

# **The history of the Smyrnaioi family**

(Written by Ioannis Smyrnaioi, July 2018)

## **Introduction**

The story below was originally written in the form of an undergraduate assignment for the Greek Open University in 2003. The aim of the original assignment was to train the students in interviewing people and in recording their experiences in an unbiased manner according to the principles of historiography. The case study that students had to work with was their own family history. Back then, I chose to write about my family from my father's side as I carry their last name, although the history of my mother's side was way more interesting. During that assignment, I interviewed my aunts Cybele Katrantzi and Callirrhoe Karamanou, and my father Charalambos, to all of whom I am greatly indebted. The original assignment was relatively short and could not cover all aspects of my family's history. In later years, long before I started this website, I conducted further research and decided to work on a more detailed draft of my family's history. I managed to get in touch with my uncle Christos Smyrnaioi in Melbourne, and after long conversations with him, I obtained useful information that could be integrated in a slightly more detailed article.

To my uncle Christos I also own the idea of posting this article online; therefore, I thank him not only for the interesting information he provided me with, but also for his support and encouragement to make our family's history publicly available. The reason this story needed to become available online was not due to its interest, but because of a practical necessity: the Smyrnaioi family primarily consisted of migrants, who spread across four continents and lost contact with each other since the beginning of World War II. There are probably three, if not four, generations that have gone by, and it is possible that parts of the family's history survive in different locations and in different languages. By posting the family's history on the web, I am hoping that some distanced relatives might read it and contact me with their side of the story. This way, there is a chance for us to put all the pieces back together and join

the dots after a long time. If any of the names and events mentioned in this story sound familiar to any of the readers, then please do not hesitate to contact me.

For those who are interested in this story from a purely historiographic perspective, this article presents the course and events of the Smyrnaioi family in conjunction with the historical events in Greece during the late 19th and 20th century. The scholarly aim of this article is to present the different ways in which memory perceives and recalls historical events, and note the different perceptions of the same events across different members of the same family. The article also presents a different kind of 'history', that of the social life of every-day people, based primarily on narratives from elderly members of a typical 19th century Greek family. For ease, the sections of this article have been divided according to broader chronological periods.

### **The Smyrnaioi family from the 1860s until the end of the 19th century**

The Smyrnaioi' history begins sometime during the middle of the 19th century at the island of Lesbos, which was by that time under Ottoman rule. The Greek populations of Lesbos had revolted several times against the Ottomans since the beginning of the century; however, all their efforts were drowned in blood due to the island's proximity with the Turkish mainland and the direct intervention of the Ottoman army; therefore, all the hopes of the Lesbians for unification with the Greek mainland remained unsatisfied. During the 1860s the island had a mixed population of Turkish Muslims and Greek Christians, who lived in separate communities and often occupied different territories. The economy of the island was primarily agricultural and there was prosperous trade with the coastal regions of Asia Minor. Unlike other areas of the Ottoman world, Lesbos was an island of rich agriculture and an important trading centre with significant economic growth.

As attested by their last name, the Smyrnaioi family descended from the city of Smyrna, which is nowadays Izmir, a large urban centre on the Western Turkish coastline. During the 18th and 19th century, Smyrna was a big trading centre and was

occupied by mixed populations, such as Turks, Greeks, Armenians and Jews. The main trading network of the Greeks in Smyrna included most of the islands of the North Aegean Sea, the city of Thessaloniki and Central Macedonia, and the Ottoman capital city of Istanbul (or Constantinople as still referred by the Greeks).

The Smyrnaioi family were active in livestock breeding and trade. They lived in the area of Galatas, the name of which associates with dairy products. Unfortunately, information on the family's history for this specific period is sparse and survives vaguely in the memories of the elderly members of the family. For example, it is totally unclear if the Smyrnaioi family originally started from Lesbos or Smyrna; however, they seem to have occupied both places simultaneously during the 19th century. Furthermore, the Smyrnaioi family associated with the Kariotis family, who were also merchants with strong connections with the neighbouring island of Chios. In fact, members of both families were married, although their names do not survive any more.

My great grandfather, Sarantos Smyrnaioi, lived in the village of Kalloni, Lesbos, and was a currier and shoemaker. The exact date and place of his birth are unknown; birth records from Ottoman Lesbos do not survive and the memory of the elderly could not recall such information. It is likely that Sarantos was born sometime during the second quarter of the 19th century and this could have either been at Lesbos or Smyrna. The fact that his work associated with the processing of pelts might suggest that he was somehow connected with the part of the family that lived in Smyrna, which was involved in livestock trade.

Sarantos Smyrnaioi and his wife Maria had eight children. It is perhaps more accurate to say that the couple brought up eight children, as child mortality was a usual phenomenon during the 19th century due to epidemic diseases; it is possible that the couple had more than eight children, and their exact number cannot be confirmed. From these eight children, two were girls and six were boys. The youngest boy in the family was my grandfather, Ioannis Smyrnaioi, born in Kalloni, Lesbos, in 1898.

In the neighbouring village of Agia Paraskevi, located 16km North-East of Kalloni, lived the family of my second great grandfather, Chrysostomos Nikolaides. Chrysostomos was a Phanariot scholar and a highly educated man, who once had served as a secretary of the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople. The exact date of this event is unknown, but it probably was sometime in the 1860s. He returned to Lesbos in the 1880s and worked as an appointed judge for the Ottoman government. He and his wife Marianthe brought up five children, the youngest daughter of whom was my grandmother Ellie Nikolaides, born in 1903.

### **The life Ioannis Smyrnaioi between 1900 and 1926**

My grandparents, Ioannis and Ellie, were young children when stirring events took place in the Ottoman Empire during the first years of the 20th century. My grandparents' memories from such events were vague; some were passed on to me by their children, often biased due to their own political perceptions; therefore, only a limited amount of information can be confirmed through other historical sources.

The beginning of the 20th century was characterised by the rise of nationalisms. The Young Turks' Revolution in 1908 gradually shifted towards a national ideology, which pushed aside all non-Turkish identities that once existed in the Ottoman Empire. In due time, the state's attitude towards the Greeks and other non-Turkish populations became harder. The Turkish administration at Lesbos favoured the island's Turkish Muslim populations and many Greek Christians who held public offices, such as Chrysostomos Nikolaides, were pushed aside. The injustice and inequality created by the authorities exposed a climate of national fanaticism of the Greeks against the Turks. The ideas of Greek nationalism on the other hand, which circulated by the press in the independent Greek mainland, showed to the Lesbians the necessity of fighting for their freedom and unification with Greece.

The island was liberated by the Greek fleet under Admiral Koundouriotis on 8th November 1912. During the course of the First Balkan War (1911-1912), the Greek

navy took control over the islands of Lemnos, Lesbos, Chios, Tenedos and Imbros. Although not present when these events took place, the family's elders preserved memories from the battle of Klapados in 1912, which has not been thoroughly recorded in modern texts. The Greek Christians population of the island, while still under Ottoman rule, organised an expeditionary force consisting of volunteers, which were armed and equipped by donations of Lesbian expatriates from the United States. This force was called the Lesbian Phalanx. Many expatriates from the United States travelled back to Lesbos by boat to fight on the Greek side. Due to the long journey, which used to take weeks, a large number died onboard from typhus and other diseases before even reaching the island. A story preserved by the elderly villagers of Kalloni says that while the Lesbian Phalanx was marching through their village to meet the Ottoman army at Klapados, a soldier broke from formation, rushed up to an old lady standing to the side of the road among the cheering crowds, kissed her on her forehead and ran back to his formation. It took a few minutes for the old lady to realise that this soldier was her eldest son, who had migrated to America when he was still a teenager. Rumours say that this soldier never returned to his mother. After this decisive battle, and after the successful operations of the Destroyer Averof and the Greek navy in the Aegean Sea, Lesbos was finally liberated in 1912.

Despite the dream of unification with mainland Greece coming true, the living conditions for the islanders had become difficult due to the war. The collapse of trade, economic problems and poverty could not be tackled after the liberation of the island. In theory, the expulsion of the Turkish Muslim populations from Lesbos would have left more cultivated land for the Greek Christian populations. Still, many local businesses that were trading with the Turkish mainland were shut down as the war and the hard border policy did not allow the continuation of commerce. The social and commercial ties between the family members who lived in Lesbos and those in Smyrna were completely cut off. The broader social and economic crisis led to the largest migration in the history of Lesbos, in 1913, which deprived the island of its youth.

My grandfather, Ioannis Smyrnaioi, was one of this generation's migrants. He departed to the United States in the summer of 1915, when he was sixteen years old. According to the records of the Ellis Island Foundation, my grandfather arrived at New York onboard S/S Themistocles on 23rd August 1915. He was planning to meet his older brother Apostolos Smyrnaioi, who lived at 15 Locke Street, Haverhill, Massachusetts. A search on Google Maps shows that this place is nowadays a car parking area. All five Smyrnaioi brothers had left the island before the liberation and all of them had migrated to the United States; however, there is almost no information about their lives before my grandfather arrived there. It is likely that not all of the Smyrnaioi brothers lived together in Massachusetts. There is information that some of them had businesses in Boston, while others had businesses in Texas, most likely in Dallas.

During the time the five eldest Smyrnaioi brothers had migrated to the United States, the income of the shoemaker Sarantos Smyrnaioi at Lesbos was probably not enough to sustain his large family. It was a custom of this time for fathers to prioritise in the upbringing of the family's daughters; therefore, the people who used to migrate were exclusively young boys. The jobs they were working at in the United States were primarily industrial, and despite their hard work, they earned a decent living and their lives were more comfortable compared to Lesbos. Furthermore, the United States at that time had the reputation of being the 'Land of Opportunity': the system was structured in such way that poor people of limited education could earn money and slowly work their way up, often starting their own businesses. Although not certain on the details, some of the Smyrnaioi brothers started their careers as waiters and ended up opening their own restaurants.

When my grandfather left Lesbos, it took him over three weeks to cross the Mediterranean Sea and then the Atlantic Ocean by boat. During the same period, Greece was troubled by the disputes between King Constantine XII and prime minister Eleftherios Venizelos on whether Greece should enter the Great War next to the Allies. For my grandfather and for other migrating youths of his generation, such political events probably played no part in their lives. Although the Great War was

raging across Europe, people like my grandfather were more concerned about their daily survival. Greece entered the Great War in 1916, at a time when my grandfather was at recruitment age. Had he not migrated to the United States a year earlier, the family's history could have been different.

Ioannis Smyrnaioi lived in the United States for ten years. He originally worked at his brother's restaurant in Boston and after learning to speak English, he moved to Dallas, Texas, where he opened his own restaurant. A very common profession among Greek migrants of the early 20th century was being a 'dish-washer'. To many modern contemporaries who are used to electrical dish-washer, it is difficult to remember that dish-washing was done by hand in large basins, and that older restaurants hired people for this task. A common joke among Greek migrants of the 1910s was that the profession of the 'Discobolus' (with reference to the ancient statue of the Disc Thrower by Myron) was the destiny of almost every newcomer.

When I was interviewing members of my family, everybody was against me writing that my grandfather was likely to have started his career as a 'Discobolus', as this was regarded a low-class profession. The truth is that nobody knew exactly what my grandfather did for living when he first arrived in the United States; still, if he started his career as a 'Discobolus' and worked his way in becoming a restaurant owner, then this needs to be mentioned in pride, not only for my own grandfather, but for every hard-working migrant in Greek history, who became a successful professional and a respectful member of a foreign society.

The United States of the Prohibition Act is probably known to us through various films, which describe a period of rising crime, Mafia and gang wars. In reality, it was also a period of intense migration due to a flourishing economy, and a place where different cultures met and coexisted. At that time and despite the difficulties of his life, my grandfather felt as if he had discovered paradise. When he returned to Lesbos, he used to speak with great admiration about his life in America. There is a picture of him and two other gentlemen taken at a gym in Dallas sometime in the 1920s. The three of them pose proudly in their workout garments, which look like old-fashion

underwear, with their chest muscles flexed and one leg leaning on top of what appears to be a weight bar. What is interesting in the picture is that they all have trimmed moustaches (as in 'Hitler-style') and they appear to be smoking cigars in the middle of their training! In later years I discovered that my grandfather used to practise boxing, a skill that was highly appreciated in the restaurant business, particularly when a shopkeeper needed to deal with drunk customers that refused to pay. In another picture, my grandfather poses in front of his 1921 Dodge, a car which he dismantled and shipped back to Lesbos when he left the United States. Finally, my grandfather used to speak to his children with great fascination about his first cinema experience: he had watched a Charlie Chaplin film in Boston back in 1916.

The popular story that I was told as a teenager was that my grandfather's brothers passed away and my grandfather was the sole inheritor of their businesses and savings. I was also told that all five brothers died of tuberculosis. My grandfather sold everything he inherited from them, which totalled to a large sum of money, and returned to Greece in the summer of 1925. The main reason for his return was to get married and start a family of his own. It must be noted that this specific generation of migrants were primarily single males; they used to arrive at a foreign country without speaking the language and used to spend most of their time at work; therefore, their social interactions were limited and their chances of finding wives were equally low. This might have been the reason why most of them focused in their professional careers and in making enough money, which would allow them to return home one day, find a wife, marry and start a family there. Such marriages between rich former expatriates and young local ladies were in most cases arranged between families.

When my grandfather returned to Lesbos in 1925, most things were probably not the same since the time he first left. The Great War, the Asia Minor Campaign and the Catastrophe of Smyrna in 1922 had determined the island's future, which happened to be right in the middle of another Greek-Turkish conflict. For the Smyrniaios family, which had already lost contact with its family members who lived in Smyrna since 1912, the Asia Minor Catastrophe only made things worse. Despite the depopulation of 1.5 million Greek Christian refugees from Smyrna, none of the family's members



managed to cross the Aegean Sea and find safety at Lesbos. Some were killed during the Turkish retaliations at Smyrna, although it is possible that some who related to the Kariotis family, managed to cross over to the island of Chios.

In practical terms, the thousands of newly-arrived Greek refugees from Smyrna consisted a strong labour force, which could have assisted in the island's recovery and economic growth after the destructive war. In the first couple of years the refugees faced adaptation difficulties; however, the locals assisted in their integration and they soon became a major workforce. Furthermore, local agriculture was rejuvenated; new knowledge and farming techniques were introduced to the local communities from Asia Minor; and finally, new agricultural products and crops were brought in by the refugees, which were suitable for the geological and climatic conditions of Lesbos. Soon, the island's economy started to pick up.

My grandfather returned to his remaining family in Kalloni, which consisted of his parents and two sisters, in 1925. He was re-introduced to the community as a highly successful and rich former expatriate, who had inherited the savings of his equally rich brothers, and nobody seemed to remember him as the son of the shoemaker Sarantos.

About five years ago, long after I had written the first draft of this paper, I discovered that the truth on my grandfather's return to Lesbos was slightly different than what I had been originally told. The story had been purposely altered by the family to subjugate certain feelings of social and religious condemnation.

The truth was that my grandfather was not the one who decided to abandon a good life in America and go back to Lesbos. Furthermore, although it appeared likely that some of his brothers might have passed away from tuberculosis while being in the United States, some others probably started their own families there and never returned to Greece. It is almost certain that my grandfather's family received letters from the United States in the 1930s, which were from other relatives, although these could have been from distanced cousins. Such correspondence stopped right after the

beginning of World War II. Finally, it was revealed to me that the decision to return to Greece was made by my grandfather's older brother, Terpandros Smyrniaios, who was still alive back then.

Both brothers returned to Kalloni in the summer of 1925 with the intention to get married and start their own families there. Not long after they arrived back, Terpandros Smyrniaios fell in love with a lady who belonged to a poor family of workers, who were regarded as people of lower-class status. Although he wanted to marry her, his family brought serious objections and insisted on him marrying a girl from another rich family, which had already been approached and the marriage had already been arranged. Terpandros was a man of honour and could not accept that. One day he returned home from the fields and found nobody there other than the family's maid. He asked her to go to the storage room and bring a petrol lamp to his room as he planned to do some reading. While the maid was downstairs, she heard a gunshot. Terpandros Smyrniaios shot himself in the head with a revolver he had brought back from the United States. The bullet went through his skull and was wedged into the wall. From that day, this specific bedroom at my great grandfather's house was never used again. The family was forced to forget this incident despite its grief due to the social and religious preconceptions of that time, and I only found out about it many years later by asking the wrong questions.

Unlike his brother Terpandros, my grandfather Ioannis was happy to marry Ellie Nikolaidis. In relation to my grandmother's family, information is limited. During the time when my grandfather lived in the United States, the life of the Nikolaidis family at the small village of Agia Paraskevi in Lesbos was probably different compared to their life during the Ottoman period. The educated aristocrat and former judge Chrysostomos Nikolaidis maintained some connections with the Patriarchy and the Orthodox Church's bureaucracy, although his main income derived from land ownership and agriculture. Despite the great political and economic changes at Lesbos during the first quarter of the 20th century, which he felt badly, he never stopped regarding himself a traditional Phanariot aristocrat and he never stopped educating his children according to the principles and social values that existed in Constantinople in

the 1860s. In his mind, the preservation of the family's aristocratic status was a task to be carried on by his children.

After his return from the United States, by grandfather Ioannis Smyrnaioi invested most of his money in agriculture. He bought large plots of cultivated land and built a large traditional house, in which I also spent a portion of my childhood. As a wealthy Greek-American of that time he needed to find a suitable wife to start a family; therefore, his parents convinced him to seek for her in the circles of the island's old aristocracy. Back then, almost all marriages were arranged and the village's matchmakers suggested that the perfect match for Ioannis was the youngest daughter of Chrysostomos Nikolaides, Ellie.

Ioannis and Ellie got married short after they were introduced together, in January 1926. They spend their honeymoon in Athens, which was the most glamorous city in Greece during that time, and stayed at the newly build Great Britannia Hotel, which is still one of the city's greatest landmarks. During their stay in Athens, my grandmother was stung by an infected insect and suffered from a rare skin allergy, which was never cured.

### **The Smyrnaioi family from 1926 until the end of the Civil War in 1949**

Ioannis Smyrnaioi and Ellie Nikolaides were a fit couple, who were meant to become one of Kalloni's prominent families during the interwar period. During their marriage they had four children: Callirrhoe (born in 1927), Cybele (born in 1928), Christos (born in 1932) and my father Charalambos (born on 17th April, 1937). The fact that my uncle Christos was born on 4th August 1932, a date which coincided with the rise of the 4th August Regime and the Metaxas dictatorship four years later, was always something that people joked about. During the interwar period Lesbos went through important economic growth. Even after a catastrophic flood in 1931, which destroyed almost every crop and house in Kalloni, agricultural production recovered quite quickly. During this period, my grandfather expanded his operations beyond olive oil

production; he became involved in viticulture, livestock breeding, including horse breeding, fish farming, cotton planting, which was particularly difficult due to the island's climatic conditions, and finally trade. Until 1939, my grandfather employed over 250 workers at his plantations and other businesses.

The years of prosperity for my family lasted until the beginning of World War II. My aunts used to tell me stories of military discipline at the Female Gymnasium of Kalloni (the local junior high-school) during the Metaxas dictatorship (1936-1941). Such stories would sound alien to the ears of modern high-school students: there used to be an early morning flag-raising ceremony at the school's courtyard, accompanied by the compulsory fascist salute; all girls were dressed in army-style khaki long skirts, a yellow scarf and a military beret; there were compulsory meetings of the 'Metaxas Youth' after attending Sunday's liturgy; and finally, there was a lot of singing of patriotic anthems of that time. At the beginning of World War II in October 1940, Lesbos was overwhelmed by strong feelings of national pride; however, the actual war had devastating consequences on the island's population.

During World War II my grandfather was already too old for conscription. Instead, the army confiscated all his animals, particularly the horses and donkeys, which were used for the transportation of ammunition at the Albanian front; some of his cattle, sheep and goats were confiscated and butchered to become meat for the army. Despite the victories of the Greek army against the Italian advance in Albania, the German invasion through Yugoslavia in April 1941 led to Greece's final defeat and surrender to the Axis. After the surrender, the island of Lesbos was placed under the jurisdiction of the German army, and more specifically under Austrian command. The Smyrnaioi family and other families with rich agricultural production were forced by the invaders to surrender 6/7 of their annual production for the needs of the German army at the Russian front. From that point onwards, severe poverty and hunger hit the populations of Lesbos. The loss of their livestock, the destruction of their land and the confiscation of most of their agricultural surplus by the invaders brought the Smyrnaioi family in a difficult situation. During the war, their land was only

providing enough to cover for the family's most basic nutritional needs, and unfortunately, my grandfather had to let all his staff go.

Under such difficult survival conditions, a significant part of the population of Lesbos fled to the mountains, where they formed local armed resistance groups. The resistance groups were initially armed with old and defective hunting rifles, but later they armed themselves with newer material, coming from battle spoils or contributions of the Allies, which were para-dropped at night on the mountains. Still, feeding themselves was a huge problem. Despite their poverty, the local populations supported the Resistance as much as they could, also under the fear of retaliation by the occupation troops.

In a later interview with a friend's grandfather, who came from the village of Petra, Lesbos, it was explained to me that unlike the German occupation troops in Crete and the Peloponnese, who would execute fifty to one hundred male civilians over the age of sixteen for every German soldier killed by the Resistance, the Austrian commander of Lesbos had a milder approach and did not believe in mass executions as a mean of subjugation. Of course, after battles between the Resistance and the occupation troops, there would follow investigations, arrests, torturing of civilians and several executions.

During the occupation period, hunger was probably the most effective mean of subjugation. My grandfather always remembered stories of people who would report Resistance members to the occupation authorities, or women who would go into prostitution to earn their food. One of the old workers that my grandfather used to employ, uncle-Elias, had lived through the horrors of war twice in his life. He was telling my grandfather that during the evacuation of Asia Minor in 1922, the allied navy was anchored at the bay of Smyrna, with specific orders not to engage and not to assist in the evacuation of Greek and Armenian populations. The small fishing boats owned by local fishermen were not enough to carry the people away, who needed to be evacuated during the Turkish advance, and many civilians would fall into the sea, trying to swim their way out of the burning Smyrna. With sole exception of the

American navy, which assisted in the evacuation of civilians as much as they could, the British and French sailors would chop the arms off any civilian who would try to swim and climb onboard their warships. Uncle-Elias told my grandfather a shocking story: while swimming towards one of the small fishing boats at the bay of Smyrna in 1922, his hands would touch on bodies with chopped arms floating at the top of the sea. At the end, he managed to grab the edge of a fishing boat, which carried him and many other civilians to the port of Mytilene. In 1942, during the great famine, he would dig up small anthills to find a couple of wheat grains to feed himself. Food was practically a rarity; still, uncle-Elias never betrayed any of the Resistance members in exchange of food.

One of my grandfather's former employees reported my grandfather to the authorities for the possession of a fire arm, which he never handed in. This was an old Winchester carbine, similar to those we nowadays see in Western films, which he had once bought in Texas. The penalty for the possession of a fire arm during the German occupation was death. When the soldiers stormed through the house to find the carbine, my uncle Christos, who was ten years old at the time, sneaked into the warehouse at the back of the courtyard and threw the weapon inside a wide ceramic pithos full of olive oil. As they were in the warehouse, the soldiers decided to confiscate the family's supplies; however, they could not take the ceramic pithos away as this was cemented on the floor. This way they never found the weapon and my uncle saved my grandfather's life.

In October 1944, the Axis occupation forces withdrew from Greece; there was a gap in the government of the newly liberated state, which was automatically filled by the political officials and the leading members of the Greek Resistance. By that time, the members and leaders of the Greek Resistance were by vast majority communists and were not supported by the Allies in order to form a legal government. Furthermore, the so called National Liberation Front (the communist fraction of the Greek Resistance) was heavily armed and threatened to establish a government by force. During their exile in Egypt, a body of Greek politicians under Georgios Papandreou and a Greek expeditionary force that was still loyal to the king, were supported by the

British to return to Greece and remove the communists from the government. The British support to the National Unity Government took the form of an armed invasion in December 1944. The clashes between the National Liberation Front on one side, and the National Unity Government on the other side, which was supported by British and Greek troops, led to a devastating civil war, which lasted between 1944/5 and 1949. The Greek civil war was the first armed conflict of the Cold War and its consequences were by far more catastrophic than the actual invasion by the Axis.

The history of this period is heavily biased, and even nowadays, it is still negatively charged with anger, hatred and guilt; therefore, I am not planning to go into the historical details of the Greek Civil War, which have been officially recorded in other volumes. Instead, I will present the historical events as these were perceived by my family's elders, bearing in mind that there is possible bias in comparison with the official Greek history.

Modern historians suggest that the Greek Civil War began in Athens on 3rd December 1944, when joint Greek and British troops opened fire on crowds of unarmed demonstrators, who were loyal to the National Liberation Front. The use of force by the Greek government and their British allies escalated after the events at Athens. The joint forces attempted to take over the areas which were under the control of the National Liberation Front, and the island of Lesbos was one of them. In Christmas 1944, the British navy tried to land Indian colonial troops at the port of Mytilene. The reaction of the locals was immediate and drastic: armed members of the National Liberation Front and a large group of civilians, armed with agricultural tools, barricaded the pier. Demonstrators arrived at the port of Mytilene from all over the island, shouting to the troops to go back. Due to the reaction of the locals, the landing was postponed. This first victory of the National Liberation Front filled the locals with pride and was celebrated by the entire population of the island, regardless of their political identity. Volume 18 of the 'Free Lesbos' journal in March 1945 wrote: "Mytilene - Christmas 1944, or, how the English invasion was stopped: The slaves came to enslave the free (a tune from Agiasos)". This victory gave hopes to the locals for the creation of an independent communist government controlled by the National

Liberation Front; however, the official government in Athens had completely different plans. In due time, Greek national troops from Crete landed on the island and the Civil War soon broke up.

During the course of the five-year Civil War in Lesbos, the population of the island was divided to those supporting the National Army and the government and those in favour of the guerrilla troops of the National Liberation Front, which were then called the Democratic Army. Armed conflict brought worse suffer and pain to the island than the Axis. The Democratic Army was led by sworn communists who hated those that once were rich. Soon, my grandfather became one of the targets of the communist guerrillas, who were fighting for the redistribution of the land, which was expected to be taken away from the wealthy landlords. Paradoxically, my grandfather's family was never under direct threat from the guerrillas due to an incident that went back to the days of the German occupation.

During a cold winter evening in 1943, the family was sat around the table eating a poor meal, consisting of a coarse wheat soup, which is called trachanas. All of a sudden, there was a loud noise at the front door and my grandfather with my uncle Christos ran to see what happened. There, they found a bearded man wearing a wrecked army uniform of the Resistance lying unconscious on their doorstep. The penalty for offering shelter to the Resistance members was death; still, my grandfather could not let this person die from hunger out in the cold. He carried the man in and asked my grandmother to give him food. The food was not enough to feed a sixth person; still, my grandmother Ellie, who was a tough woman, took the rest of the soup away from the family's plates, put it back into the pot, and emptied the content of the pot into the young man's mouth. Then, she put the man to sleep on the sofa. As soon as he recovered, he left the house on his own while the rest of the family was still asleep, probably a couple of hours before dawn. The family never found out who this young man was.

After the Axis retreat in October 1944, and a couple of months before the Mytilene landing by the British, the guerrillas of the National Liberation Front marched through



the village of Kalloni. A heavily armed young bearded captain of the Greek Resistance on his black horse arrived at the neighbourhood where my grandfather's house was, looking for him. At the beginning, the neighbours thought that the guerrillas were looking for my grandfather to kill him, so they made sure they allowed him enough time to escape; however, my grandfather decided to go out in the street bare-handed and meet the young captain. My grandmother was next to him all the time. It turned out that the young captain was the man who had fainted in front of their doorstep a few months earlier and he only wanted to thank them for saving his life. He also promised to my grandfather that during the 'persecution of the rich', which was to follow, he would have made sure that nobody harmed him and his family.

During the course of the civil war, my grandfather's family was never harmed by the guerrillas; however, the land they owned was systematically burnt; their crops were either confiscated at gunpoint or destroyed; and, their livestock was shot. The guerrillas even attacked my grandfather's small fish-farming pier at the bay of Achladeri, burnt it down and killed the fish by throwing hand grenades in the water. Although my grandfather never believed in war and never liked Greeks killing other Greeks, the type of 'social justice' that was enforced by the communists made him furious. My father remembered him often repeating: "I wasn't washing dishes for ten years in America to have all my belongings destroyed by those murderers who don't even own their own underwear". Still, my grandfather never agreed with the bloodshed.

In 1948, when the Civil War still carried on, my uncle Christos was at his final year in high-school and had no other option than to be drafted in the National Army a year later, and be sent to fight in the Civil War. Both my uncle and my grandfather despised this idea. To them, it was totally unacceptable for a member of the family to be firing a weapon against his own brothers; therefore, a little before finishing high-school, my uncle migrated to Australia and was cut off from his family for many years. He returned to Lesbos in the 1980s, but he only stayed for a short period, as his own family was still back in Australia.

## **The life of Charalambos Smyrnaioi between 1950 and 1975**

The Greek Civil War ended in 1949 with the victory of the National Army. As communism was never established in Greece, my grandfather kept his land and whatever else he owned, which had not been destroyed during the Civil War. By that time, he was already too old and had lost most of his resources to start another life from scratch. The family's prestige and wealth had been lost and nothing reminded them of their pre-war glamour.

This sudden change in the financial status of the Smyrnaioi family and the broader difficulties that every family on the island faced after the end of the Civil War, led my grandfather in making the same decision his father made fifty years earlier: he decided to offer most of the family's resources as dowry for the weddings of his two daughters and he sent his sons to seek for a better future away from the island. My uncle Christos had already migrated to Australia a year earlier and he was not planning to return soon. When my father was in high-school, it was the period of the Korean War, in which Greece participated as part of the NATO forces. My grandfather did not want my father to be drafted into the war; therefore, he contacted a Greek-American friend of his, who was the director of the Pepsi-Cola factory in Egypt, and arranged for my father to migrate there. The Korean War ended in 1953, when my father was still a student. When the time came for him to migrate to Egypt, the revolution by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1955-56 and the deportation of all Western nationals from the country, did not allow this to happen. Furthermore, a lot of Western businesses in Egypt were shut down in 1955, including the factory where my father was supposed to work at. After this change of plans, my grandfather decided to send my father to Athens to study and practise a technical profession.

Between 1956 and 1958, my father studied at the Anastasiades College and became a radio technician, also specialised in electric refrigerators. Such studies may sound awkward nowadays, but back in the 1950s, technicians with such knowledge and

skills were at high demand. The readers need to bear in mind that the only broadcasting medium in Greece in the 1950s was the radio. Television broadcasting commenced in 1966 and television appliances did not become popular until July 1969, when many households and shops purchased televisions to watch the first live broadcasting of Neil Armstrong walking on the surface of the Moon. Furthermore, in the early 1950s, most refrigerators in Greece operated with ice. The first semi-electric refrigerator, the Coronet, was introduced in 1954 and used electric power together with an ice-column. Proper electric refrigerators as we know them today, did not appear in Greece until the early 1960s. My father studied the principles of these devices and learnt how to repair them at a time when these were considered technological innovations.

During his studies in Athens, my father was actively involved in student groups that often protested against the government. During a political demonstration in 1957, the police attacked the students using wooden clubs, which were popular in law enforcement during that time, and they broke my father's arm. My father was seen wearing a cast around his arm by some of my grandfather's friends, who passed the news on to him. My grandfather became furious and sent my father a letter explaining him that he had decided to stop funding his studies as he "did not sent his son to Athens to become a communist". From that point onwards, my father started working as a waiter to finish his studies and received other means of support, mainly contributions in food, which were sent to him by his sisters. After finishing his studies, my father decided to become an army officer. He served as a lieutenant in the special forces between 1958 and 1963, and after the end of his contracted service he returned to Athens, where he worked as a radio technician for Philips, and then he opened his own repair shop at the area of Exarcheia. This is where he met my mother, Aikaterine or Nina, in 1966. They remained engaged for nine years and they finally got married in 1975, a year before I was born.

### **The Syrmakezis family: a parallel history**

Although it was never my intention to present the entire history of my mother's side, it is perhaps a good idea to offer some information on her background prior to meeting my father. Nina was the youngest daughter of Ioannis Syrmakezis and Maria Sapountzi; she was born at the village of Amarynthos, Euboea, in 1942. She was the youngest daughter of a family of nine children, four of which were boys and five were girls.

Her grandfather, George Syrmakezis, was born in Thessaloniki sometime during the 1850s, during a period when the city was still under the Ottomans. George was probably contemporary with Sarantos Smyrnaios, although these two had never met. When he was young, at a time when Greek nationalism was rising and the Greek populations of the Ottoman Empire supported their unification with mainland Greece, George had an argument with a Turk at a coffee shop near the area he lived in. The reasons for this argument remain unclear. Some suggest that the two young men were having a fight over a girl and that the Turk insulted George for being a Greek 'subordinate'. In a moment of anger, George pulled his knife out and killed the other man on the spot. After becoming a fugitive and running away from the authorities, George crossed through Thessaly to the independent territories of the Greek mainland and settled at Amarynthos, where he lived for the rest of his life as a fisherman. He started a family there and had at least five children, while rumours suggest that he had another child from a secret mistress at a nearby village.

George's youngest son, Ioannis Syrnakezis, who was my grandfather from my mother's side, was born in Amarynthos in 1893. He was a fisherman like his father and he never finished school as he was forced to work from a young age. He was drafted in 1910, at the age of seventeen, and he was sent to fight against the Ottomans during Balkan War I. Ioannis Syrnakezis marched with the Greek troops through the city of Thessaloniki on 26th October 1912, not long after Admiral Kountouriotis had liberated the island of Lesbos from the Ottomans. He remained in active service during Balkan War II and he fought against the Bulgarians at the battle of Kresna Gorge in July 1913. He was wounded on his right leg by machine-gun fire during one of the assaults and he was decorated with the infantry's bravery medal. He returned to

active service during World War I, where he served with the reserve troops in Trace, but he was dismissed before the beginning of the Asia Minor Campaign. He returned to Amarynthos sometime in the early 1920s, when he met my grandmother Maria, got married and started a family. Maria came from a poor worker's family, and unlike the arranged marriages between the rich elites of the 1920s, my grandparents got married out of pure love.

Ioannis Syrmakezis had a strong personality and he was a hard-working man, who I always admired. Although he never talked about it, I was always under the impression that he had been seriously traumatised by the war. He had the reputation of a tough, emotionless, practical thinker, who would never cry and never reveal his true feelings in front of others. He was so hard-working that the concept of a free weekend was totally unknown to him; he would start his day hours before dawn and wake his sons up at 5am to follow him to work, even on Sundays. He believed that everything in life comes with hard labour and bold decisions; that laziness is never rewarded; that real men should always be alert, focused and determined; and that when fortune strikes hard, a man needs to stand back on his feet as fast as possible and help his family up. If I was to guess, I would say that my grandfather's balance towards all the problems and difficulties he faced in life, was through hard work and through caring for his family. Furthermore, his way of thinking should not surprise anyone, as this was how most people of his generation used to think. These people had been hammered by misfortune and other tragic events during long-lasting wars; therefore, they needed to develop their own psychological mechanisms to cope with the pressure.

During the interwar period, my grandfather opened his own shop and used to sell fish. This shop is still there nowadays and is still being managed by his family after three generations. In her book titled "The indelible memories of an eighty-year-old", my recently departed aunt Argyroula Spanou recorded the birthdates of my grandparents' children: their eldest son, Stavros, was born in 1925, followed by: Asimina in 1927, George in 1929, Constantine in 1931, Triantafyllio in 1933, Argyroula in 1935, Demetrius in 1937, Helen in 1939, and finally Aikaterine in 1941. The exact year of my mother's birth is under dispute. Aikaterine was definitely born right in the middle

of World War II; this could have been in 1941, but she might not have been registered to the local council until the 8th November 1942; or, perhaps my aunt made a mistake while recalling an incident that she had combined with my mother's birth.

During the first days of World War II, the Greek army managed to stop the invading Italians at the Albanian front on the 28th October 1940. Despite their efforts, the Italians could not continue their advance, while in other occasions they were being pushed back during the Greek counter-attacks. This first defeat of the Axis demanded Hitler's immediate intervention, who organised an invasion plan involving Germany and Bulgaria. After marching through Yugoslavia, the combined Axis forces attacked Greece from three different directions on 6th April 1941, and eliminated any resistance. Until May 1941, the Axis forces had managed to occupy most of the Greek territories. For administrative purposes, these territories were divided in three zones, each of which was controlled by the Germans, Italians and Bulgarians respectively. Euboea belonged to the Italian sector, which was also the largest one.

My aunt, Argyroula, remembered a story from the time when my mother was still a baby in her baby-basket. It could have been during the Axis advance in 1941, or during some retaliation incident in 1942, when the area where the family lived was burnt completely down by a joint unit of German and Italian soldiers. My aunt, who was six or seven years old at that time, heard a loud blast and saw an explosion from a hand-grenade inside the house. Everybody was hiding at the back and although there were no victims, the family panicked. My grandfather with three of his sons were fishing that morning, so my grandmother and her eldest daughter Asimina were the only ones who could pull the rest of the children out of the burning house. My aunt remembered that the fire spread too quickly all over the house, which had a wooden roof. My grandmother managed to rescue every child that could walk but there was no way to go back in the house and rescue my baby mother, who was in her basket. My aunt Argyroula refused to let the baby die and went back into the burning house to rescue her. In an effort of great desperation, my grandmother covered her face and ran back into the house, rescuing both my aunt and my baby mother.

During the Axis occupation, Euboea was one of Greece's most deprived areas. As with Lesbos, most of the agricultural production was confiscated by the invaders and sent to the Eastern front. People were dying from starvation, and very often, retaliation and executions would follow any sabotage conducted by the Resistance. Fish and other marine resources were accessible, though few could afford them. During that period, the absence of real economy and the devaluation of the Greek Drachma meant that those who possessed paper-money could not use it to buy anything: a cigarette would cost several millions of Drachmas and a sack full of banknotes would not be able to buy someone a loaf of bread. The only real economy was among those who exchanged traded commodities, such as food, and those who had savings in gold. Ioannis Syrmakizis kept his shop open during this period, and added a small kitchen with a couple of tables at the back of the building; this way he converted his fish store to a proper restaurant. His customers rarely had money or other traded goods to pay him for the fish; still, he was kind enough to feed everybody who was in need.

Buying via credit and paying later was a common practice in rural Greece during that time, which carried on even until the 1980s. My grandfather had a piece of chalk and a blackboard on which he noted the sums of money owed to him by his customers. At the end of the day, he would look at the blackboard and say to my grandmother: "Maria, draw the sponge", meaning, to wipe the numbers off the blackboard. This way he used to erase the daily debts and only accepted payment from those who could afford it. Effectively, he was feeding many people for free.

The Civil War in Euboea began earlier than in other parts of Greece, and more specifically before the Axis' retreat from the Greek mainland. The battles were between the communist guerrillas of the National Liberation Front, who once comprised the Resistance, and the Royal Rural Police, which still controlled the island's coastal zones and were sworn anti-communists. The Royal Rural Police had never been made redundant by the Italians during the occupation and the guerrillas of the National Liberation Front always regarded them as traitors and collaborators with the enemy. As soon as the National Unity Government arrived in Athens after the

country's liberation, the Royal Rural Police changed their Italian uniforms and went back to their pre-war duties. The battles of the Civil War in Euboea were fierce due to the old hatred that existed between the two enemy groups. In their attempt to take over the local government, the guerrillas would not only attack the local police stations, but they would destroy entire villages in the coastal zone, and kill every person who was thought to have collaborated with the Royal Rural Police. My grandfather, who was kind enough to feed every person who came to his restaurant, was soon wanted by the Democratic Army to be executed.

During one of the guerrilla assaults in 1949, the Democratic Army broke the government's line of defence and took over Amarynthos. The battle continued in the streets and everybody who happened to be out in the open was indiscriminately shot. My uncle, Stavros, who I never met, was nineteen years old at that time. He was with a group of friends at a nearby house when he opened the front door to see what was happening in the streets. A bullet hit him through the chest and died on the spot. During this assault, my grandfather was hiding away from home as he knew they were coming for him. My grandmother was on her own with the rest of the children when the neighbours told her that her son was dead. In her book, my aunt Argyroula recalls that everybody in the family was shocked. My grandmother collapsed and could not handle the emotional pressure.

On the same day, her sister-in-law, Sophia, who was a strong woman, went to the local primary school, where the guerrillas were temporarily stationed, and asked for her nephews' body. My aunt, Argyroula, who was fourteen at that time, accompanied Sophia to an open courtyard, which used to be the school's playground. There, the guerrillas had piled every dead body their assault had left behind. The commander of this open-air morgue asked aunt-Sophia whose son was the young man they were looking for. As soon as he heard the name Ioannis Syrmakezis, he became furious and shouted at her: "I don't know where he's hiding, but if you see him, tell him we'll find him, chop his testicles off and shove them in his mouth". This was the type of hatred that existed among brothers during the Greek Civil War. Aunt-Sophia wrapped the dead body in a yellow (almost golden-coloured) blanket and took it home to my



grandmother. After many years, I found this blanket stored at my parent's place. The edge of the blanket had a yellow silk lining, which still carried a dark brown stain of blood. I decided to pass it on to my aunt Argyroula, as this blanket was part of her memories from the Civil War, and probably inspired her at some point to write her book.

The end of the Civil War came few months after Stavros' death; my grandfather returned to the village, where he re-opened his fish shop, but as with the rest of the villagers, he was still poor and carried a heavy loss in his soul. Unlike the traditions of Lesbos, where fathers offered their land as dowry to their daughters, the Euboean traditions demanded that fathers passed their land and savings on to their sons. Such social traditions were very strong during the beginning of the 20th century and only disintegrated in the 1990s. Although Ioannis Smyrnaiois passed most of his land to his daughters, Ioannis Syrmakezis passed his little house and shop to his three sons. All of them worked hard to support the rest of the family as much as they could. My mother and two of her sisters who were not married at that time, Helen and Argyroula, were sent off to find jobs in the big cities.

After wondering around for a few years, my mother arrived in Athens in 1962, where she started working in sales. She was an active woman and she soon became one of the first members of the Greek feminist 'party', at a time when feminism was seen as social stigma. She always believed that women cannot claim their right place in society if they are not willing to fight for equal access to jobs and equal salaries as men. Her views were revolutionary for the 1960s: society needed to advance from treating women as potential housewives and mothers, to recognising them as valuable resources in modern economic development. I personally felt that these ideas were the result of my grandfather's hard-working legacy. Nina lived in a number of house-shares in Athens and in 1966 she moved to Exarcheia with her best friend Jenny. One day, her radio broke down and took it to a nearby repair shop, which was ran by three young technicians. One of them was my father; he asked her out and they ended up spending a lifetime together; they also departed from this world together in 2005.

## **The period of the colonels' dictatorship**

The troubled period of the colonels' dictatorship, which lasted between April 1967 and July 1974, was characterised by political persecutions against those who belonged to the left. The area of Exarcheia in Athens hosted many left-wing youths and most of my father's friends were under surveillance by the secret police. Even though eighteen years had gone by since the end of the civil war, communism was still regarded as one of society's most contagious diseases, a notion that was strengthened further by the Cold War. Although my father always regarded himself as a 'progressive communist' (whatever this might have meant in his own mind), he used to work long hours and never had the time of becoming politically involved in any 'anti-regime' activities. Furthermore, the fact that he had served as an officer in the Greek army meant that he was beyond any suspicion, even though this was long before the dictatorship.

Unfortunately, the victims of the dictatorship were not only those who supported left political ideas, but also innocent civilians who were never involved in politics. During the Polytechnic Uprising in November 1973, the regime decided to disperse the demonstrating students with the use of heavy military force. Most Greeks remember the footage from the night of the 17th November 1973, when a tank was ordered to run down the main gate of the Polytechnic School in the centre of Athens. In the morning of 17th November, this same formation of tanks was heading down Papagou Avenue at the area of Zografou to assist in the repression of the uprising. Most people in the area did not know what was happening and many got out on their balconies to watch the 'tank parade'. Suddenly, one of the tanks turned its turret towards the inhabited areas on its left and commenced machine-gun fire with the intention to threaten the crowds at the balconies. Four bullets hit the balcony of the flat where my aunt Cybele used to live with her family. My cousins, Costas and Nikos, who were seven and eleven years old respectively, happened to play at the balcony when the bullets got to them. They both dropped down bleeding with multiple wounds on their legs and groins.

This was probably the worst incident in the history of the Smyrnaioi family. Every single relative arrived in Athens to support my aunt and take care of my cousins in hospital, who survived by pure luck. After this incident, my father developed strong feelings against the dictatorship and the army. He personally went to the Ministry of National Defence and demanded to know the name of the officer who ordered the tank's crew to fire on inhabited buildings. This was totally classified and he was refused any information on the incident. Even after the end of the dictatorship, the names of those officers have not been revealed.

That day, my father had a strong argument with the Ministry's military investigators; he reminded them that all army officers were under vow to protect the country's civilians and that the army's job was not to fire against innocent children. In a moment of anger, he pulled his four 'stars' out of his pocket and threw them on the desk of the department's commanding officer. As a Greek Army lieutenant, my father's insignia were four stars, a pair worn on each shoulder. By throwing them on the desk of a superior officer, he was informally resigning from the army; of course, when this happened, my father was not in active service but was a civilian-officer in the reserves. This unofficial resignation was never accepted by the Ministry's commanding officers. In July 1974, during the Turkish invasion in Cyprus, my father was re-called in active service and was sent for training at the School of Infantry in Chalkida. The government's plan was to re-train some of the reserve units to back up a counter assault; this operation never took place and several days later the dictatorship collapsed due to public displeasure.

## **Epilogue**

The history of the Smyrnaioi family still carries on, although this article does not discuss any of the events that occurred after 1990. My grandfather, Ioannis Smyrnaioi, passed away in 1978, when I was two years old, and my grandmother Ellie followed shortly after. From my mother's side, my grandmother Maria died in 1984, and my grandfather, Ioannis Syrmakezis, died in 1989 at the age of ninety-six.

My parents stayed together from 1966 until 2005, the year they both died and buried together.

I was born in January 1976 and although there is little information about me in this article, my life is well-recorded in a series of hand-written diaries, which I have kept since my days in high-school and the army. I am now hoping that a patient ‘someone’ will read through them one day and decide what is important to be published in the future. Here, I only wish to stress that a fortunate coincidence in my life was to be baptised under the name Ioannis, which was the first name of both of my grandfathers. Unfortunately, even though I carry the last name of my father’s family, I never spent enough time with Ioannis Smyrnaioi, as he passed away when I was little; however, I had the honour to spend a lot of time with my other grandfather, Ioannis Syrmakizis, whom I always admired and wanted to follow his steps.

After 1990, the Smyrnaioi family went through some difficult moments and the family’s bonds broke down due to various clashes and personality issues. This article is not to discuss any problematic behaviours in the family; it is only meant to present the story of my grandparents and parents next to some important events of the late 19th and 20th century.

By reading through early-modern Greek history, the readers can learn about a series of ‘glorious’ events, such as battles and struggles for freedom and democracy, where the protagonists demonstrate heroic behaviour and self-sacrifice. The official history of the modern Greek state can often be emotionally charged and can trigger a variety of feelings to the readers, ranging from admiration to dispute.

To the other side of such ‘glorious’ historical events lies the parallel story of the Smyrnaioi family. This relates to the historical reality of the ordinary Greek people, which was often different compared to the nation’s official history. The Smyrnaioi family did not have members who fought in important battles against invaders and was never glorified for that. For our family, the 20th century was shaded by events, which are briefly mentioned in the books of the nation’s official history. These are

hunger, sorrow, immigration, division, conflict, catastrophe and everyday hardships. A researcher can easily record such emotions, which survive in the memories of the elders. Such memories cannot function independently from the psychological cosmos of their participants. This is the psychological cosmos of the actual protagonists of the non-written and non-official national history.