

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ETHNIC GROUPS OF YOUNGSTOWN

Personal Experiences

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GUS MAVRIGIAN

Interviewed

by

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on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: GUS MAVRIGIAN
INTERVIEWER: Molly McNamara
SUBJECT: Ethnic Groups of Youngstown
DATE: August 9, 1988

MM: This is an interview with Dr. Gus Mavrigian for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Ethnic Groups of Youngstown, by Molly McNamara, recorded at Dr. Mavrigian's residence, at 31 Hamilton Avenue, Poland, Ohio, on August 9, 1988.

Dr. Mavrigian, can you give me some background on your family? Your parents? Your brothers and sisters?

GM: Yes, my parents Andrew and Sophia Mavrigian, were both born on the Island of Crete, Greece. They came to America as young people about seventeen years of age. They settled as immigrants. They established themselves in various locations near factories on the East coast, in Massachusetts, and in West Virginia's coal mine area and finally here in Youngstown, in the steel industry. Father spent his lifetime in the steel industry here in Youngstown.

MM: Do you know what he did in steel mills?

GM: He worked as a fabricator, and as a painter for Republic Steel Corporation. He worked basically in the fabrication section of the Truscon Division of Republic Steel. Truscon made metal sash, reinforcing bars, steel joists, and other construction products.

MM: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

GM: There was a family of six children. The oldest was Angelo, the next would be Harriet, and then Ann, myself and my twin brother Steve, and my younger sister Helen; three boys and three girls.

MM: Where did your parents settle once they came here to Youngstown?

GM: They settled like many immigrant families in the proximity to the church. Our church, St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church, on Walnut Street, had a very large contingent of Greeks that settled and lived as family close to the church. We had block parties, house visitations, and celebrations of Saint's Day or Name Day. In other words, if your name is Mary, when it is Saint Mary's Day, the whole community would celebrate and honor you. This is sort of a lost action today -ashame that people do not honor each other on their sacred patron Saint Day.

MM: Now, what street did you live on when you were young?

GM: I was born on Bentley Avenue, right behind Truscon Steel Company, adjacent to the factory where my father worked. Later we moved and I spent about eighteen years of my life in the McGuffey and Albert Street area, which is now the McGuffey Plaza area. I attended East High School.

MM: Can you describe to me what it was like growing up in Youngstown when you were a youngster?

GM: Well, I recall that it was a very enjoyable period. We had lots of fun. People were very, very friendly. Doors were left unlocked, with block parties, celebrations on name days and birthday parties. We had no conveniences like automobiles at that time or television, but we had the love and respect of each other.

MM: Now, the community that you lived in, where there a lot of Greeks or were there a lot of other ethnic cultures?

GM: We more or less stuck to the Greek community. Businesses included Paleologos' grocery store, in downtown Youngstown on Watt Street; the Poulakos' donut shop, the Kissos' News shop, the Hagelis' general trade store (selling Greek and Italian food), on East Federal Street. We worked and lived near the church on the East side and always walked to downtown Youngstown. We would walk to church from the McGuffey area to Walnut Street which is about a fifteen to twenty minute walk.

MM: I think that this is the first time that I ever heard of somebody, so far that I have interviewed, somebody tell me that the community that they lived in was you know the majority of one ethnic background. Most of them talk about having such a mixture on the East side and whatever. There was such a mixture of different cultures.

GM: In the early 1930's and 1940's, I think that you still had ethnic ties that were very close. You would find a contingent of Greeks working in one factory and living near each other; similarly, you would find a contingent of Polish people or Irish people that lived near each other. Today we take great pride in unity. We have eleven Orthodox churches: Bulgarian, Russian, Hungarian, Greek, etc. and they are better knit today than they were thirty years ago.

MM: So you are saying that you think that they got along?

GM: Well, what is happening is the disipation or a reduction of the membership in the Greek church and consequently you look to your brothers in the other Orthodox or boundaries of faith.

MM: Okay, do you remember for instance, World War II? Could you take me through that, what you remember of that?

GM: Yes, I remember World War II very well. My oldest brother Angelo, went to the service. He was four years older than I. I recall the day that he left for the service. It was a sad day for the family. He served in the European theatre of war, during World War II, and then near the end of the war, my twin brother Steve and I both enlisted in the Air Force. This was late in 1944. Of course the war was just coming to an end. So it affected our family because it divided the family of six. All of a sudden you had the three males absent from the household and you had the three sisters left at home.

MM: Can you just describe to me your family itself? Were they very involved with the church and the cultural heritage for instance, of the Greeks?

GM: Yes, I think that if you would look at our consecration booklet, I will provide you with a copy, it does reflect the history and development of our parish. I did some personal research through the Youngstown Vindicator. For example, and I discovered that back in the 1930's if you would look in the Church Notice section, it would say St. Nicholas Church, offered the Orthros, the mass, (for example the mass or liturgy at 10:00 a.m.), and every Sunday afternoon you had a cultural hour. You had a social get together. So you maintained that family tie within the church for more of the love of each other and the love of our Lord. We would have recitals, violin playing, guitars, or the Greek instruments the Bazooki, dancing and just enjoying life. That was basically it. So this is how the community grew. Today that seems to be absent. The young people get married and they leave the parish. Not only in the Greek church but elsewhere there is a tremendous prob-

lem created by the absence of young adults within the church community.

MM: Yes. You also mentioned that you were in Korea?

GM: No, I was recalled during the Korean Conflict. I had served an additional year as a reservist for the Air Force, I was stationed in Louisiana, and in Colorado, at Lowry Air Force Base.

MM: Okay, after you were married did you stay in the Youngstown area?

GM: Upon discharge from the Air Force in 1951, I was married and living in Denver, Colorado. We loved the Colorado territory, which at that time Denver was strictly a tourist mecca. We loved Denver and spent the first year and half of our married life in Denver, where I worked for a company called Gates Rubber Company. I received my first exposure as an applied mathematician there. Our oldest son Michael was born in Denver. We became home-sick, so early in 1954 we decided to come back to Youngstown area. In Youngstown, I had difficulty getting employment. So, I decided to utilize my Korean GI Bill. My wife lived with her family here on the East side of Youngstown and I went to Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh, PA, traveling back and forth by train or bus. I had no car at that time. I received my MS degree in mathematics from Carnegie Tech in June 1954.

MM: Where did you live in Youngstown? What street?

GM: My family, the Mavrigian's, lived on McGuffey Road, near the McGuffey Plaza, but as a married man I lived on Shehy Street for a number of years, and then from Shehy our family moved to Hamilton Avenue in Poland, our current residence.

MM: That is where you live now. On Shehy Street, I know several people have mentioned that they have lived there. What was the ethnic makeup there? Did you find it different?

GM: No, it was not different. You had very few Greeks in that section, you had mostly Italians and Irish, a good mixture. We had no racial problems, blacks and whites. We were well knit as a family. We enjoyed many good times in Lincoln Park, swimming, picnicking, and so forth. But there was an absence there on Shehy Street of Greeks who are now scattered. They all head for the suburbs.

MM: I was going to say that this must be the time when everybody started moving out of the area.

GM: This would be the late 1950's. It started the exodus from the downtown area.

MM: Can you tell me a little bit about the church itself? The Orthodox religion? Some of the holidays that you practice? How they differ perhaps from some of the others. I don't know some of the other cultural or ethnic churches in this area.

GM: Well, I think that in general, the Greeks are very proud. The fact that the family is centered around the church and so it is a very prayerful moment when youngsters grow up and maintain their ties through the church. I think that it is the strict upbringing that the mother has and her influence on the children. For young girls for example, it was very difficult to date, you had to be chaperoned all of the time. I won't call it the Oedipus Complex, but strict adherence to the church principles, I think, helped the Greek population grow professionally.

MM: Is it true that, this may be getting a little off the track, but were a lot of Greeks painters?

GM: Yes, you will find that even today that many Greek people are painting contractors and they are successful in this profession. Others are in the restaurant business. I think that if I had to identify occupations for area Greeks in business, I would first list restaurant operator and secondly painting contractor.

MM: Do you know why?

GM: Well, I think that first of all the Greek men are very proud, and industrious groups of people. You will find that in their native country of Greece they competed, they were sponge-divers, or fisherman, and they lived on the sea, so they had to work very hard today they accept a challenge like climbing these tall towers to paint. So it is the challenge that they had as divers or painters that has led them to this competition.

MM: How about within the Greek Church, do you find that there is a lot of competition between the people of Crete or from Rhodes or from like the main land?

GM: Oh, yes you will find that they are very factional. As a matter of fact you will find that in the city of Campbell, the majority of the Greeks there have relocated from one island, the Island of Kalymnos. These Kaymni folks are very proud and help each other out. It is not unusual to see the member of one family (from this Campbell parish of Archangel Michael) labor extensively to bring relatives to America. In my parish of

St. Nicholas, located in downtown Youngstown, the parishioners came from many parts of Greece.

MM: So there is a big difference. Did they get along though as well you think with the other Greek churches?

GM: Oh, yes. They cooperated, especially on a holiday I think that it is very important. One good feature is what we call mono-ecclesia (a celebration in one church); in other words, when it is St. John's Name Day in January, the other two churches will close down and the three populations will assemble at St. John's to honor and celebrate the St. John's Patron Saints Day. When it is Archangel Michael's Name Day, in November, the other churches close down and we go to Campbell. Then when it is St. Nicholas's Day, in December, the others honor us. So we do maintain that tradition of honoring Patron Saints.

MM: That is interesting.

GM: So, there is cooperation.

MM: Yes.

GM: Also, March 25th is a very important day. It is called Greek Independence Day, when the Greeks broke away from the Turkish Rule and that tradition is maintained every year with celebrations, dancing, speeches, etc. The churches often get together and have a common Independence Day celebration. Thus, a great degree of cooperation still exists. There is of the a movement of sorts to unite two of the churches. a call for enosis or unity. So, altogether we try to unite, there are always minor conflicts.

MM: Yes.

GM: However, we are trying to build one big parish, one big community center in Youngstown, by combining the parishes at St. John and St. Nicholas.

MM: That is interesting. Okay, going back to some of the history of Youngstown or your own personal history, you had said that you worked in the steel mills for awhile too?

GM: Yes, we had to augment the income of our parents that so many young people at age sixteen, seventeen would go out and work. They would sell newspapers, or work in factories and retail stores. In my personal experiences I worked in steel mills part time while I was going to Carnegie Tech. I worked full and part time for companies as the Youngstown Vindicator, Commercial Shearing, Republic Steel Corporation, and Youngstown Sheet &

Tube Company. I have extensive experience laboring in the open hearth departments of the steel industry.

MM: Can you describe to me how Youngstown was changing at this time? You had described a little bit when you were young and say now that you are older, what changes have you seen in the Youngstown area?

GM: Well, I have seen this second generation become very independent. They have matured, they have developed professional attitudes. Our church was born, that is developed around 1925 let's say, and at that time it was a growing experience. We had no medical doctors, no lawyers in the parish. Today, it is a reversal. We have many of our young people graduating with diplomas, and degrees of professional areas such as law, medicine, education, and engineering. Now that we have a great professional and technical society, in a way it is hurting the parish because people are becoming independent. That is, with higher education and materialism, our youth graduate and leave the area for successful professional careers, leaving the church without leaders.

MM: Do you think that this is sort of tearing away from the old traditional breek?

GM: Yes, it is definitely tearing away at that fabric which brought us together here as one family. People are too independent, they belong to their individual country clubs, and slightly beginning to deviate from the church. Church attendance has been shrinking for instance, young folks leave the parish, and a significant number of mixed marriages occur.

MM: Yes.

GM: You see in the past, if you go back thirty years many of the marriages in the Greek church were by arrangement, so you maintained those cultural ties. You maintained that love for Greek attitudes. Today, I would say that in ninety percent of our marriages, one partner is not Greek. As a consequence, you may have the family leaving the parish and going to a Non-Orthodox parish, or you may have only one member of the family attending the services and not the entire family. So that mixed marriage has actually split the parish community.

MM: Now, you speak Greek right?

GM: Oh, yes.

MM: And did you learn that from your parents?

GM: Yes. Again, one important tradition is that, while elementary and high school youngsters were more or less forced to go through Greek language school. We would come home from our public school; let's say East High School locally, and then in the late afternoon attend the Greek Language School two days a week, and this would go on for four or five years. So, many of the second generation people are well versed in reading, writing, and speaking the Greek language.

MM: And how about your children, do they speak Greek?

GM: Well, here is a good example, my wife is not Greek. She is of Italian background, so my youngsters know very little Greek. We speak a little bit around the house, we attend Greek functions like picnics and dances and they love Greek dances. They enjoy the Greek music, but they do not really practice the Greek language.

MM: So in your own family you think that you have lost some of the tradition?

GM: Yes, definitely.

MM: I see. You said that your parents never went back to Crete?

GM: Yes, that is true. They were so busy raising a family and they put their entire heart and dedication to getting the best for the six children.

MM: I know that it was common, probably at the time that they came here that, I am finding this with a lot of Greeks, where one member of the family would come over here work for a period of time and then go back, but this I understand is not the case then with your family

GM: True, it is not the case in my family. My father came here by himself, and then my mother (from the same island) came at a later time. And they met, I guess that they met as young people working in different factories in Massachusetts. They were married in Rutgers, New Jersey.

MM: I see. Do you know why they came here to this area in particular?

GM: Well, they came here at the great period of immigration when Europeans looked at America for a promising future. They had no future in Greece. If you look at the Greek islands, life was simple - farming and fishing - and raising herds of sheep or cattle, farming and fishing, with no heavy industrial effort. So, to get a better life they came to America seeking improvements

and a challenge for the future.

MM: Do you know why they picked Youngstown in particular?

GM: No, they migrated. As I said, they landed in Massachusetts and worked in the textile mills, then they went from there, I believe, to Virginia and worked in the peanut factories. They went from textiles, to peanuts, to the West Virginia coal mines. They seemed to follow patterns of movement: If they heard of a better opportunity elsewhere, they moved. So they were very mobile, they were transient in moving from state to state. They went from Massachusetts to Virginia, to West Virginia, and finally, from the coal mines, my father heard of opportunity in the steel mills, here in Youngstown.

MM: I see.

GM: His last thirty years of labor were spent in the steel mills, especially at Republic Steel Corporation.

MM: Do you think that it also had to do with that there were a lot of people of his own background from this area too?

GM: Oh yes. They were here, relatives and friends. Again all Greeks in America had this opportunity and it was just this word of mouth communication that attracted people. For example, if you heard of a good job for a historian, say in West Texas, you would probably go to Texas. It is that notice of availability that attracted attention.

MM: Right. Okay, have you ever been to Crete?

GM: Yes, I was very fortunate about ten years ago, I spent eighteen days in Europe, visiting Crete where I met several cousins. I found a totally different world or lifestyle on this Island of Crete..

MM: How so?

GM: Well, people were very friendly. Everywhere I went in Greece, I was treated with great respect. It is rude if you turn down a meal offer in Greece. So they were very friendly and gave me a terrific time, and I was able to travel the monestaries. More or less I was able to view the ancient part of Greece, where the pace of life is different than ours here. I went to telephone some friends and I was told that thus was improper because from 2:00 to 6:00 p.m. they have there siesta. They take a break, and then they party and dance all night. They have a great time and a great love of life. I saw all modes of transport. I saw people walking, riding

donkeys, also, riding bicycles, and driving autos and trucks. It is quite an experience to witness this conflict of worlds.

MM: A different world.

GM: Yes. It is unspoiled right now.

MM: I just have one last question for you. Since this is an election year, I was wondering what your impressions are of candidate Michael Dukakis?

GM: Well, I am very proud that finally, in our life time, we get to see the ethnic people treated with great respect. I believe that Governor Dukakis, has all of the credentials to make a fine president. He is I think, a very competent leader. I may not agree with his issues (say on abortion for example), but I think that over all I am proud that as a Greek he is running for the presidency and I would definitely support him.

MM: I was just curious.

GM: Yes, it is prideful and the proper thing to do-to back a member of a church organization and proven leader.

MM: Right.

GM: I pray that my comments, through my personal experiences, are useful in your assemblage of data in the oral ethic study in this valley.

MM: That helps me a lot. Is there anything that you would like to mention that I haven't covered?

GM: Well, I think that if you want to really extend your study and make it more meaningful in terms of interpretation and facts, I think that you should look at some of the references that I have mentioned. There are two excellent MA (master of arts) theses, here at Youngstown State University. One thesis is by Dr. Kyriacos Markides and the other one is by Rev. Fr. John Alexandrou. Both did a master of arts thesis on the subject of Greeks in Youngstown, Ohio. They show the background of the local Greeks, their church affiliation, and their personal characteristics. Both authors also extended predictions of the future for Greek life in the valley.

MM: I wonder how much of the predictions are true?

GM: Well, I think that it is time to examine the conclusions drawn in these theses.

MM: That was done sometime ago, twenty years ago?

GM: Yes, this first thesis was completed in 1966, twenty-two years ago. It is interesting to note that this author, Dr. Markides, who is now a PH.D. in sociology, made predictions that we should look at. The object of his thesis was to explore the degree of assimilation of Greeks in Youngstown. Herein, he said that the two Greek communities of St. John and St. Nicholas only exist in Youngstown as disjoint churches because of factions.

MM: Is that true?

GM: Yes, that is true. That is why you have St. John's and St. Nicholas's, two distinct parishes.

MM: Really?

GM: Yes. From Greece they brought back their political beliefs and carried them to America. Hostilities between the Greeks in Youngstown existed during the early years of immigration because of politics from their mother-land.

MM: But you think that they get along now?

GM: Yes, today there is much more cooperation. Lack of cooperation then, you see left the door open for the new generation to accept the general culture. Most members of St. John's were considered to be professionals and proprietors, whereas St. Nicholas the other community, consisted mostly of a laboring force.

MM: That is interesting.

GM: From both of these parishes, higher value education is valued highly. It is a strong assimilation force. Mixed marriages are now well accepted by the second generation.

MM: I guess that those are true any how. Some of his predictions.

GM: Addendum (added during review). It is significant to note how true the predictions are becoming. Both theses cited (completed in 1966 and 1978, respectively) predict that factions will disappear and unity or merging of the two parishes will occur. Today this merger appears near. Another important indicator of the Greek culture was entertainment. The Greek-Americans, whether from St. John's or Nicholas' displayed a positive attitude towards Greek dancing. In social gatherings and picnics, they danced to both tunes of Greek and American music. As one second generation Greek girl said, "If I lose everything else Greek in me, I am

hoping that I will never stop loving Greek dancing."

END OF INTERVIEW