



Greek America: The Next Fifty Years

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A central concern in every era of Greek America has been how to sustain a viable Hellenic entity in America. Thinking about the next fifty years is problematic but essential. The community of 2016 is far different than the community of 1916. Rather than being mostly foreign-born and not well-educated, the current community is primarily American-born and well-educated. The future community will be different from both.

In the past, repeated new waves of immigrants have stimulated and renewed Hellenic identity. The most spectacular of those inflows was the 250,000 Second Wave immigrants from Greece and Cyprus (1965-1980).¹ In subsequent years, the flow of Greek immigrants has been so low that it is largely balanced by Greek Americans relocating to Greece. A massive Third Wave of Greek immigration is not likely. Even during the present Greek crisis, when 200,000 Greeks have left the homeland, only 5,000 came to the United States. The majority have emigrated to nations in the European Union with ready access back to Greece. Another significant percentage have gone to Australia where there are large Greek communities in two major cities, a governmental program that supports bi-culturalism, and opportunities for advancement superior to those in America.

Unforeseen events may alter expectations, but certain trends seem certain. Among these is the high rate of outmarriage to non-Greeks. For quite some time, that rate has been 80% and rising.² This phenomenon will result in the majority Greek American population in 2066 having a mixed ethnic heritage of American-born Greeks who do not have exposure to even a grandparent born in Greece or Cyprus.

Greek Americans of mixed ethnic heritage Greek Americans will be free to drop their ethnic heritages, treat them symbolically, cultivate multiple heritages, or decide to be Hellenes. Choice here is not like picking a dessert. Choice is shaped by societal

trends, economics, family influences, ethnic activism and numerous other factors.³ Individuals, ultimately will make their selection based on what they believe is positive for them, not some abstract sense of ethnic obligation. The challenge that faces the present Greek American community is to establish an attractive and welcoming culture.⁴

The Greeks of the Great Migration (1880-1924) and the Second Wave (1965-1980) were Greek by birth and mainly were concerned with how American they wished or were allowed to be. The generation that matured after World War II mainly thought of itself as the caretaker of an ethnic legacy inherited from its parents. In that sense, individuals had to decide how Greek they wanted to be. The generation that will mature in 2066 will not be greatly influenced by genetic heritage or seeing themselves as caretakers of a historic legacy. Individuals will opt for being Greek primarily on the basis of how that fits into their personal ambitions and psychology. With that reality in mind, there are numerous community actions that could foster the choice of Hellenic identity.

Access to Greece

A Greek America that is not connected to Greece is hard to imagine.⁵ Maintaining that contact for young people is essential. We are fortunate that the land and people of Greece pretty much sell themselves. For the past decades, many Greek American organization had understood this reality and fed that connection by sponsoring travel to Greece by thousands of Greek Americans, roughly aged from 15-25. The response has been terrific. Participants return feeling very enthusiastic about being Greek and wanting, in many cases, to learn more about Greek culture and to better navigate the Greek language.

The nature of each program differs. Organizations like AHEPA and the National Hellenic Society provide relatively large numbers with an introduction to contemporary Greek culture laced with some education on the Byzantines and Classic Greece. Cretan organizations and other regionally-based groups focus on familiarizing students with the local history and culture of their forbearers. The American Hellenic Institute provides a relatively small group interested in public service with intense interactions with political figures and thinkers in Greece and Cyprus. This diversity of approaches is a strength, not a weakness. The variety of programs offers considerable choice for young Greek Americans, and the programs are not burdened with a fixed agenda shaped by an umbrella organization. A doable goal for Greek America should be to establish the programs that offer all maturing Greek Americans the opportunity to visit Greece with a group of their peers.⁶

Another priority is to establish follow-up programs to maintain and cultivate the Hellenism activated by initial travel to Greece. Younger people need to be integrated into community organizations as partners rather than as learners. For example, their perspectives and their skills in dealing with the new communications technology can help revitalize our organizations and make them far more effective in dealing with the general American public.

Revitalizing Secular Culture

If Hellenic culture, rather than genetic heritage will be central to Greek indemnity in 2066, the community has to move dynamically in areas where it has not been strong. Although we have done well in preserving traditional dancing and music, we have had a weak commitment to the other arts. We must understand that if we want young people to choose Greek identity we must go beyond celebrating Greek national holidays and traditions. If we wish to have work produced by, for, and of Greek America, we need to support our artists and intellectuals. Without such support, they are likely to go to where their efforts are better appreciated.

We already have an existing model of cultural activism: the National Hellenic Museum in Chicago. The museum has regular book signings, music programs, culinary classes, and other activities designed to engage different elements of the community.⁷ Organizations in smaller cities cannot match the variety of activities in Chicago, but events on a more modest scale are possible.

Every Greek American household needs to subscribe to a Greek American newspaper or magazine. The best of these are essential in shaping a sophisticated ethnic culture. More practically, if physical literature is not present in the home, younger people are not going out to find them on their own. I am distressed that *Voices*, our only literary magazine, has had to suspend publication.⁸ Another five hundred subscribers would have kept it viable. We need to realize that such low-cost investment, much less than the cost of a restaurant meal, has the huge benefit of showing our most creative members that what they do matters to us.

Our newspapers will play a critical role in the next decades, but with a major difference from the past. Breaking news has become the domain of the Internet. This reality means our ethnic press needs to produce in-depth quality commentary while continuing to cover topics that are ethnic in nature but not part of the conventional 24-hour news cycle. Music, film, and literary critics must have the same credibility as political columnists. To simply publicize an event or work by a Greek artist is no longer sufficient, and puff pieces where all works by Greek Americans are automatically praised are counter-productive. The justly popular tradition of offering recipes,

evaluating Greek wines, and reviewing restaurants is sound, but they too need to be upgraded. If upgrading becomes the norm, our ethnic mass media might well grow even as some forms of conventional media perish.

Greek film festivals did not exist in the 1980s. Today, there are half a dozen and dozens of a more modest nature. Cinema is a dynamic way of bringing contemporary Greek culture to a popular audience. Screenings are cultural rather than financial enterprises. A side benefit is that Greek films help those with limited Greek or those learning Greeks with their language skills. They get to simultaneously hear idiomatic Greek while checking the subtitles to see if they had correctly understood what was being said. A current weakness in our presentation of cinema is that the works of Greek American filmmakers are rarely shown. This neglect may be one of the causes of the slender number of independent films with Greek American themes.⁹

Books with Hellenic themes generally sell in the low thousands. As a consequence, most of those works are published by university presses, small independent presses, and ad hoc groups. Greek American organizations with multiple chapters can offer tremendous support to these publishers by buying books for their organizations, local university collections, and public libraries. Multiple subscriptions to literary magazines and academic journals would help greatly in keeping these economically marginal ventures viable. The same holds true for videos with Hellenic topics. DVD sales of such works are so low by usual commercial standards that even modest support would be sufficient to keep independent filmmakers solvent even if theatrical screenings are sparse.

The Future of Greek Orthodoxy

The Greek Orthodox Church has long been a backbone of Greek America, and Church policies in the next decades will greatly affect the nature of our ethnic identity. Three major options are available to the Church. It can continue to operate as it is now operating. It can increase its emphasis on Greek ethnicity. Or it can focus on spreading Orthodoxy.

The Church currently welcomes converts, but it is passive in terms of its outreach. Consequently, most conversions are a result of outmarriages to non-Greeks who adopt their spouse's religion. The shortage of priests continues and many new priests are converts already ordained by related faiths rather than clergy schooled in Greek Orthodox seminaries. Americanization of the Church proceeds haphazardly. Not much is done to promote national or ecumenical visibility. Continuing this mode is reactive at best and has no specific agenda aimed at the needs of children of outmarriages

An alternative policy would be to make the preservation of Greek identity in America a major Church mandate. Fewer compromises would be made with American culture and using the Greek language would be stressed. Such a Church would almost certainly decrease in total numbers, but the faithful would be united by a strong commitment to a culturally-focused Church. There would be less appeal to children of outmarriages as a category, but those who were attracted would have or acquire an intense ethnic identity. Such a pathway is favored by former Archbishop Spyridon. The controversial Spyrdion has opined, "I constantly ask what the future of our Church is going to be in America as I see the continuous assimilation of the Greek element. The closing of the Greek schools and the growing career mentality of the clergy have me agonizing more and more every day I think the division of the Archdiocese into smaller ecclesiastical entities doesn't advance the unity of the Church in America."¹⁰

A third choice is for the Church to strive to become a national Orthodox Church in which the Greek in its title is generic, like the Roman in Roman Catholic. The emphasis would be on faith rather than ethnicity. There could be serious outreach to other Orthodox believers, but growth would mainly entail conversions from other faiths. The Greekness of the Church in this scenario would be in its core values and rituals. Although the liturgy and hymns might remain in Greek just as the Catholics once used Latin, most Church activities would be conducted in English. This orientation has obvious appeal for the children of outmarriages. Such an approach, however, has never been attempted in the United States and has numerous risks and complexities. Its virtue is that it actively addresses changing cultural dynamics while retaining its Hellenic essence.¹¹

Accessing the Communications Revolution

A new dynamic force in Greek America and the rest of the world is the ongoing communication revolution. This phenomenon can serve as a tremendous asset in promoting Hellenic identity. The most obvious benefit of electronic media is that they offer instant communication with family members and intimate friends. Exchanges of photos, letters, and Skype sessions mean that, unlike the past, geographical separation does not mean an automatic familial disconnect.

Greeks who do not live in Greek centers can now easily remain up-to-date on all Hellenic current events. They also can be in communication with professional colleagues in virtual communities that can be as productive as face-to-face relationships. For example, as a writer/scholar/editor, I am in constant contact with colleagues in Greece, Australia, Ukraine, and other places where speed and ease of communication was slow and difficult even ten to twenty years ago. I can work with colleagues on joint

projects and bring them to fruition in months rather than years. The same pattern can apply to business and professional relationships.

Another new phenomenon is the use of the Internet to build social relations among young people. In some cities, younger Greek Americans use social media to create parties with open-ended invitations. No one can be sure who is going to show up at an event, but all those who do are seeking Hellenic or pan-Hellenic contacts. Such networking is far less formal or intimidating than traditional church-related gathering.

Our organizations mainly use electronic media as a substitute for the pamphlets they formally published. Few have tried to develop publications aimed at the general public or offering a historical memory. We are also short on local blogs that offer a schedule of upcoming or ongoing events in a manner even more effective than the community radio or weekly newspaper of yore. Another option to local sites, say in a city like Detroit, is to compile a list of all books and scholarly studies that deal with Hellenic interests in that region.

The Greek Language in America: An Endangered Species

Whether Greek Americans can truly be Greek if they only speak English, has long been a contested identity issue, but no one questions that Greek culture is best appreciated in the mother tongue. A new factor in sustaining Greek in America is that the United States has recognized that in an emerging global system that prizes cultural sensitivity and bilingualism the need to speak more than one language is all but mandatory. In that sense, retention of the Greek language in America is now tied to wider cultural needs, not just the particular desires of a family or community. This situation results in some unexpected benefits for us. New funding pathways have opened. Public charter or magnet schools, Greek language classes in some public schools, Internet language courses, person-to-person Skype interchanges, and a strong focus on college language courses are all positive developments still at an early stage. Historian Alexander Kitroeff has further noted that some interesting approaches to language education developed in the past, but never vigorously pursued, are worth reconsidering.¹²

Universities are playing an increasingly critical role in Greek language education. As more colleges require command of a second language as a degree requirement, studying Greek has practical as well as subjective benefits for Greek American students. An added advantage of university programs is that they often have formal study abroad programs that provide extensive first-hand experience and interactions with Greek colleagues. A chronic problem in maximizing the potential of such outreach has been that funding from foundations often goes to Classical or Byzantine Studies rather

than Modern Greek Studies and Greek American Studies. All are worthy, but funding the latter two is essential for community survival.

The odds for Greek language retention in his new linguistic climate are long but much better than in past years. We must begin by acknowledging that for all of our past efforts, which were strenuous and extensive, the community has not been particularly successful in retaining Greek in the American-born. Repeating the same methods and expect different outcomes doesn't make sense.

Ethnic Heritage and Political Engagement

Greek Americans are justly proud of Classical Greek and Byzantine history. More often than not, however, our knowledge of both is shallow and even shallower about modern Greece history and the history of the Greeks in America. In many ways, we treat our heritage as a precious porcelain art work to be admired but not used.

Learning about Greeks in history is unusual even at the college level. Classical Greece gets some play, though not as much as it should or used to.¹³ The Byzantine Empire usually rates only a page or so in conventional world history texts. Adding injury to insult, American politicians and journalists now cite the Ottoman Empire as a reasonably just, multi-ethnic state when, in fact, the Byzantines were far superior in that regard. For example, not all Byzantine emperors were Greek and the patriarchs had little secular power. We can add that the Byzantine patriarchs refused to recognize forced conversions, a doctrine espoused by some emperors.

If we look at accounts of World War II, there is rarely much reference to the Greek defeat of Mussolini or the diversion of German divisions from other battlegrounds to combat the Greek resistance. History channels do not have films about the destruction of the German elite paratrooper corps in Crete or how the destructions of the Gorgopotamos viaduct was a factor in the defeat of Rommel in North Africa.¹⁴ The Greek genocide engineered by Turkey is rarely discussed.

The history of Greek American does not fare any better. Greeks are usually just lumped in with "other European immigrants." A recent PBS documentary about the famous Ludlow Massacre of 1913 did even mention Louis Tikas, the Greek leader martyred at Ludlow who became a national symbol of the exploitation of labor.¹⁵

The causes of this neglect of our heritage by others has multiple sources, but our community has not been vigorous in undertaking the political and social activism essential for generating greater and more accurate visibility. In that regard, Irish, Italian, and Armenian activists have done much better. The Irish community in New

York mounted a vigorous educational campaign that led to a revision of New York's history texts to state British policies were the major cause of the Irish Famine of the 1840s. The Italians of New York, concerned about the high dropout rate of Italian college students, particularly males, were able to obtain state funding for a research foundation to study and address the issue. The Armenians have steadily accumulated public statements by nations, states, and prominent politicians regarding the Armenian Genocide organized by Turkey. This strongly suggests that change is possible when there is a will to make it happen.

National umbrella organizations have never been successful in Greek America. Effective action is usually more viable when carried out by compact groups or at the base of the community. For this reason, AHI has long advocated that each parish or community form a political group to interact with the local congressional representative and each state's two senators. Only a handful of activists are needed to get vital literature to these officials. Ideally, politicians should be invited to speak with the community. All will respond, especially in election years. This response may just be formal, but it offers the opportunity to urge them to join the bipartisan Congressional Caucus on Hellenic Affairs, presently co-chaired by Gus Bilirakis (FL) and Carolyn Mahoney (NY). If they are already members, they need to be congratulated. Whatever the circumstances, outreach to politicians reminds them that they have a Greek constituency that pays attention to the positions the politician takes.

Each year there are some 500 Greek food festivals, usually held in tandem with a local Church. I do not know of a single one that offers a literature table on a non-controversial religious matter, such as the continued closure of the Halki seminary by Turkey. A petition could be available to send to the appropriate politicians, mass media, and even the Turkish government. Just a few persons are needed to attend such a table. Outreach of this kind would greatly aid our Congressional leaders. If by some miracle, all the festivals took such action, there is a potential for half-a-million signatures.

The *topika somatei* (regional societies) have a crucial role to play. They embody the most direct and immediate linkage to Greece. If one wants to interact in some manner with a specific region in Greece or Cyprus, the *topika somatei* are often the most efficient and rapid means of so doing. These organizations, unfortunately, have not done much to communicate with the American public. Pontian societies are an exception. They vigorously sponsor lectures, organize forums, and publish books, including teaching guides for elementary school teachers.¹⁶ Actions are often undertaken in cooperation with Armenian and Assyrian organizations. Other groups besides the Pontians also have been vigorous, but the majority of the *topika somatei* remain social societies with limited outreach.

Modern Greek Studies programs have done quite well in offering instruction in Greek, but they rarely organize events of interest to other scholars, journalists or the general public. This partly stems from an intense orientation on identity issues, academic theorizing, and the fine arts, but financing is also a critical factor. If the community wants to have more public seminars and more dynamic scholarship it must fund such projects. A legitimate complaint of MGSA program in this regard is that funding often is offered with conditions about who can and cannot speak and insistence on a preconceived conclusion. Those are intellectual non-starters.

Greek Americans are increasing aware that our future has more to do with interactions with modern Greece than nostalgia about “the village,” Classic Greek ruins, and Byzantine glories. Socrates wisely counseled “know thyself.” If familiarity with our history in America is essential to that “knowing,” we are not doing a very good job. There are numerous excellent books to drawn on, but readership is anemic and academic courses sparse.

We also have to know our history to understand why some of our tactics succeeded while others failed. We must understand that when dealing with foreign policy issues, we cannot stress ethnic pride but why what we propose is good for the United States. We need to ask ourselves how we were we able to mount a successful Greek War Relief campaign in World War II that was good for Greece and good for the United States. But why were most Greek Americans silent about the junta and supportive of politicians such as Spiro Agnew who embraced the dictatorship? The long-term consequences were negative for Greek America and America in general. More positively, why were we able to rally when Cyprus was invaded by Turkey and manage to hold down military financing for some time. Why are we less active and effective on this issue now? Why have we allowed the United States to support the FYROM name fiasco? Why have we allowed Turkey to be regarded as a “model” Islamic state when it thwarted American efforts in Iraq, trades extensively with ISIS, sabotages pro-American Kurdish fighters, and allows Europe to be swamped with refugees? What cultural strengths in Hellenism has earned us the distinction of being recognized by other Americans as a “model” immigrant community? Answers to such questions demand serious scholarly study and public debate, not silence about the negatives and uninformed self-congratulations on the positives.

Just how behind we are in presenting ourselves to the American public is indicated by the fact that almost all documentaries about Greek America that go beyond regionalism in any serious manner have been made by homeland Greeks, often working for Greek National Television.¹⁷ These homeland Greek filmmakers often work intimately with Greek Americans, and we should be pleased that there is such an

interest in our history. Nonetheless, we need to step forward and take a good look at ourselves. Most of what we will see is attractive but we have our warts that should not be airbrushed away as the Soviets used to airbrush the images of deposed leaders.

In the past, homeland Greeks often have believed Greek Americans are not “real” Greeks. Greek Americans, in turn, have often looked upon modern Greece as a failed political culture with which they do not want to be closely identified. Those attitudes are now waning. The increasing interaction between homeland and diaspora Greeks visible in various scholarly, journalistic, business, and artistic enterprises is very encouraging. Greek Americans have realized the benefit of seeing ourselves as homeland Greeks see us, and homeland Greeks have begun to show greater respect for how they are perceived by Greek Americans.

Conclusion

Speculating on the future is always risky. If we were thinking about the future back in 1966, we would not have anticipated the importance of the Second Wave of immigration that was already underway. Nor would we have imagined a military dictatorship being established one year later in the land we like to refer to as “the cradle of democracy.” That a Greek American would be the presidential candidate of one of the major parties was not on our agenda either.

The pattern of the past fifty years is that most ethnic groups do not survive past the fourth generation in America unless there is renewed or constant immigration. There is a high outmarriage rate in all groups and the children of those marriages usually move away from ethnic identity to American identity.¹⁸ These patterns that cut across all ethnic lines suggest that even if all the changes that appear positive should materialize, the maintenance and growth of Greek America is not guaranteed. What is guaranteed is failure of the community and possibly its demise if it just looks backward, hankering for a romanticized yesteryear or dwelling on the negatives in play.

Often forgotten by doomsters is that while new forces will wipe away many old patterns, they will also establish powerful new social dynamics. One of our ethnic legacies is that earlier generations of Greek Americans knew their fate in America required initiating actions believed appropriate for growth. Unlike some other ethnic groups, we face the certainty of change as a prosperous community with no fundamental, internal divisions. Our ethnic image in America is extremely positive. From this position of strength, maintaining a durable Hellenic identity in America is doable, but it requires more than wishful thinking.

¹ Peter C. Moskos and Charles C. Moskos, *Greek Americans: Struggle and Success* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 2014, Third Edition), pp 12-13.

² At the fourteenth annual conference on The Future of Hellenism in America hosted by the American Hellenic Institute in cooperation with the National Hellenic Society, Father Kosmos Karavella (Protopresbyter, Greek Orthodox Church of Sts. Constantine and Helen, Annapolis MD) stated that Orthodox Church estimates that outmarriage was currently between 90%-96%.

³ Symbolic ethnicity here refers to holding on to food or musical traditions or other aspects of culture but only in a haphazard manner. An extended discussion of this phenomenon is found in Yiorgos Anagnostous "Re/collecting Greek American Reflections on Ethnic Struggle, Success, and Survival," *Journal of Modern Hellenism* V. 31 (2015), pp. 148-175.

⁴ A far more hopeful perspective is offered by Peter Moskos, *Greek Americans*, pp. 193-204. Moskos finds that a significant percentage of children of mixed heritage are opting to emphasize their Greek identity. He describes this as Greek identity "trumping" other ethnic heritages. If that phenomenon continues, the Greek American community could continue indefinitely. Choice, however, is not just a matter of individual will but the product of a complex of family, community, educational, national, and economic forces.

⁵ Everything noted here about Greece usually applies to Cyprus as well.

⁶ Jewish Americans have already achieved their goal of providing such trips to Israel. I do not know of any other ethnic group that shares that distinction.

⁷ There museum also hosts school visits that educated young people about Greek culture.

⁸ A discussion of that magazine is offered by its editor, Annamarie Buonocore in the Emerging Voices of Greek America section of Volume 5, Spring 2014 of this journal. Also ceasing publication in recent years were *Odyssey*, *The Greek Star*, and *The Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*.

⁹ See nycgreekfestival.com for a typical festival program.

¹⁰ Theodore Kalmoukos, "Former Archbishop Spyridon Shares His Thoughts about the Church," *National Herald*, Dec. 19-25, 2015, p. 6.

¹¹ An early account of what this might entail is found in Stephen J. Sfekas and George E. Matsoukas (eds.), *Project for Orthodox Renewal: Seven Studies of Key Issues Facing Orthodox Christians in America* (Chicago: Orthodox Christian Laity, 1993). Also see Charles C. Moskos, "The Future of Greek America," *The Ahepan*, Spring, 2006, pp. 16-17.

¹² Alexander Kitroeff, "Greek Language Education and the John Rassias Report," *National Herald* (12-26-15), p. 13.

¹³ The brief fad of writing off this history as that of old white men has passed and the argument that Classical Greek has been credited for lore developed in North Africa was demolished by Mary Lefkowitz. *Not out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (NY: Basic Books, 1996) and Mary Lefkowitz and Guy Maclean Rogers (eds.), *Back Athena Revisited* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

¹⁴ A correction to this neglect is George C. Blytas, *The First Victory: Greece in the Second World War* (River Vale NJ: Cosmos Publishing in cooperation with the American Hellenic Institute , 2009). Details on the Gorgopotamos action: pp. 361-70, 380.

¹⁵ A crucial account of Tikas and Ludlow is found in Zeese Papanikolas, *Buried Unsung* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1976). Another sound account is the film *Palikari: Louis Tikas and the Ludlow Massacre* directed by Nickos Ventouras; produced and written by Lamprini Thoma.

¹⁶ Ronald Levitsky, *The Pontian Greek Genocide: a teaching unit* (Bloomington, IL: Pontian Greek Society of Chicago, 20006); *Hellenism of Asia Minor and Pontus* (Bloomington, IL: the Asia Minor and Pontos Hellenic Research Center, Inc., 2014). The same organization published Harry Psomiades, *Fridtjof Nansen and the Greek Refugee Crisis, 1922-24* (2011).

¹⁷ Some examples are *The Journey* (Maria Iliou), *Buzz* (Spiro Taraviras), *Palikari* (Nikos Ventouras), *Greek American Radicals* (Costas Vakkas), *Greektowns: A series* (Nicolas Panoutsopoulos), *Dan Georgakas: A Diaspora Rebel* (Costas Vakkas), and *Greeks and Americans* (Tassos Rigopoulos).

¹⁸ Jews are often cited as an exception but Jewish outmarriage rate is so high that Jewish scholars speak of the American experience as a Silent Holocaust. Yiddish is no longer widely spoken. Statistics on Hispanics show that, contrary to popular myth, most third-generation Hispanics speak English as their primary language.

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