

Emmanuel (Manos) Ioannis Tryfonopoulos

I was born in 1927, in a beautiful coastal village called Methoni in southwestern Greece. I was the fifth of six children born to Reverend Ioannis and Presbytera Aikaterini Tryfonopoulos. My father died in 1938 leaving my mother to raise 6 children on her own. It was a difficult time for all of us. I attended elementary school in Methoni but just as I began secondary school in nearby Pylos, war broke out in 1940 and all the schools were closed. I spent the next three years working on the farm, helping to support my family as the “man” of the house. My older brother had been called to fight in the war. I became a member of the resistance group to fight the invading forces.

When the schools re-opened in 1943, I returned and earned my diploma in 1947. I moved to Athens to apply for university. I was successful in my entrance exams but was denied admission due to my political affiliation during the war. This changed the course of my life. I found a job working for the Diocese in Paramithia in Northern Greece. I worked my way up and caught the attention of the Bishop who sent me to be the superintendent of the local orphanage.

In 1950 I was called to serve my National Military Service. I enlisted in the Officers’ school and achieved the rank of 2nd Lieutenant. In April 1953 my tour of duty was complete and I was discharged. I returned to work in the Diocese of Trikala as the superintendent of their orphanage. I was to stay there for a year before leaving for Canada.

Since high school, I had been corresponding with a young lady named Maria from my home town. We had plans for our future but one day she wrote to me to tell me that her family was emigrating to Canada, the land of opportunity. We agreed that once she had settled there she would sponsor me to come over. So in October 1954, I found myself saying goodbye to my mother and family and embarking for Halifax. Once there, I boarded a train for Kingston. We were married 10 days later.

Life was difficult at first, we were both working long hours sometimes at two jobs, doing whatever we could, trying to learn the language at the same time. I met an Italian who had a shoe repair shop. He gave me my first job as a shoe repairman. I had learned the trade during the war and since I spoke Italian also, I was hired. Several months later, I changed jobs to work as a shoe repairman for Mr. Nick Pezoulas, a fellow Greek. The work was good, however, I was always on the look out to improve my situation and make some progress. An established member of the community, Mr. George Karis, who was later to become a good friend, told me about a job opportunity as a milkman. This job had more responsibility, higher wages and I would be out in the fresh air. The interviewer, however, did not seem too eager to hire a foreigner who could barely speak English. He interviewed me but also gave me bookkeeping and accounting tests that were not part of the job description. I had no trouble in solving the problems as I was strong in mathematical skills. This was not the only time that I, like many other immigrants, would face prejudice. We had to prove ourselves more so than the average Canadian. I did so well on the interview that he had no choice but to hire me. This meant an increase in salary and a small step towards a better life! In six months my wife and I managed to save enough money for a down payment on a house and within the same year welcomed our first child, a daughter.

The church was very important to us, not only because I was a priest's son and the majority of my working life had been with the diocese but because it gave us a sense of family, of belonging, of familiarity, of support. We joined and immediately, I volunteered for psaltis, or chanter. This position has been important to me my whole life. It has brought me comfort and strength when I needed it.

At that time there seemed to be two separate groups of Greeks in the community. One from Tripoli, the other from Corinth. There was not much interaction between them. We did not have a priest or a church of our own and had to rent various halls for our church services. We had two different priests that came alternately to perform the liturgy. I took it upon myself to think of a way to get the two groups to warm up to each other. I did some investigating and made arrangements to borrow Greek movies from the Greek film board to show the community. This was a huge success. Since I had worked with children before, I thought it would be a good idea to put on a play using kids from both sides. I named this group of youngsters "Greek Youth of Kingston" to include everyone and to unite us. The first play we put on was "Golfo", a Greek neo classic love story. All the parents came to admire their children and to be entertained. Slowly, the two communities realized they had a lot in common. Once Bishop Theodosios from Toronto was assigned to our community, the same priest would come to Kingston and that also provided some stability. We were on our way to saving to buy our own church.

On a personal level, I was working hard, making some headway and had bought my own shoe repair shop. My brother had come to Kingston and so had some cousins. We were starting to breathe easier and living a more comfortable life. Maria and I decided to grow our family.

We welcomed a son in March 1960 not knowing that tragedy was around the corner. On June 4th my wife died suddenly leaving me shocked, heart broken and with two small children to care for. Unable to look after an infant, I asked my cousin in Montreal to take him temporarily. She was married with children of her own and lived with her parents and unwed sister. There would be plenty of help and they were family. A year later I took both my children to Greece to my sister and mother. I had plans of working in Canada to save money and then moving back to Greece. However, once again life had other plans in store. I met a woman named Shirley when she brought her shoes into my store to be fixed. We exchanged stories and found we had a lot in common. I started rethinking my decision to return to Greece and so brought my children back to Canada.

By this time, I did not have the shoe repair shop anymore. I tried different jobs from car salesman, insurance salesman to manager and subsequent owner of a diary bar. I always tried to better myself and worked hard but I always had time for church and the Greek community. I have always been a Committee member and even served as Treasurer and Secretary on many occasions and as President twice. My love of soccer inspired me to start a men's soccer team. When the Board of Education introduced the Heritage Language Programme, I applied for grants to start the Greek school. This was co-signed by Mrs. Mary Karkoulis who requested grants for Greek dancing. The first school teachers were the priest Father Dimitrios Polychroniadis and

Mrs Maro Argyropoulos. Our community was steadily progressing well. I helped to get our community involved in Folklore and we always had one of the best pavilions enjoyed by Greeks and non-Greeks alike. We participated every year until Folklore was discontinued.

The Greek Community has been a home base for me throughout my life in Canada. It has been a shelter when we were all homesick looking for comfort and familiarity in a new land. I tried my best to contribute to the group by taking part in all aspects, the social, the business and most importantly the church. I still chant at the church every week.

In the early 1950's, we were only a handful of Greeks searching for a better life. We worked hard, overcoming many obstacles and difficulties to become a strong community that enriches the Canadian fabric of society. We have grown to over 200 families now. Many of us are successful business owners, others contribute in their own way to make Canada a better place for all, while still honouring our roots and from where we came.

My hope for the future is that the Greek community and the Church remain an important part of the lives of future generations of Greek Canadians. Keeping the old traditions and religion alive does not take away from the fact that we are proud Canadians. It simply reminds us of who we are and how we came to believe in what we do. These traits are important to all people. Why else is there such a resurgence of companies that search for one's ancestry. We can be proud of our heritage and bring to the table all the best of what we are, all ethnicities working together to make a better life for themselves and their children. This is what makes Canada such a wonderful place to call home.