

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Greek Culture Project

Impact on Campbell, Ohio

O. H. 499

THELMA SPIRTOS

Interviewed

by

Wilfredo Rivera

on

November 4, 1980

THELMA SPIRTOS

Thelma Spirtos was born on April 24, 1948, the daughter of Nicholas and Helen Spirtos, in Campbell, Ohio. The Spirtos family moved to Campbell, Ohio early in Thelma's life, and she attended school in the Campbell School System. She graduated from Campbell Memorial High School and proceeded to further her education by attending Youngstown State University. She graduated from that institution with a Bachelor of Science degree in secondary education.

Thelma is currently a teacher at Campbell Memorial High School, where she specializes in art education. She is a member of the Archangel Michael Greek Orthodox Church and the Daughters of Penelope organization. She enjoys traveling, drawing, and ceramics as her hobbies.

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INTERVIEWEE: THELMA SPIRTOS
INTERVIEWER: Wilfredo Rivera
SUBJECT: Cultural Shock, Economic Crunch, Alienation,
Political Aspirations
DATE: November 4, 1980

R: This is an interview with Thelma Spirtos on the Youngstown State University Greek Impact on Campbell Project, by Wilfredo Rivera, at 63 Tremble Avenue, Campbell, Ohio, on November 4, 1980, at approximately 8:00 p.m.

Miss Spirtos, can you tell me if your parents are from Campbell, and if they're not, could you tell me the reasons why they decided to come here?

S: First of all, my parents were not born in the United States. My father was born in Kalymnos, Greece and so was my mom. My father came to the United States at the age of fourteen. The reason was to get a job and to try and help his mom and his other brothers and sisters. At that time my grandfather had left Greece to come to the United States, and he stayed here quite some time. In fact, he died in the United States in the early 1900's. As a result, my grandmother was left by herself so my dad had to come up here and help her out by sending her money. He got a job in a restaurant first in New York City, and then later he moved to Campbell. In Campbell he got a job in the steel mill, Republic Steel Mill. He worked there for fifteen years or so. Later he left and went to North Carolina and he went into business with another man who was also an immigrant. They opened up a business in North Carolina and that lasted for three or four years. After his partner died my dad returned to Campbell and got a job in Youngstown Sheet & Tube and worked there until he retired.

My mom came to the United States in 1947. She came to the United States and lived with a cousin of hers who was living in Campbell. Her cousin sent for her because she was to marry my father. My mother got married in the States and stayed

here, had my brother and myself, and she works as a seamstress for Shy Lockson in Youngstown. She did that before she worked at home sewing for various people to make a living.

R: Can you tell me what kind of structure exists in your family now and also can you touch on your background starting with your childhood up to your present status?

S: As a young child I remember growing up in a very strict household. My father was the patriarch of the family. We were not permitted to do anything unless he told us to. My mother was also under his wing. It was a very strict structure. My brother was also brought up in this fashion. In a way it was sort of inhibiting in that you were so dependent on them and it was very difficult to break away. The thing with them was they were always insistent about school and getting an education; this was their main interest. They had no concern for recreational parties of any sort. Their concern was to go to school and get good grades, go to college, and make something of yourself. "Don't work in the mill like I am," was his favorite expression. As a result, this is what we did. I went to college. I am a teacher now. Presently I teach art at Memorial High School. My brother is a doctor. He is presently doing his internship in Toledo, Ohio.

R: In regards to your parents, being that they immigrated from Greece, how did they learn the language of English, through what institutions in Campbell?

S: My dad was an educated person. He didn't finish high school in Greece. He completed his third year in high school when he came here. My dad had no formal training at all in a school here. He learned most of it through interaction with people on his own. He was very eager to learn the language and I think he cared about this country more so than he did Greece. He spoke the English language quite well. He lived in the United States for about forty-five or fifty years. My mom attended an adult basic program. This was at Gordon School in Campbell. She went there for a year or so and learned how to write. She could at least write her name. She spoke quite well, but had a difficult time writing.

At home, we spoke only Greek. When we attended school we did not know a word of English. We spoke Greek in the house. When I was four years old I did not know a word of English. My brother and I went to kindergarten not knowing how to speak English; we did not know a word the teacher was saying. We began to talk in English in intermixing with the children. We finally learned the English language, but still in our house we spoke to our parents in Greek. We weren't permitted

to speak English. The English we picked up at school. It was a lot easier with my dad. He spoke English and I could talk to him in English. With my mom it was a little difficult.

Our church started a Greek school program. All the children at the age of seven years old had to attend Greek school. It was grades one through seven. It was a systematic school. You would go two days a week, read, write. It was a good program. We learned a lot about our language and about our religion in Greek school. After seventh grade most of us knew how to write and read Greek. If we went to Greece we knew everything that was said. Reading books was a lot easier. It was a very good program as a whole.

R: Who was in charge of the Greek school?

S: At that time Father Pappas taught Greek school, the priest of our parish. Today Mrs. Thomas teaches Greek school. I don't know if she graduated from college, but the woman knows the Greek language quite well. She has done a very good job with the children. She teaches grades one through five, and then Father Pappas teaches the older children, I think the sixth and seventh graders. He teaches them mostly the religious part. Mrs. Thomas teaches them the basics: the nouns, the adverbs, the parts of speech. The two of them together are a good combination.

R: What effect has religion had in the cohesiveness of the Greek population in Campbell?

S: Religion is really the basis for the closeness that exists in the Greek community in Campbell. It is very important in the family role. To them Orthodoxy is very essential to them; this is what has kept them so close. Most of the people that have left Greece were lonely or homesick, their religion has kept them going and kept them together.

R: In regards to the customs of the Greek people, are there any customs in particular that were once practiced in Greece that were brought back over here to Campbell? I understand they have the Greek Easter festivities a week following the American Easter. Is that a traditional celebration from Greece or was that created from the church in Campbell?

S: That is the way it is in Greece. They follow the same calendar as the people in Greece. Custom and tradition are a very important part of the Greek family.

R: How about the significant value of name day?

- S: They have the name day celebrations also. In Greece it is a very festive day when it is the name day of a saint. If you are named after that particular saint people come to your house and congratulate you and bring sweets; it is a joyous occasion. They celebrate that more so than they do a birthday. A birthday they don't consider as much as a name day. In some households it is a very big event; they will have open house.
- R: I understand that male Greeks are very possessive toward Greek women. Is that something carried over from Greece or is that something that was created in this community?
- S: I really think it is brought over here because in my travels to Greece I've noticed the way the men are; they are very spoiled, very demanding. A wife has no time for herself. Every need of her husband has to be taken care of before she does anything for herself. He won't get up to get a glass of water; she has to bring it to him. They are demanding and egotistical. They are difficult I think to live with and to be a part of. Living here it is very difficult for me to understand their ways.
- R: Because of this dominance of the males what have the Greek women done about it? What kind of attitudes were established against this dominance?
- S: Most of the men are not like that. Maybe they are at first, but I think most of the women have rebelled against this. They have changed; the men here are more Americanized. They've given the woman the benefit of the doubt more or less. They are more compassionate to her. In my household my father was very stern and everything was his way, but he respected my mom. If she was sick he would help her. I've seen my father wash dishes and wash the floor, whereas a person from Greece would never do that. I've experienced that; my aunt was dying in bed and her husband would not help her. Her son helped her and he thought it was disgraceful. In order for the neighbors not to see he shut the shades and washed the floor and the dishes. It is disgraceful for a male to do a household chore. The male in America, the Greek male, is a lot different.
- R: What is your personal attitude in regards to the Greek male dominance within your own culture?
- S: I can only say from my own experience that my dad was domineering and to this day I found it difficult living with that. I think it was my temperament, and I was able to put up with this, but in some ways he has hindered me in that I am not as aggressive. I was afraid to do a lot of things with my occupation, socially. I was afraid to intermix. It has taken me a long time to get ahold of myself

and say I can do this. He did everything. It is a difficult life living like this, and I don't think a lot of people could stand for it. Most of the Greek people are like this, very domineering. They try to run your life to the point of telling you who to marry.

R: What is your mom's attitude about it right now being that she is by herself?

S: The same way. He still controls her to an extent. She is still very staunch about this.

R: Does she expect you to serve the Greek male hand and arm?

S: No. My dad was never rough or demanding with her in that respect; he was more Americanized. I don't think she would ever want me to marry someone like that and be in a position to live like that.

R: What would your mother's attitude and your attitude be toward interracial marriages, a Greek with a non-Greek?

S: There is a certain bias that exists. Prejudice will never cease to me. To this day I can't pinpoint it myself. One thing is the religion. It would be horrifying for me to marry someone from another nationality and religion. They cannot see a marriage work with anyone other than a Greek. This is the way my family is.

R: How do you feel about it personally?

S: I don't think there is anything wrong with it myself. As much as they have controlled my life I can't feel that way because I've seen a lot of marriages work out and they are decent and good, but they'll never see that.

R: If you marry out of your race, ethnic background, will you practice Greek within your household? Would you emphasize the importance of the language and the religion or would you expect to favor the husband's background?

S: Knowing myself he would probably have to practice the Greek way. It is so much in me, the customs, the tradition, the religion, it would be very difficult for me to accept his ways. Maybe I can see their point in that way. I would really have to care for him in such a way that I would forget all this, but I don't think I could. He would have to practice my way or I don't think it would work because I would miss it. I would miss the tradition, the music, and the language. My religion, I don't know any other way.

R: In regards to the cohesiveness that exists in Campbell among the Greek people, I understand that the Greek people

- have a tendency of having these social gatherings whereas they have a specific way of dancing. Can you elaborate on dancing for the Greek people, how much it means to them, what kinds of food are served?
- S: All of this was brought from the old country. They would have these socials and because there were so few of them in this particular city the only way of seeing each other and feeling good about each other was to socialize in this way and they would have dances or get-togethers. These would be at someone's house or at a small, rented hall. With listening to music maybe some of their hostilities or anger toward fellow neighbors . . . Each one would make their Greek food. They have different delicacies. They still do this. They have the church's name day dance, their annual New Year's Eve dance, Easter dance, Thanksgiving dance; these are all ways of getting together and socializing.
- R: Can you be more specific in regard to the dancing procedures? I understand that plays a major role.
- S: There are various dances. Different parts of Greece have various dances. There are different styles and ways of expressing themselves. Most of them originated on different islands.
- R: What is the main dish for Greek people?
- S: I would say they eat a lot of lamb. One of their main dishes is phila, the grape leaves with the meat and rice. Pastitso is another dish. One of their favorite drinks is ouzo. Another common hors d'oeuvre is ouzo with octopus or squid.
- R: Have you ever been to Greece?
- S: Yes, I have.
- R: Did you find a difference between the way the people are structured here compared to the structure over there, their cohesiveness?
- S: In regards to cohesiveness, no. I would say they are the same.
- R: What did you find so much different in Greece that is not so different here?
- S: The political ideas were a lot different from us. I expected them to be a lot more democratic. Most of the youth are anti-American, and this is what shocked me the most.

- R: Do you hold any political aspirations? Do you feel the political structure today could be structured in a way where it could be more advantageous to the Greek people?
- S: The political structure is all right. If a person wants to be in politics and feels he is qualified and has shown incentives in this way to help people or the community, I feel his chances are as good as anyone else's. We have a Greek running now, Senator Meshel. To me he is a very dedicated person and he has shown this as a senator. If he makes it as a congressman he will do the same. He is ambitious and he feels he wants to help people. I think anyone that is interested in that has the same chance as anyone else. Greek people are very supportive of their own kind. Of course you do have that one particular mass that are very jealous too.
- R: I understand from previous interviews that the church is a political structure within itself and that Father Pappas is considered to be the political mouthpiece among the Greek people. Is this true in your eyes?
- S: He is our leader. If there is an announcement to be made or an endorsement of some sort he will endorse this particular person or issue. I would say to an extent he is, but not to the point where he is going to control your mind. Most people do follow his ideas and accept them.
- R: What are your personal attitudes about Father Pappas? Do you feel he has done an efficient job with the Greek people in regard to the modes of communication or do you believe he could do a better job with that position?
- S: Most definitely he has really held this community together. I really don't feel as though there could be another priest that could have lasted in this community. Father Pappas is a very domineering, very hardworking person. He has kept us together. Kalyrnian people are very difficult people to understand. Father Pappas is not a Kalyrnian, but he has managed to do a fantastic job. Most of these people that have come from Greece were very crude, and undisciplined. He has trained them to act properly in church, to respect certain things that they never did in Greece. That's another thing with Greece. I think people in America are much more religious than the ones in Greece. I realize that the religion has come from there, but we are even more religious. Perhaps it is because of Father Pappas, I don't know. I think he has done a very good job in keeping us together, the youth too with the language and starting the Greek school, having these dances. He has instilled this tradition and custom in us that I don't think we could have gotten from anybody else. He is a fantastic priest.

R: Is there an animosity that exists within the Greek people because they come from a different part of Greece?

S: Yes.

R: I understand the Kalymnians dominate the main population in Campbell. I heard there was animosity between Kalymnians and another group, did that come from the old country or was that created here?

S: I don't know. I know as a youngster there was always a tension or dislike for anybody else that wasn't Kalymnian. They Symians were the second largest group after Kalymnians, and then smaller groups of the others. There was always animosity between Kalymnians and Symians. Kalymnians always felt they were superior. One thing about the Kalymnians, they are very industrious. They are hardworking. There was always a jealousy between them. Where it originated I don't know.

R: Does this competition exist today?

S: To an extent. It is not as intense. I can't understand why it has lessened. It is like that on the islands. One island always thought they were better than the other. If you intermarried one islander with another they were very upset.

R: This interracial animosity, do you think it has affected the people's attitude toward church?

S: Maybe with the younger generation, yes, but the older people, they still feel they are doing the right thing. This interracial marriage thing they cannot accept. They say they're religious and righteous, and yet they are not. The younger generation can see this more so than the older generation. I'm third generation; there is no way I can tell my mother she is wrong. No way. There is no way I can change her ideas. This is the way they've always felt.

R: How did the Greek people hear about Campbell?

S: When my dad came here very many had settled here, very many Kalymnians. This is how he migrated here. America was work. My dad came through word of mouth. At that time the mills were in full capacity and there was a lot of work; this is why they did come here.

R: Do you feel the mills had a major impact in influencing Greeks to come to Campbell?

S: I would say. Most of them really didn't have to know the

language at that time. In any other job you had to know the language. Most of them managed to get in very easily without a test.

R: I'm surprised you said the mill attracted the Greek people to come to Campbell. I understand most Greek people are very business oriented people, especially in regard to painting. What got the Greek people interested in this kind of thing?

S: I know painting is very dominant. They are business oriented and that is where the money is. I really don't think the mills closing had affected Campbell that much because of this. Most of the people that had left the mill are young; that is what they are doing now; they are painting. They don't feel the crunch as much. The older men that had seniority and many years in the mill and are ready for retirement, it has affected them and their families. Basically the younger generation is not affected as much. They are painting and they are making money.

R: What are your personal feelings about the layoffs from the mill? What attitudes have the Greek people taken? Do they plan to go back to Greece?

S: Most of the families I know are retired. They have no choice; they are going to stay here. The younger families are either moving south or trying to find other jobs. The school situation is bad; enrollment has dropped so you know most people are leaving. Some people are going back to Greece; they've made enough money so they can go and open up a business in Greece. These are people that have been here for quite some time. For a man with a young family it is impossible for him to pick up and go to Greece. Most of the people are just sticking it out.

R: Are you planning to stay here regardless of what the situation may be?

S: I would never go to Greece. I will probably just stay here and see how it goes. If it doesn't work out maybe I will move.

R: Can you tell me what the future holds for the Greek people in Campbell?

S: The Greek people in Campbell will definitely stay here. First of all, their church is here; their foundation is here. They would never leave. Painting will be here. There are jobs for most of the Greek people. Your younger generation has become more educated and more school oriented nowadays and through their education they will be able to get better jobs and hopefully stay in the area. Their

- relatives are here and their friends; I feel they will stay here until things get really bad.
- R: Is education emphasized as the way to succeed among the Greek people?
- S: Yes. They feel that through education not only will they succeed, but they will get a better job. This is why they stress the education. They don't want their children to do the things they had to do, work for minimum wage as a laborer.
- R: Being an educator, can you tell me something that has happened in your life that has changed your own outlook about your culture? Do you want to see some changes happen within your culture or are you accepting the culture the way it is?
- S: Most of the culture that I've been exposed to I accept. One thing I feel will eventually change, and that is the intermarriage situation. The younger people are not as prejudice and not as bias as my parents were and their parents. I feel this will definitely change. I know there is a religious factor involved also, but I do feel the younger people are not as bias and they will come around. You will see more intermarriages. As far as anything else is concerned, I don't see any other major changes.
- R: Is there anything else you would like to discuss before we conclude our interview?
- S: No.
- R: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW