

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Greek Culture Project

Campbell, Ohio

O. H. 634

CALIOPE MASTROVASELIS

Interviewed

by

Wilfredo Rivera

on

October 25, 1980

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: CALIOPE MASTROVASELIS

INTERVIEWER: Wilfredo Rivera

SUBJECT: Greek immigration to Campbell, dowry, kinship,
extended family, alienation

DATE: October 25, 1980

R: This is an interview with Miss Caliope Mastrovaselis for the Youngstown State University Greek Impact on Campbell, Ohio project, by Wilfredo Rivera, at 486 Sanderson Avenue, on October 25, 1980, approximately 5:25 p.m.

Miss Mastrovaselis, can you tell me something about you, your parents, and your family in regards to the project?

M: I'm a Greek-American student and senior at the University of Toledo. I'm majoring in biology. I'm a second generation American. My grandparents on both sides were born in Kalymnos, Greece, which is one of the islands in the north of Greece. My father was born in Youngstown and I was born in Youngstown. My grandparents came over from Kalymnos because of the steel mills offering jobs to unskilled workers who didn't have to speak the English language at that time.

R: Could you tell me if your parents had any influence in regards to you speaking English or Greek?

M: Yes. My grandparents, and my aunts and uncles, and my father required me to go to Greek school which is offered at all the Greek churches. The Greek school starts when you start regular school. You go in the afternoon and they teach you to read and write in Greek. They teach you about Greek mythology and about your religion, and it's mandatory for you to attend so that you can understand the church services. It's taught by the priest and some of the leading families of the church. It usually goes from three to four hours twice a week, and they grade you just like in school. You have report

cards and projects to do and oral lessons. Every year you give programs at Christmas always in Greek. At Greek Independence Day, which is March 25, we have a program and a dance. It's very much a part of the Greek-American students' life this Greek school. We hated it, but it was a good thing we went.

R: Who provided all the funds for this program?

M: Your parents paid for it. I don't think it was very much; it was like \$75 a year. If you were paid up as far as church dues it took care of part of it. They weren't really that stringent as far as payment went because the priests and most of the families wanted you to be there even if you couldn't afford it.

R: Tell us something about your childhood and what you remember about school.

M: My name is Caliope and I went to some schools outside of the Campbell area and people thought with a name like Caliope that that was kind of strange. Caliope is a very Greek name. They considered me an oddity as a matter of fact. In one of my schools I had to stand up in front of the class and tell them everything I knew about ancient Greek history because I was the only Greek in the class. The remainder of my schooling from the time I was eight years old until I was a senior in high school I spent in Campbell, Ohio where there is such a high Greek percentage that there were several kids in the class with the name Caliope and there was quite a majority of Greek students. The Greek students associated together and formed their own cliques, their own little groups because they were always together either in Greek school or in Sunday school. Your friends were almost always Greek, and that was encouraged by your family. I found that in high school that when the Greek students unified they began to do things unheard of before. They voted in a Greek homecoming queen and they voted in Greek majorettes and Greek cheerleaders. It was the first time since coming to the city of Campbell that the Greeks began to unify as far as getting something like that done. It was always very ethnocentrically oriented. Everything had to be Greek. Greek girls weren't allowed to go to the prom or to the winter formal unless their dates were Greek. Even on a friendship basis they would prefer you to go with a Greek cousin than somebody outside, even if they were Italian. That is the way they preferred.

R: Can you tell me your intentions in regard to trying to change the way the Greek people are cohesive? Are you trying to break away from that cohesiveness?

- M: The Greek cohesiveness is both beneficial and injurious. It's beneficial because it gives you a sense of your own identity; it gives you something to hold onto; it gives you friends. You automatically become accepted; you don't have to be a brain or "Miss Beautiful". The fact that you're Greek you become automatically accepted into this clique. After that you develop your own personality, like maybe wanting to be a cheerleader. You can be part of the Greek group and also in another group. It's injurious because it separates you from your schoolmates and Greek people as well as other ethnic groups. They seem to think that their group is superior, in which case it is forbidden for you to date outside of your nationality. This makes socializing in the school difficult, and you don't socialize in the community as easily. The majority of Greek immigrants that came here in the last ten years never even bothered to speak the American language fluently because they had their own coffee shops and cafeterias. They spoke the language among themselves and they never bothered to orient themselves socially with other groups. It really is damaging to a student that is growing up in 20th century America when they leave Campbell, Ohio to fit in, because they've never had any exposure to other identities. They've always been taught that they are inferior to them. I feel that that is injurious.
- R: Is that a custom or attitude developed from the mother country, Greece?
- M: Exactly. It was brought over from Greece, but somehow it became more strict because in Greece they trusted neighbors and friends. Here they didn't trust anybody outside of their own ethnic group. I think it's a good thing that the Greek-American group is changing and becoming more modern because their children were the ones who suffered in the past. They weren't allowed the normal after-school activities that are very much a part of growing up and very much a part of the school.
- R: Does there exist a bias level among Greek people towards other ethnic groups?
- M: Yes.
- R: Do you feel that there is an impact there and to what degree?
- M: The bias level is changing, gradually. The prejudices are eroding. The Greek people did not want their children socializing with people that weren't Greek. The Greek people believe that their religion is the first religion, and therefore the only correct religion. Because of their Greek heritage they were superior in every way. This has been going on in Campbell from the beginning. Every ethnic group that came

here didn't want their children marrying outside of the group. Intermarriages have just recently begun to be accepted. They're not even accepted by the entire population.

R: What is your personal view of the bias level today? Do you agree with the Greek people or deviate from their norms?

M: Personally I deviate only because I've had greater exposure due to some chance things that occurred in my life. I think I was the first Greek-American girl to go away to college in Campbell. I deviate because I've had greater exposure.

R: If you ever married would you treat your children in the same way of the Greek tradition?

M: I would want my children to be as proud of their Greek heritage as I was taught to be, but I wouldn't do it to the extent that I would have them separate themselves from the rest of their class, their non-Greek classmates. Even when you have exposure to other groups you learn more. I would want my children to have as much exposure to other groups. Because half of their education is lacking. You can't spend your entire life in America in a Greek group. You don't get to understand what the rest of the country is about and what being American is. The Greek-Americans like my father, whose parents came over from Greece, they served in the Korean War and were very proud to call themselves Americans. They thought of themselves as Americans and Greek. They always introduced themselves as Greek-Americans because of the way they felt about their country. The people who were born in Greece that came here, they would say they would like to go back to Greece to retire. The people that were born in America and were Greek, they go there frequently for a vacation, but I don't think they would live there permanently because they're used to the American surroundings.

R: Have you ever been to Greece?

M: I just returned a week ago.

R: How was your experience there? Did you find a culture shock for you there?

M: Culture shock is a good way to put it. Even though Athens has been compared to New York City, the neighborhood that I lived in in Athens is like stepping back two generations. Greek women in Greece haven't made the strides that American-Greek women have made here in the States. The fact that I'm twenty-three and unmarried is a shock to the Greek people in

Greece since they seem to think that you should be married at a certain age. The marriage age in Greece is between eighteen and nineteen years old. On the islands it is much younger.

R: That's the traditional pattern?

M: Yes. The fact that I'm a senior and I'm applying to graduate school, people look at you in awe and say why. They think that since I have a degree now I should get married. A woman in Greece cannot get married to a man in a similar class unless she has a dowry. The dowries have gone so far to mean that she brings with her a house filled with furniture and a trousseau for both her and her husband, and sometimes a sum of money. If you don't have that you don't marry a man with an education. It was like stepping backwards in time for me. I wrote a journal of what I saw because it was hard for me to believe what I saw.

The Greek people in the United States are restricted to a certain extent as far as what their daughters do, but in Greece it's phenomenal. The girls do not go anywhere unescorted by a male, absolutely nowhere. The men sit in coffeehouses and you'll find they brought that tradition over to the States. It's exclusively a man's world. A female does not transgress into the coffeehouses; it's just not done. I found it very hard to accept. I've been raised very strictly up until I was eighteen years old.

R: In regard to the custom of women obtaining a dowry, does that custom still apply to the Campbell structure of Greeks?

M: Yes, it still exists, but it is changing. For my first cousins, the dowry was discussed with the husband, and in one case with the husband and his parents. They had to find out whether his parents found it acceptable. In this case the boy was educated and he was a Greek student from Greece. He was studying computer science in America. Because she was able to afford it, the marriage took place. Had she not been able to come up with the dowry, his parents would have forbidden it. As a matter of fact, they had specifications as to what size house they wanted, and car, and the continuation of his education.

Even in Campbell you'll find that parents are still arranging marriages for their children. Someone approaches a man with a daughter who is of marriageable age, say anywhere after eighteen years old, but sometimes before that. They will come up to her parents and say, "I have a son and he is this, or he has this kind of education, and why don't we fix the two of them up." Then the families arrange a meeting with their children with the understanding that the

person is the child's prospective groom.

My aunt's mother told her who she would marry. He needed to marry someone for the American citizenship. They were married within a week. They had no courtship. However, the marriage has lasted twenty-seven years. It's a successful marriage from all accounts; they seem happily married. But this is still done.

On more than one occasion you'll find that if the parents don't force you nowadays to marry this person they are out shopping for husbands or wives. The parents have very much influence as to whether you accept a groom or you don't. If the person is unacceptable to your parents, in most cases the wedding does not come into existence.

R: Besides the marriage customs brought over from Greece, are there any other customs or ceremonies that are practiced today in Campbell?

M: The customs that are practiced in Campbell are religious customs. In Greece there is one church, and that is the Greek Orthodox Church. Whatever customs are practiced at the church are practiced here. At Easter we have a custom of raising a lamb and then slaughtering it and having a big family feast. The lamb bleeds and then you take the blood and they put the blood across the door; it is an imitation of the sacrament that occurred in the Bible.

At Christmas time you have the Greek Christmas carols and you have a game of chance in some families so that you find out what kind of luck you are going to have next year.

Greek people believe in baptizing children at the age of infancy. For them the dedication of the child by parents to the Christian life is something festive. If you can afford it they have a band and they have food; it's a very big thing. It is much like the Jewish people when their sons reach a certain age. The Greek religious holidays are always experienced by family, not only by nuclear family, but by extended family. All of your aunts, uncles, cousins, they come together and eat together and spend the day together. It is a matter of a big celebration.

We have a name day on the day of the saints. If your name is George then on St. George's Day it is your name day. It is a big celebration. In Greece they throw enormous parties. In America everybody gathers at this person's house and if you have five George's in your family you have to visit all five Georges in one day. The Greek people have a custom of

naming their children in patterns depending on where they come from. On the island of Kalymnos the first son is named after the father's father. The second son is named after the mother's father. The first daughter is named after the mother's mother. The second daughter is named after the father's mother. In this way in a family that has five children every one of the five children . . . In Athens it is different; the first two children are always named after the parents of the father. The second two children get the names of the parents of the mother. It is not customary to name a child after someone who died young because of superstitions. The Greek people have superstitions of the evil eye, where you wear a blue bead to ward away the evil eye. The evil eye comes from someone unconsciously or consciously wishing you harm. They will tell you one day that you have beautiful hair and the next day your hair will fall out. They believe that is caused by the evil eye. Most people from Greece very much believe in this.

- R: I understand that Greek people have a very unusual way of dancing. Can you tell me more about their dancing procedures and how dance is regarded as a very valuable art in Campbell, and how it is utilized for socialization among Greeks?
- M: Greek people dance in circles. People join hands and you dance around. There is traditional Greek music. Either the bazooka, which is like the mandolin . . . Every island has its own type of music. Some are much more distinguishable than others. These dances are the only way the Greek girls can meet and socialize with Greek boys. That was always done under the watchful eye of their parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. It's not acceptable for a girl to leave a Greek dance even to go outside to get air. You sit by your parents and the priest is always there. Most often the dances are always a church function; they are sponsored by the church or a Greek Hellenistic society.

The Greek people have their own food that they brought over from their country and the Greek women cook Greek foods. The menu in a Greek family is almost totally Greek. We eat fila, which are grape leaves stuffed with rice and meat. We have a lot of lamb in our diet and a lot of fish. They cook with olive oil because in Greece it is one of the major exports. We have a traditional Greek liquor, it is called ouzo. We have our own pastries dipped with nuts and they're usually dipped in honey.

- R: Do you still practice Greek?
- M: Being a Greek?
- R: No, speaking the Greek language. Being away from Campbell

while you are at school, do you find it hard adjusting back to the language itself because of the lack of practice or is it just something natural?

- M: Prior to the time I left for Greece my knowledge of the Greek language had been very limited. Although I attended a Greek school I did not have the opportunity to practice in my home since my stepmother wasn't Greek and she didn't understand the language. However, since being in Greece and coming back, I find that the Greek words come much more easier to me. They were always back in my memory, but now they've surfaced. I intend on teaching my own children the Greek language and have them attend the Greek school.
- R: Politically speaking, do you feel that the Greek people are either exposed too much or not exposed enough to what is actually going on within the community itself?
- M: Taken in this instance there is a Greek that is running for Senate. The fact that he is Greek, he has already gained the Greek support. He will gain it simply because he is a Greek.
- R: What do you suppose should be done about this in regard to exposing the Greek people in Campbell to get involved with the political scene?
- M: The Greek people in Campbell are becoming involved because of the Youngstown Sheet & Tube issue. That was the major factor that brought over all these Greek people to the States in the first place. As I said before, they didn't require skilled labor. This has got them more involved in the political situation. They are becoming more involved with things like the school board at Campbell Memorial. They're becoming more involved as far as education goes. I don't know what it would take other than a major crisis.
- R: Educationally speaking, what impact does a family have in regard to education towards their son or daughter?
- M: The Greek people value education very highly. Before they valued it very highly for their sons. They did not expect or permit their daughters to go to college. The parents demand very high grades from their children.

When I was in Greece I found that students are much more advanced. By the time they are in high school it is mandatory that they become bilingual.

R: How do you feel about education?

M: I feel education is a great equalizing factor. You are always equal in what you do in the classroom. I feel an

education is important to self-image.

R: What do you consider as being the motivating force for your education and success?

M: It was a combination of factors: My father had had some courses in college and he very much believed that the only way you could have a better life was through education. Also, because I have found that I enjoy the classroom situation, the more I go on in education the more self-confidence I gain.

R: From the year 1970 until the year 1980 was there a transitional phase in regard to the culture of the Greeks in Campbell? Did you see an apparent movement or higher esteem among the Greeks themselves or did you see a digression?

M: There has been a great transition. You will find that until the 1970's the Greek community was composed mostly of laborers in the steel mill and small business ownerships. During the ten years the Greeks have moved out into blue-collar jobs. It is now more accepted and more feasible for the Greek children to attend college because their parents are receiving greater pay wages. They are becoming more lenient in their children's upbringing. They allow their children to socialize more with non-Greeks even though it's still not exactly acceptable to marry outside of the Greek ethnic group. In the last ten years the Greek people have made more strides as far as socializing themselves. More people that have come here in the last ten years to live are trying to speak the American language and trying to become accustomed to the American ways. There has been a modernization trend and there has been a whole softening of the rigidity of the ethnocentric core here. Campbell is probably behind in a lot of ways. As I understand it, these changes took place ten years ago in New York City.

R: What does the future for the Greek people in Campbell look like?

M: I feel the Greeks will stick to their culture for the next ten years. They will try to give their children the opportunities that they see around them. By doing that they will realize that they have to socialize their children into the American society. They're going to send their children to American schools. They will want their children to speak the American language fluently. They will want the children to be a part of school social groups.

R: Do you feel that the Greek people in Campbell are going to keep up with their traditional beliefs from Greece itself or do you feel they will deviate from them?

M: I think the Greek people will be able to pick which customs they prefer. They won't feel there is only one way; there will be a choice.

R: Can you tell me something **in** your life that has changed your outlook on how you perceive your culture being in the near future?

M: I mentioned the situation with my best friend earlier. She was also my cousin. She wanted to marry someone outside of the Greek culture. Tidal waves of shock went through the family. It was damaging to her and the young man's self-esteem. That was the first time I felt that being a part of the Greek group wasn't always such a good thing.

R: Is there anything you would like to add?

M: Only that the Greek impact on Campbell is probably the same as the Italian impact on another small city. It is not only the Greek people that behave this way, it is every ethnic group that comes over.

R: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW