

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Greek Culture Project

Impact on Campbell, Ohio

O. H. 448

GEORGE CORFIAS

Interviewed

by

Wilfredo Rivera

on

November 30, 1980

GEORGE M. CORFIAS

George Corfias was born on January 13, 1937, the son of Micheal and Irene Corifas, in Campbell, Ohio. George has lived in Campbell all of his life and attended Gordon Elementary while young. He graduated from Campbell Memorial High School GED program and proceeded to further his education by attending Youngstown State University. He graduated from that institution with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1975.

Mr. Corfias is currently a director at Jones & Laughlin where he specializes in business transactions. He is involved in and geniunely concerned with the Greek community in Campbell and also an active member with Archangel Michael Greek Orthodox Church.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Greek Culture Project

INTERVIEWEE: GEORGE CORFIAS

INTERVIEWER: Wilfredo Rivera

SUBJECT: Crisis situations, Alienation, Cultural shock, Holidays

DATE: November 30, 1980

R: This is an interview with George Corfias for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on the Greek Culture, by Wilfredo Rivera, at 390 Porter Avenue, Campbell, Ohio, on November 30, 1980, at approximately 1:30 p.m.

C: My dad, Michael Corfias, came here to the United States in the early 1900's. He went directly to a town in Iowa, Cedar Rapids, seeking employment there; he found it and worked approximately twenty years. Then he went to Tarpon Springs, Florida. After going there he disliked it and went to Greece. This was approximately 1925. After going back down to Kalymnos, he met my mom, whom he married. He got married in about 1925 or 1926.

He then left, coming back to the United States and left my mom there. He came here to set up his home. They came directly to Campbell, hearing from others that Campbell had steel mills and so forth. Plus there was supposedly other Kalymnians here. He picked up and came to Campbell in approximately 1925 and he started seeking employment, which he got in the mills. Several months later my mom came up. They started their first home on Gordon Avenue. After living there for a little bit my sister Mary was born. The people that owned that home wanted them to leave because they were going to move into it and they moved to Eleventh Street. Eleventh Street is where I was born in 1937. My mom and dad of course being from Europe, spoke minimal English. My mom spoke very little English. My dad spoke very good English because he spent a good twenty-five years of his life . . . Prior to coming to Campbell he was already speaking English enough to get a job. In the meantime, he had self-educated himself.

When he left Greece he was just a youngster; he was one of thirteen children. Not being able to make a good living there they decided to come over here to the United States. The reason I think he was possibly able to learn and be a teacher to himself was because he had a little bit of an education from Greece. I think he had mentioned to me that he had approximately six years of education. By knowing enough of Greek he was capable of translating this into English and then helping himself learn. As a matter of fact, he knew how to read and write. My mom, by being locked up in the house and associating mostly with Greek people, her English was very minimal.

The emphasis in our house was always Greek. Greek always had to be first because of the religion. We had what I feel is a very big handicap versus the other first generation people here. The big handicap was religion. All of the other nationalities here, ninety-nine percent of them were all Roman Catholics. They had one, big, happy family as far as religion was concerned. Our religion was Greek Orthodox and it was not as popular as it is now. At that time we had to stay within our own religions. As a result, we were really drawn apart from the rest of the community as far as marriage and so forth. If you married outside of the Greek community you were actually marrying outside of the religion. When you were marrying outside of your religion you were creating a lot of heartaches. For starters you were creating chaos in your own family. It was unheard of to marry outside of your own family. Not so much because you were marrying a non-Greek, but because you were marrying outside of your religion. Religion at that time did play a big role in their lives. I think there was a bigger emphasis on religion back then because this is sort of what tied them together.

We all had to learn the Greek language, there was no getting away from that. We had to learn to read it and write it. We went to school; they had rented schoolrooms at Gordon School and they had people who had at least a high school education from Greece or they were very knowledgeable of the Greek language teaching it. Each one of us in my generation, we all went through that school one way or another.

The emphasis at that time as far as my dad was concerned was education, but he also had big emphasis on having a steady job. That was as important as education. If you could get a steady job working at Sheet & Tube, that was as good as an education. When we were growing up, the average person, if he had a high school education, it was pretty decent. A minimal amount of people had a

college education and very few people could afford to go to colleges, to send their children to college. My dad's emphasis was getting a good job and having X number of dollars a week. If you could learn to survive on this you were doing good. He did it and he felt everybody else did.

My sister did get an education right off the bat. She went to college and took business and was working and going to business school.

In the 1940's my dad started contemplating retirement. They had no pension then. He decided we would pick it up and go to Greece. I was in the eighth grade then and we took off and went to Greece. I interrupted my education and went to Greece. When we went to Greece my dad had this great, big idea of finding Greece as it was when he was a kid. Unfortunately, it didn't work out that way. He wound up going down there and disliking it with a passion and wanting to come back. Everything that he thought was going to be there wan't. People had changed; a lot of his friends had died. He found out that he had more friends and more ties here.

The three years I spent in Greece were absolutely fantastic. Everything was at its best. There was not much tourism; it was nice and quiet. It was beautiful. It was a beautiful climate compared to what we have here. I enjoyed it. I made a lot of friends. As a matter of fact, I met my wife at that time. I had nothing but a wonderful time there. That is probably one of the main reasons I have close ties with Greece today. When we stayed there for three years I went to school. I learned how to read and write even better. I actually got an equivalent to a high school education down there. By not going through the four year term that they had for high school, I couldn't get my diploma. In the meantime my dad decided that we had to come back because I was going to be eighteen and they had a deal there where if you're eighteen years old you can get stuck serving in the Greek Army. He was so disillusioned that his mind was made up to come back to Campbell, so that's what we did.

In 1954 we came back to Campbell. After working various jobs and finding out that it was more and more difficult to make a living without an education I decided that something had to be done about it. After getting married in 1960, my wife and I decided we were going to do something about it being harder and harder to make a living. I decided to go through the GED and took the ACT test and enrolled at Youngstown State. I got my degree there after approximately five years. I got a four-year degree. I was working full-time at Jones & Laughlin Steel and going to school. In my

job there were people moving up. I knew I was smarter, but I couldn't get the job because I didn't have a college education. My dad was very happy; he was still alive when I started college.

In the meantime, my sister had gone back and gotten her degree in education. She had a degree in education, and she still teaches in the Campbell school system.

Right now, everything in our home is tied a lot to Greece. My wife speaks Greek to the children. We insist that they go to Greek school and we insist that they practice the Greek Orthodox religion. We also insist that they maintain a lot of our Greek customs. I feel that Greece has a beautiful heritage and there is so much there they can pick from. They are Americans first, and they know this. We have ties in Greece and we try to go there every four or five years.

R: Mr. Corfias, can you touch on some of the customs that are practiced among the Greek people and some of the customs that you believe in, artifacts from your family?

C: One of the most important customs is our holy week. Our holy week is a very, very strict fast week; everybody is fasting. There are very few people I know who don't follow this fasting, and going to church every night. I think that is one of the nicest customs we have.

We have our name days, and this is another big thing. If it is somebody's name day, everybody who is really close to them visits them. This is an old country custom that is still carried through.

Christmas is one of our big holidays. We have a situation where the families get together and emphasize what it is all about. There is more than just gift giving. It is really the birth of Christ. We enjoy the week by going to churches and we explain to our children that it is not just a time for gathering gifts. It's really the start of Christianity and this is how it all began.

Easter is big, and they also have church holiday. I think the main reason this is a success and it is followed is because it is in Greece. Everybody belonged to a neighborhood, and their neighborhood had a particular church. On its feast day, everybody celebrated from their neighborhood, celebrated with their church. When they came here there weren't ten different churches, so the emphasis all went on their one church. One church here in Campbell is Archangel Michael as far as Greek Orthodox is concerned. Now the whole emphasis is all on the feast day of Archangel Michael.

Another big holiday is New Year's Day. They have their big

patron saint, St. Basil. This is celebrated on New Year's Eve. In Greece, he is the one who brings the gifts. They associate that holiday with gift giving.

R: Can you touch on the prearranged marriages that existed? Does it apply to the Greek people in Campbell?

C: I think that it still may apply to a small minority of first generation Greeks for the simple reason that a lot of them may have had family ties or connections with people in Greece. Maybe they've come here and put this into their kids' minds. I think that these are the few prearranged marriages that exist today. I don't think that they are done in any vast numbers. I think that we still have a good percentage of Greeks marrying Greeks versus other nationality in Campbell. We still do have these newcomers, and these people are still first generation. Their children are still marrying Greeks because they are first generation also. This is probably going to drop off in the near future.

R: Mr. Corfias, what is your attitude about prearranged marriages?

C: I do not feel that they would work in today's society. The problems that would be created are vast because of personalities. I think it would create many problems today. I think it worked back then because the times were different. From what I understand, it is only working now in far away villages in Greece. It is not practiced in big cities because it doesn't work.

R: What are your beliefs about interracial marriages and how do you think the other Greeks in Campbell feel about it?

C: I don't think that it would really work for the Greeks here in Campbell today. Myself, I don't believe that a person's color or religion does not really make a difference. I don't think you could convince my wife of this because she was born and raised in Greece where there was no such thing. Marrying a non-Greek was absolutely chaos. Marrying a person who was not the same race was absolutely impossible. I don't think society in general is ready for it, let alone the Greeks.

END OF INTERVIEW