



A New Zealand Cretan war connection

*A micro-study of
Greek female immigrants
to NZ in the 60s*



Evangelia Papoutsaki (Communication Studies)

Athina Tsoulis (Performing & Screen Arts)

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THE CONTEXT



- Many Greeks left Greece post WWII for economic reasons resulting in large waves of migration to the US, Canada, Australia, Germany amongst others.
- New Zealand had much smaller numbers coming to its shores. However, an internationally based scheme saw significant numbers of Greek women migrate to NZ in the 60's to work as domestics in hospitals and hotels.
 - A NZ-Crete War connection
- These women were assisted through a two year work-visa.
- This migration radically altered the sex ratio of the NZ Greek population (predominantly male)



The Project Aims

- To document the personal narratives of these Greek female post-war immigrants to New Zealand
- Explore from a gender perspective how women experience migration
- Follow the *migration loop* - Compare migration experiences between those women who chose to stay & those who either returned to Greece or chose to migrate for the second time to Australia

With the support of the Greek Community in Auckland & funding from the Australian Sesquicentennial Gift Trust for Awards in Oral History/NZ Ministry of Culture and Heritage

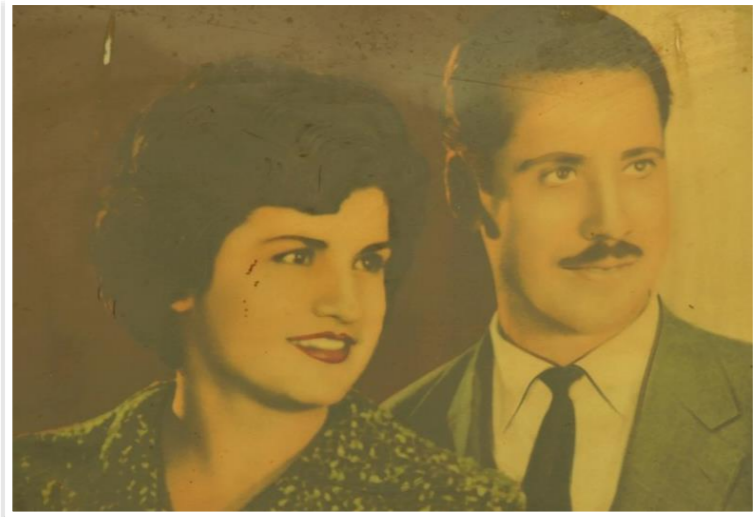
Key Features

- **Single women (age group 16-35)**
- **Arrived between 1962-64**
- **Most from the island of Crete**
 - **Mostly from the western part of the island (NZ soldiers stronger connection to this part of the island)**
- **Underwent a period of training of 3-6 months in basic language & domestic skills in Greece before migration.**
- **Intermarriage (higher ratio amongst these female assisted immigrants) than other Greek immigrants.**



Local newspaper story

Greek immigrants: Some of the 44 Greek girl migrants trained for hotel work who arrived in New Zealand yesterday. They were photographed in Wellington before leaving for Auckland last night.



- **Upon arrival in NZ the women were boarded on trains and dropped off in various parts of the country where they began work the very next day in hospitals and hostels.**
- **Upon completion of their 2 year contract, most moved to established Greek communities (Wellington & Auckland).**
- **This scheme resulted in a significant period of ‘chain’ migration consisting of fiancés & close relatives assisted by these young women.**
 - **There were arranged marriages with men from Crete – NZ requirement was they had to purchase a return ticket for the men and marry within a month from the prospective groom’s arrival. But a significant number married non-Greeks.**
- **By the 80s, a large number of these women returned to Greece/ Crete or chose to migrate for the second time to Australia for family reasons and the attraction of Australia’s larger Greek communities.**

An Oral History Methodology

- Received training at the Alexander Turnbull Library Oral History Center
- Time consuming process (pre-interviews phase – establish trust /revisiting- maintaining a relationship)

Selection of Interviewees

- Total of 16 Cretan women interviewed: 6 in New Zealand plus a Kiwi female teacher; 5 in Australia; 5 in Crete.
- Snowball / convenience sample - Participants identified from the Greek community resident in Auckland & Wellington and their informal relationships with women who moved to Australia or back to Crete.
- The Cretan societies in NZ & Australia were approached & provided assistance in locating women.



THE PROCESS



- The interviews followed the NZ Oral History guidelines & based on an interview list based on the following themes:
 - Life in Crete - childhood memories, war memories, daily rhythm of life, impetus to migrate, expectations, process to qualify;
 - Life in the NZ - arrival, early experiences and first impressions, settling in, interactions at work & social life; creating social networks to maintain sense of community and Greek culture, contact with home;
 - Return visits to Crete - visiting home for the first time, impressions, sense of belonging.
 - Reasons for choosing to stay, return to Crete or migrate to Australia

The Interviews



- Conducted mostly in the Greek language, in the interviewees' own surroundings & recorded on digital recorder.
- Extra interviews have been recorded in Crete from relatives & friends to add dimension to the women's accounts.
- Relevant documentation & photos enhanced the interview process & collected for archival purposes.
- All records will be archived at the Oral History Archives – National Library in Wellington.
- At a later date, some stories will be visually recorded on HD digital for a feature length documentary. Some funding has been obtained to begin this process.

Why Did They Leave?



- ***Impact of World War II* upon their childhood & young adulthood as this part of Crete suffered more greatly than many other parts of Greece due to helping the Allied soldiers escape:**
 - Economic - Homes and personal belongings burnt and destroyed;
 - Working constantly from a young age with little leisure;
 - Affected future prospects i.e.. dowry;
 - Disrupted schooling;
 - Personal - childhoods coloured by trauma of war, ailing or missing fathers, personal wartime experiences, sadness at the destruction.

TRAUMA OF WAR

“They [Germans] gathered all our possessions from our house and put it in a big pile and burned it and we were left with nothing, not even a change of clothes.”

“My mother had to tear one of her dresses to make nappies for the two small ones.”

“They lined him up with his four cousins...My father watched as they shot one by one and when it came to his turn he ... jumped and rolled down the hill the Germans firing after him. He fell into the pond, which was at the bottom of the hill and he hid under a ledge. He had been shot and his blood floated onto the surface of the water. Later, the villagers came and dragged him out.” Anastasia Despotaki

“As I walked through the fields I trod on the boy’s foot. He was dead.....I started screaming....we went to Kira Maria whose son it was and told her...Kiria Argiro, Kiria Chrisanthi, Kiria Maria and Kiria Evthokia carried his body in their arms down to St Nicholas in Agia Irini.” Argiro Pendaraki



Giorgos Despotakis by the memorial to the cousins who were killed.



Ruins of the Despotaki house

LOSS OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

“And sometimes one of us have to stay behind, we have to look after dad because my father was paralyzed. Mum have to go to work. So, one, we all take sort of turns. One stay one day from school then the other one the next day and more or less we have been educated because we never fill up the whole year to school.” Adriana Weston

“One day my mother called us together and we sat at the table, I remember it well...and said ‘I can’t educate you all, the boys will continue at school and the girls will have to learn a trade’.” Argiro Pendaraki



“My teacher said they had two places for students to go to study in Hania and then Athens free of charge and one was for me. My mother wouldn’t let me go because my father was dead and my mother was very protective. .. It was hard because I loved learning.” Alexia Pendaraki,

**CONSTANT
HARD
WORK**

“We were picking olives and we worked everyday. It was raining all day and we had a sack to cover our heads as we picked olives. A man came by and he said to us slaving away in the heavy rain. ‘Why don’t you leave and go to another country’ and he gave us a newspaper which had an item about migrating.” Anastasia Despotaki

“People worked from sunrise to sunset every day. That’s what we knew.” Spirithoula Vlondaki

“Yes and we thought eh, hello, there must be a better life than this... We were so naïve those days, let’s face it and we just looking for something better.”

“All I wanted is at those days to have a nice car, because a rich family back there they used to have ... Always dream to have a nice car. Stupid might be but yeah. ‘I would have gone anywhere’. Adriana Weston

FUTURE PROSPECTS



- **The Dowry system prevailed in Greece at the time. Marriages were arranged according to status and reputation as the families, not just the couples, were joined by marriages;**
- **There was order to the way families married off their children - by age and gender. Eldest daughter was married first working downwards and then the sons could marry.**
- **The expectation was that a dowry would be provided by the girl's parents - usually something substantial.**
- **Families struggled to buy a house for all their daughters and this put a strain on resources.**
- **Shortage of men due to large number killed in the War compounded the issue**

EMERGENT THEMES



- Questioning of cultural norms for Greek women in a patriarchal culture;
- Frustrated aspirations - wanted something different;
- Yearning for adventure;
- Desire for economic independence.

“I could not understand why I have to pay a man to become a slave to him. Why? ... You marry somebody and you have no right to talk, I’m talking about Crete ... You do as you are told, you treat him like a God and you just work.” “I had those views forever since I noticed that a girl has to buy a husband.”

Alexia Pendaraki

“In those years we didn’t know anything, I don’t know how to say it but we didn’t know how to go out to work, earn money.”

“ I was asked for when I was fifteen but I must not have wanted that..... I saw our neighbours leave, we stayed up late talking and then we walked them to the bus and I must have started dreaming.”

Adriana Weston



“I heard their stories about America, Germany and something inside of me just wanted to go. I wanted to leave. They offered me matches from here, there and everywhere but I didn’t want it. I just wanted to leave.” Spirithoula Vlondaki

Intense feelings of loss

- The NZ experience was accompanied by a deep sense of loss. Parting from the known was abrupt. Realization of what they had given up only hitting them as they boarded the plane - ***“I was crying all the way to New Zealand and I haven’t stopped.”***
- Return visits to Greece were welcome on the one hand - ***“It was like I was dead and I was resurrected”*** - but the loss of their village communities hit them hard. People had left and the villages were emptying and family homes crumbling from disuse.



Aikaterina Galanaki's village,
Hosti.



Alexia Pendaraki's village,
Agia Irini

- **Some had a feeling of being cheated by the whole experience –**
 - *“If I knew what I know now I would have never come”*
 - *“If Greece was what is it now, I would not have come [to NZ]”*
- **New found communities in NZ were breaking up as people moved to Australia or back to Greece.**
- **Those moving to Australia longed for compatriots in NZ with whom they had shared a seminal life experience.**
 - **Found it hard to fit into Greek Australian communities.**
- **Returnees to Crete missed NZ & found the new Greece hard to take.**



- Those agreeing to be interviewed felt relatively positive about their immigration experiences.
- Phone conversations revealed that those who did not want to be interviewed did not *“want to wash their dirty linen in public.”* One resented coming to NZ to *“wash other people’s toilets.”*
- Sanitization of women’s accounts. Greek concept of hospitality may prevent them from openly criticizing their host country.

LIMITATIONS

