spot up high the aerals of mobile transmitters, Television aerals, Weather stations and the never ending long black plastic pipes carrying water to the agricultural fields up on high. Furthermore long lines of electric wires hung in the balance from one wooden structure, crossing ravines, gullies and small valleys caring electricity to remote villages and isolated homes.

Without sounding or being political, all of this was made possible during the Military Junta period of the Colonels in the seventies. A time when the towns and villages were clean, free of graffiti, vandalism, respect was in the word, pride in the nation, running water to most if not all of the villages and towns, electricity to all the communities, roads built connecting isolated villages and in infrastructure put into place bringing Greece into the modern world. A time of prosperity and a renewed energy bringing hope to a people that had not known peace since the war of independence from the Ottomans. Unfortunately the Military Junta overstepped the mark and also with it the displeasure of the Greeks thus bringing about their down fall. It is not up to me to judge the rights and wrongs of that era other than to comment on the positive aspects of their governance.

After a few hours of driving up the winding roads we managed to reach the village of Soha. A tiny village high up in the mountains with views to the South and the West. Ideally located, hidden from below and from view due to its location. It also gave the inhabitants the opportunity to flee if they spotted the occupiers of that particular period, Venetian, Franks or Ottomans (Turks); who if they were caught would have been slaughtered. This often occurred during the Ottoman occupation as it did happen to the inhabitants of the Cottages of Soha. The people of that village were slaughtered and their heads decapitated and thrown in one of the many ravines. Yes the occupation of Lakonia and the Peloponnese was indeed a difficult period for the Greeks and most escaped into the mountains seeking refuge.

At the village we drank water from the communal mountain spring water which was clear as day unlike the mineral milky water that we in Pellana from time to time drink. In fact when Maurice and I boil our water to make tea, the sentiments of the minerals left behind stick to the pot making it difficult to scour later when cleaning. Still a few extra minerals in our bodies will not do us any harm, but then again who am I to judge, I am no medical doctor. We took numerous photographs and spoke to one young agricultural worker named Kostas, who happened to drive by and gave us some valuable information about the surname Kotsiakos.

He said that the name Kotsiakos was known in the village but its origins were from a village further up the mountain side some four kilometres away at a place called Anvraniti. When he saw that we were travelling by taxi he advised against driving through the short route only because felt that it was dangerous due to the rocky road, winding, twisting and narrow track that snaked its way to Anvraniti and said that the longer route was much safer.

As we were about to jump in the taxi and follow the longer route which would have added another thirty kilometres we came across another gentleman who was 80 years old and went by the name of Tasos. Tasos introduced himself and invited us into his home for a Greek coffee and chat. It was an offer too good to refuse and we hoped that he would shed further light on the subject of the Kotsiakos surname. We soon found out that Tasos could speak English and confided in us that he had spent some time in Ottawa, Canada and had run a restaurant with his brother who had since passed away some time ago.

During our discussion, Tasos gave us a brief outline of the history of the village, stating that there were only ten people living in the village and no children. He was concerned like many other elders that the village would one day become deserted and the homes fall into disrepair and be forgotten. Tasos also advised us that a woman lived in the village who had married a Kotsiakos but her husband had recently died. When pressed to see whether it was possible to visit her, Tasos advised that the woman was now elderly and was cared by her children who would visit her from time to time and we came to the conclusion that a visit to the elderly lady would be pointless.

As we drank our Greek coffee and ate some of the “koulourgia” (biscuits/cookies), Tasos advised us that if we travelled slowly it was possible to drive to the next village of Anvrانيتι, but to be wary and careful of the narrow and rocky road that led to the town. His description of the route was extremely accurate and saved us much heartache when we took his advice. After all it saved us the trouble of back tracking and adding the additional 30 kilometres. Tasos asked Maurice in his broken English what did he think of Greece and Maurice responded in the affirmative and spoke positively of time thus far in the country.

Maurice that he was considering returning again the following year upon which Tasos advised him that he is willing to sell his home to Maurice for 65000 Euros. A small sum compared to the size of the house with balconies and double story homestead. Tasos did sweeten the deal by saying that had bought the building for 40000 Euros, spent 30000 on renovations and was willing to sell it to Maurice for the sum mentioned above. Maurice said that Tasos offer was generous and appreciated the gesture but would have to consider all of the ramifications involved and think on it.

After a while, we took our leave of Tasos, thanking him for his hospitality and made our way towards the taxi located further down the village, taking some flowers from our grateful host who wished us a good journey and hoped to see us again the following year. Dimitri our taxi driver, guide and travel companion drove the vehicle over the mountains towards the village of Anvrانيتι, chuckling at my expense as he could see the colour drain from my face when we came to the narrow pathways of the track and I just so happened to be on the side looking down the thousands of metres drop down below. If my undies did not get soiled, I can tell that I was shitting bricks in any case. As for Maurice, he showed no fear as he was on the opposite side behind the driver oblivious to the fear I was experiencing and failing to see the little hair I had on my head being raised.

When we finally reached the village of Anvrانيتι, we parked the vehicle and took numerous photographs of environment and I must say the views were just breathtaking and wondering why the heck we did even bother live where we did when Gods splendour was here for the taking. We could see far below the mountains and into the distant valleys, villages and isolated homesteads that dotted the rugged and craggy mountains. After taking single and group photographs we walked to the local tavern and sat down for a well-earned lunch of Lamb, potatoes, country Greek salad, bread, water and wine we did not manage to drink because it was forgotten although we had ordered it.

We managed to speak to the local inn keeper named Ilias who to our delight confirmed the name of Kotsiakos being indigenous to the region as there was till one family that had connections and ties to the village and that the younger relatives of the Kotsiakos family would visit and go hinting amongst the mountains valleys. Whether the residing Kotsiakos family were related to the family of Thelma Barwick (nee Kotsiakos) was a matter which could only be confirmed by speaking directly with them. Unfortunately time was of the essence and it was not possible to make direct contact. This would have to wait for another time and another visit to the village of Anvrانيتι.

However although we did not get the opportunity to finalise our research, I personally was pleasantly surprised to be greeted by my cousin Nikos Bakis, an Australian of Greek parentage who was born in Australia and brought to Greece to be educated. Nick was a freelance journalist, a runner, a lover of ancient history, big into orienteering, hiking and a great supporter of ancient Pellana where like me his origins lay.

Cousin Nikos advised me that he often came up to the village as he had interests in hiking, orienteering and taking foreign visitors to trek through the Taygetos mountains. During our chat he introduced me to his friend named George who ran the international trekking and orienteering organization and I must say, George was a wealth of local knowledge.

George advised us that the name of the village Anvranti was actually two words: "An" meaning "up" and "Evreiniti" meaning "Jews". He stated that during the 16th or 17th century when the Venetians controlled the Peloponnese renaming it "Morea"; being of the Christian faith, hunted down the Jewish residents and slaughtered them. The Jewish people that managed to escape the Venetians made their way up the difficult and at time impossible goat tracks to found the village of Anvranti.

It did not take long for the village to grow and prosper as the Jewish people were at that time tradesmen of every sort and had not been subject to the prohibition of trades that their fellow Jews had been subjected to in other lands of the Mediterranean. The prohibition of working in the numerous trades of the time was made as a means of assisting the local trades to flourish and not have to compete with the Jews who were probably more articulate and better at their trade. The Jews over time were forced into lending money, a profession which brought them wealth. Prosperity and unfortunately the envy and greed of others in their midst. This prohibition however was not meted out to the Jews living in the Lakonian region.

Soon the news got around that the village of Anvranti was a haven and a refuge from the hunters whether they were Venetian, Frankish or Ottoman occupiers of Greece and as such attracted many made their way to the village. The village like the town of Georgitsi in the North of Lakonia housed the hunted, the oppressed, the vagabond, the thieves, brigands, poor families and those seeking respite from their oppressors. Many would arrive from the Mani area where the remnants of the ancient Spartans had fled to after the power of the Spartans declined.

The village became so popular for those seeking refuge that it grew into a town of immense proportion that rivalled that of little Sparta which during that period was nothing but a few cottages of that. It was interesting to hear that the mountain towns of Georgitsi and Anvranti located high up in the mountains attracted the oppressed and those seeking refuge from their hunters. One in the south and the other in the North and both attracting refugees from the Mani region.

When we spoke of the surname Kotsiakos, George advised us that anyone with the ending “akos” meant that their origins were from the Mani region. This was a piece of valuable information which required further investigation by Maurice in his search for the origins of George Kotsiakos. On reflection one could say that George Kotsiakos may have his roots and DNA in the ancient Spartans.

However not all was lost as it was now ascertained using the bare facts left by Thelma and the informed thus gleaned so far that George Kotsiakos was possibly born in the village of Anvranti and that he was born in 1881, leaving the village at the age of nine (1890), making his way to Athens, boarding a ship headed for the USA to stay with relatives. Leaving the USA the age of 16 (1897) and travelling to Australia where he became an Australian citizen at the age 28 (1909).

He met and married his Australian born wife and had two sons, Arthur and David. The family worked another chap with a surname of Dimopoulos who sold his share in the business returning back to Greece. George and his family continued to grow and prosper becoming an integral part of the community and a wealthy businessman. It is known that he travelled back to Greece on three occasions. The remainder of George Kotsiakos life in Australia is a subject best written and chronicled by his surviving relatives. All that I can add from my meagre sources is that Thelma Barwick loved her Grandfather and he in turn doted her as his granddaughter. One hope that our trip to the mountainous village of upper Taygetos has shed some further light on the origins of George Kotsiakos and that it make the research being conducted by Carol Kostakos Petranek in the USA a little easier to trace George through passenger ship manifests and other likewise material.

Acknowledgements: I thank all those involved in helping Maurice and I in researching the origins of George Kotsiakos. The day was a memorable that will never be forgotten. I am just so very sad that Thelma was not here today to see the results of our research to date. I am quite sure that she is having a chuckle at our adventures.

2015 and 2016 for me were years of reflection, treatment and recovery. 2017 has so far been good and one hopes that it will continue to be so. I know not to dwell on what could have been but to ensure that whatever time we have left is not squander in futile objectives that lead to nowhere. I intend to make life more meaningful and worthwhile, worthy of those who had a hand in making me who I am today. Life as we know it can only be sustained by vigilance and with that vigilance comes responsibility. Let us hope that 2017 is a good one.



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