

Maureen Sakell Interview Summary Kingston Greek History Project

Interviewee: Maureen Sakell, with Spiro Sakell contributing

Interviewer: Angeline Boswell

Date: August 31st, 2018

Location: Maureen's home

Summary created by Angeline Boswell

Part One:

How did you come to be part of the Greek community?

- Maureen, originally from Ottawa met Spiro through his sister Scia. They were married in 1962 in the Greek Church in Ottawa. She felt fortunate to be married into such a large, warm, and loving family, and she never felt like an outsider. Not even in the rest of the Greek community. She never felt shunned or excluded from anything.
- They started out in a very large family, and over the years it has extended in some ways and of course diminished in others. They are proud members of the Greek community.

What did the Greek community look like before you were a part of it?

- Very close-knit. The Greek community has grown significantly. When they got married there were quite a few families, since they had all begun immigrating after the war (Spiro says this), but since then even in the last 20-30 years more families have come. The biggest spike of immigration was in the 1950s-70s; but Spiro's family was from long before then.
 - o the original group was only 5 families.
 - o Along with the generations growing, and the newcomers coming in, the families kept growing.
 - o Now, there are about 200 families Spiro estimates.

Where would people have met before we had a church?

- (Spiro) they used to bring a priest in from Ottawa. "Word would get out" that there would be Church, and everyone would get together. They used to go to **St. George's Cathedral in the chapel**, and would have church there. In the 50's, they would bring a priest from Watertown every so often too. They even had Easter services when there were enough people immigrating to Kingston.
- AHEPA and Daughters of Penelope was very strong in Canada, and in Kingston, at first. Uncle Chris Zakos (Spiro's uncle) was the President of AHEPA in Ontario, and then became Vice President of AHEPA in Canada.
 - o There was no "Maids of Athena" since there were not enough young girls to fill a chapter for that.
- Maureen and her sister in law Geri joined the Daughters of Penelope, along with many others. It was a very strong group. The group worked very hard. They would always make a Sunday buffet of traditional Greek food. She remembers when the Karkoulis ladies joined at the home of Sophie Janos. The group worked very hard and once a year we would rent the Bronze Cafeteria, near to where Chien Noir is located now, for a traditional Greek Sunday Buffet. All the food was homemade and it was a sell-out every year.

Can you describe what Daughters of Penelope is?

- It was an off-shoot of AHEPA; it was the feminine part of AHEPA.
- They would have their meetings at homes, and their services (such as appointing a new President) at the Masonic hall on Queen Street.
- The services were a special tradition wherein if someone was promoted to President or something, there would be a service with oaths.
- Maureen was once president; then she became **district governor for Ontario**. The duties were to **promote the Greek culture and heritage**. That is why they focused on food (because people loved the food).
- It was philanthropic in nature.
- These societies were based on the Masonic Lodge (Spiro says this). The way they did their ceremonies was the same.
 - o There was also a branch called the Sons of Pericles.
 - o In Kingston there was only AHEPA and Daughters of Penelope, but within this system there also existed Sons of Pericles and Maids of Athena.
- Not everyone in the church would have been a part of this. You had to be an Orthodox Christian, but the church was a **separate thing** from the AHEPA system.
- Their Chapter in Kingston was **Mia Chapter 299**. Every major city would have had a chapter. That's why they would travel all over, to see the other chapters. AHEPA would have conventions every May 24 weekend.
- They began AHEPA at first because of the persecution of Greeks in 20th century. They needed to "do something to keep themselves together" (Spiro says this).
 - o In the States, AHEPA is still huge.
- Maureen feels that, as the Church grew, the need for AHEPA and its divisions decreased.

Part Two:

Spiro, would you like to describe what AHEPA is?

- American Hellenic Educational and Philanthropic Association. All about Philanthropy. "It's a bunch of buddies getting together" and asking what they can do to help others. "It's good comradeship; once an AHEPan, always an AHEPan." When the chapter in Kingston shut down, he lost contact with many of his peers. It was first functional because of the first generation Greeks who started it, and as new Greeks came they were not as interested in AHEPA. And when "we" left (the early Greek family members), AHEPA left.

Did many of the members of Daughters of Penelope then become members of the Philoptohos?

- (Maureen): When they got the church, the community wasn't big enough to have distinct members of Daughters and Philoptohos, so they were the same people. Maureen was a member of both, although she stayed more with the Daughters (with Murva Nikas, helping with Folkore) because of the **language barrier**. Philoptohos did not have many young people, whereas Daughters had more young people and non-Greeks so there was more English there. Philoptohos had many of the older ladies that perhaps spoke no English.

What was your general experience of a non-Greek in the Greek community? Were there difficulties? Benefits?

- No difficulties, but many benefits. The exposure to another culture; a close-knit community that was like a big family. It was wonderful. She felt no animosity.

*Would you like to speak a bit about **Folklore**?*

- There was a group called the Folk Arts Council who organized it. Each ethnic group had their own pavilion. Someone from the Folk Arts Council contacted the Greek community but they said it was too much work to get involved. So Maureen's sister in law Geri wanted to take it on, so she went to a Folk Arts Council meeting representing the Daughters. "I remember thinking 'Oh dear, she is going to get us into something... and she did.'" Our first Greek Pavilion was located at St. Lawrence College
- All of the Daughters of Penelope got together. Tessie, Maria and Effie Karis, Bessie and Katina Zakos, Toulia Leos, the Karkoulis ladies and many more worked together to make this happen.
- They cooked and they baked. Maureen remembers having pans and pans of Pastitsio. They had it at St. Lawrence because they didn't have a church hall back then.
- You had to buy a *passport* which had a map, showing where all the different pavilions were. There was always food and a bar at each pavilion. Maureen believes the Folk Arts council, with support from the different communities – funded Folklore, not the city of Kingston.
- Everyone in the community would help. Their family did a lot of the decorations, with help, in the early years. Spiro and Jimmy Sakell along with their uncle Chris Zakos were at the bar. Katina Zakos was in charge of all the displays – she was very artistic. Geri was in charge of greeting. Everyone would dress up; Maureen and Spiro made costumes for themselves and their children (they have a photo of this).
- They transformed the whole space for Folklore. There was a Parthenon, a bar, displays of artifacts, costumes, anything that came from Greece... There was background Greek music playing all the time. They danced too; they were "also the entertainment" – the community did everything! Visitors could dance, eat Greek food...
 - o they made Salad, pastitsio, loukoumades, pastries, "anything and everything"
 - o people would buy the food and either take it or sit down and eat; and the community would benefit greatly monetarily from this endeavor.
 - o The Greek pavilion was one of the most popular because of the food
- It was fun, but a *lot* of work.
- when the Greek community got their hall after two or three years, Murva Nikas then took over as the chair person. Maureen had to pass the torch on; it was exhausting. Murva was the chair person for years.
- Maureen feels that when folklore got too big, it became too commercialized. The original intention of folklore was not to make any money – it was to show *who we are* (Spiro). They felt that folklore grew to be too big, and there were certain cultures that became more popular than others and overshadowed the other smaller groups. "It became like a business really", Spiro says, and then the smaller groups starting pulling out of the events.
- Maureen: "unless you have a core of people that are willing to give up a lot of time to do it, it's too difficult". It started to die off bit by bit. It made them sad to watch this happen. With any community, as it gets too big, you lose this small, personal core.
 - o Maureen says kudos to Murva, since she put in an incredible amount of work for Folklore.

- Spiro and Maureen fondly remember the other pavilions, such as the Ukrainian pavilion, where they made many friends.
- It was great to have exposure to different cultures you wouldn't otherwise have. For Spiro, the biggest thing was being able to taste different foods he wouldn't have been able to before. It was at folklore that he tasted Indian food for the first time.

How is the community different today than when you first became a part of it? (1960s)

- Maureen and Spiro feel that people are more dispersed now, as compared to before when there were less people in the community. They remember having community picnics – something they couldn't do anymore when the community got too big.
- AHEPA used to have a dance once a month at the old LaSalle hotel.
 - o During that time, there were maybe 30 or 40 families. All the young people came and everyone looked forward to the dances. Everyone looked forward to it.

Part Three:

Up-keeping Greek tradition in the family.

- They have a daughter and two sons. And it's important to note that everyone in the family – all their nieces and nephews – celebrate a portion of Greek culture. They all celebrate Greek Easter – they all get together in Kingston and do the eggs, go to Church, do the lamb... She feels it has been an important part of their lives, even if they don't speak Greek – they've managed to maintain the Greek culture. If she and Spiro said they wouldn't do Greek Easter one year, everyone would object and say they *had* to because it is our tradition!
- None of their children married Greeks; yet they keep up the Greek traditions. Their children still have a lot of Greek friends – they still have connections with the Greek community, and the members they grew up with.
- Spiro: “the kids still carry on the traditions”.
- They can all cook Greek food.
- They even see their grandchildren keeping on this tradition. Maureen describes how their grandson is always excited to break the egg at Easter.
- Maureen cooks Greek food; she says the “meat and potatoes” food is boring; Greek food is more diverse. People are impressed with Maureen's cooking abilities.
 - o Maureen learned from Spiro's mother, Chrysanthy Sakell, who was a wonderful cook.
- Maureen did not know much about the Greek culture before she married into it. And it was a wonderful experience.
- The grandchildren don't call Maureen Yiayia (Grandma) because Spiro's mom was the “Yiayia of Yiayias”, and when Maureen thinks of a Yiayia, that's who she thinks of. No one can replace her.