

BOOK REVIEW

by Evangelos Milios

Helen Papanicolas, 2002, *An Amulet of Greek Earth: Generations of Immigrant Folk Culture*, Swallow Press, Ohio University Press, xiii + 316 pp, notes, selected glossary of Greek words, index.

I picked up this book with some reservation. A book about Greek Immigrants in North America? Born and raised in the Greece of the 60s and the 70s, Greek-Americans have been for me a species that is difficult to understand and relate to. Having spent the 80s and 90s in the US first, and then in Canada, Greek-Americans and Greek-Canadians continue to impress me with their diversity of the blend of Greek and North-American culture, which depends on the proportion of their life spent in the old and new country, the stage of their life, exactly when they migrated, and the particularities of the places they settled. Most of my social contact has been with first generation Greek-Americans/Canadians, people like me, who were born and raised in Greece. Naively, I thought that the second generation, their children, are culturally North Americans with some fondness for their Greek ancestry, but with a clear North American worldview. Reading Papanikolas' book I got a much more refined and nuanced picture of the history of Greek-Americans in the 20th century, the hardships

they endured, and their struggle to balance their sense of self, caught between the need to maintain Greekness and to blend into the North American society. I got a sense of perspective that my own struggle to construct a sense of self (which needs conscious effort and constant self-examination) is not unlike that of many others in my position, and also many, who did not enjoy the privilege of higher education as I do, which has definitely made the task easier.

The book is an interesting mix of history and cultural study of Greek-Americans in the 20th century. It follows a chronological order, starting with immigrants of the early part of the century, and tracing their life and that of their descendants till today in the wider context of an evolving American society. It vividly describes the struggles of the early immigrants to survive first in a hostile social environment, then during the Depression, and the various wars. Selected social and cultural institutions of Greek-American life are described, like the picture bri-

des, and the Greek mail order company Atlas which supplied Greeks with everything Greek no matter where they lived. Tensions in the Greek-American community at large are examined, like the one between the Greek Orthodox Church, representing tradition, and the contemporary North American Society which values independence and individual freedom to do as one pleases on personal matters. Greek-Americans appear extremely diverse, as they were not subjected to the homogenization of Greek culture in the second half of the 20th century via universal education, radio and television in Greece. As far as their Greekness is concerned, they have retained the local culture of their village or city of origin frozen in time.

The book consists of three parts. Part I, *Ancient Lore and Lost Greatness*, is a review of Greek History, leading up to the life of poverty, misery and superstition in the Greek villages which immigrants left behind. Part II, *Nationhood and Exile*, describes the voyage to the New World, the settlement in the new country, and the effort to recreate the social environment they left behind. The focus is on the Midwest and the West. The account of the exploitation of Greek mine and railroad workers by Greek labor agents and American business owners alike is fascinating. Greeks were brought in, unknowingly, as strike-breakers. Yet, they led the struggle for better work conditions. Part III, *Americanization*, describes how the involvement of Greek-Americans in the two

World Wars led to their integration and acceptance by the American society, and how they got organized to counter the Ku Klux Klan's portrayal of them. One of the organizations formed then, AHEPA, is still strong today. Other cultural aspects of Greek-American life, like the American-Greek language, are reviewed, and entertaining passages are included to illustrate them. A chapter is devoted to Archbishop Athenagoras, and his role in Greek Orthodoxy in North America. The Greek-American family and the socialization of the American-born generation are also examined through a focus on issues such as the importance of endogamy, the strict discipline under which Greek children were brought up, and the gender socialization of girls. In the epilogue, the fading interest in, and gradual loss of Greek language are lamented, in spite of the continuing strength of Greek Orthodoxy. Declining enrollments in Greek schools, a family-oriented Greek culture among second- and third-generation Greek-Americans, and the continuing decay of «Greek towns» as Greeks move into middle-class suburbs depict a sober picture of assimilation and loss of culture, not unlike that of other ethnic groups. Under these circumstances of «language shift» and decaying community life and institutions, the only focal point for the identity of Greek-Americans is provided by, in the author's opinion, the Greek Orthodox Church, without which the survival of Greeks in the United States is impossible.

The book has extensive references to original sources and it is lavishly illustrated with archival photographs of Greek immigrant life and culture in the 20th century, that nicely complement the narrative. I see it as both a tribute to Hellenism in North America and as its Requiem, as this unique culture slowly disappears, with the focus of Greece itself becoming increasingly European, and its achieved prosperity drastically diminishing any new migration from Greece to North America.

The book is valuable reading for anyone interested in the unique Greek-American culture. Greek-Americans are bound to find some of their own struggles reflected in the book, and put their own life into historical perspective.

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