

The Lost Hellenic Tseme Province Communities

BY CATHERINE TSOUNIS

Bouzoukia, Greek cuisine and the village in Greece are what young persons learn about their roots. Our family was without a country. They were refugees from Ionia, the shores and islands bordering Asia Minor. “O Megalos Diogmos” (The Great Persecution) of 1914 resulted in the fleeing of my grandmother, Despina Gagas Pappas (Papantonakis), and her family from the Province of Tseme, modern day Cesme, for safety in Chios. They returned in 1919 with the victorious Greek army, only to find their homes ruined. Heartbroken over the desolation, they returned to refugee quarters in the “Frourio” (Chios City Fortress). When my Greek teachers in 1960s Astoria would ask me where I came from, I would reply, “Chios/Mikra Asia”. Greek teachers at St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Parochial School in Astoria, would explain that this area was once Greek, with the descendants living in the bordering Aegean island

Since 1919, no one was brave enough or wanted to return to our “lost country” from fear of reprisals. I was mesmerized by my vivacious grandmother, a 5 foot, 4 inch brunette with olive complexion and blue eyes as light as the Aegean Sea. She was different from the other Greek Yiayias (grandmothers). She was an independent, businesswoman, with cosmopolitan clothes. She played rebetika, told fortunes by reading cards and from Greek coffee. “I am different,” she would say. “I am a Chiotisa/Mikrasiatisa. We had homes in Kato Panagia and a summer home.”

She explained, “My father and brothers were sea captains with their own boats. My brothers were all over six feet tall with black hair and black mustaches. They were involved in trading cottons and Turkish goods from Asia Minor to Chios. They would breach the blockade of the French and English against the Ottoman Turks to transport goods to Greece. All the trading was accomplished at night. In addition, they were involved in fishing in the best parts of Asia Minor. During one night of running the blockade, my 16-year-old brother was killed by the European powers. My mother never got over this and died young, leaving



Photo Catherine Tsounis

Tseme (modern Cesme) harbor.

me an orphan to be raised by my sister, Maria Loura.” These were my Greek roots: a turbulent past full of excitement and drama.

The Chian/Mikrasiatic Society of the 1950s sponsored the publishing of a book on the life of Hatzibeis, a high-ranking officer under the leadership of General Nikolaos Plastiras. He was from Tseme. In his memoirs, he wrote “I dreamed of going to Chios on one of the trading boats. I hid on Gagas boat. He found me and forcefully sent me home.” This was the only written document we had on our great-grandfather’s occupation.

Our Greek home was the monastery of Sts. Constantine and Helen in Cambos, Chios. The nuns would refer to my grandmother as “our person, Despina of Kato Panagia” (modern day Cliftic). For three generations, we would send donations to the monastery to help the community that followed the “Old Calendar”. Because of the betrayal of the

Despina and Christos Pappas (Papantonakis), whose roots were traced to Tseme province.

Marriage license dated Aug. 15, 1915.



Greek armed forces that resulted in the Asia Minor Catastrophe, our family distrusted the government of their origin. All their patriotism manifested itself in perpetuating Greek Orthodoxy, building churches and Greek schools in New York City and Long Island. Many became priests, such as the late Kostas Kazanas and the Rev. Dimitrios Antokas. As a young theologian, Rev. Antokas visited Mattituck and told me, “We are cousins from Kato Panagia.”

His mother, Amalia (Emily) Markotsis Antokas said, “We were the educated, merchant class that lived on the coast, not the inland farmers. The first wedding I went to when I immigrated to the U.S. was Despina Pappas’ and Kostas Kazanas’ daughters’ weddings. Only patriotes who were relatives were invited. Our women were involved in weaving carpets and tapestries that were sold in Europe. The Tsemelites believed in helping people. My grandfather, Captain George Markotsis, was a captain in a network of captains all related by blood. They transported products from Kato Panagia to Tseme. They didn’t live in Tseme. No one lived in Tseme City. They went there for schools, colleges, business and trade.” Their life was similar to ours in New York City of 2008. We work in New York City, but live in Astoria and Bayside in the borough of Queens.

Despina Pappas’ nephew, Panayiotis Markopoulos, explained “Everyone lived around the Chios City Fortress (Frourio) or Sinikismos. They were given houses during [the] refugee influx of 1914. Our relatives did not want to be farmers. They wanted to go back to their ancestral homes in Kato Panagia. They stayed in the Fortress and watched their lands across the way in Turkey. There were great fishing spots in Turkey and not in Chios. My uncles were tough captains who sailed in all weather, never afraid of storms.

Katopanagia was to Tseme what Bayside is to New York City. Our family and the Gagas family had winter homes in Kato Panagia. They all had second, summer homes in Erythrae. When I lived in Chios, I was a sailor in the Minoan Lines. The owner’s wife was my first cousin.” Daisy Lainis recalls that her father, Kostas Kazanas, said “All the men fourteen years and older were forced in 1922 to go on a death march from Kato Panagia deep into Turkey.” This is similar to the Bataan Death March in the Philippines during World War II.

Official records were destroyed in the 1914 and 1922 persecutions of Asia Minor. My grandmother said she was born in the Greek island of Moschonisi, opposite the island of Mytilini (Lesvos). Her baptismal certificate showed she was baptized in 1898 in the Greek Archdiocese of Moschonisi to Panagiotis Gagas and Zafiria Brousalis. Her marriage certificate indicates that she married Christos Dimitris Papantonakis (Pappas when he immigrated through Ellis Island customs) on Aug. 15, 1917 by the monk Neofytos from the neighborhood of the Frourio (Fortress), one year after their expulsion from Tseme. These are the only documents that showed the history of Despina G. Pappas’ past.

In 2008, we are now third and fourth generation Greek-Americans. Many are not Greek Orthodox. Greek is no longer spoken in the homes. Our only link to being Greek is our name. I decided to retrace our roots in Turkey, beginning with my maternal grandmother, Despina Gagas Pappas (Papantonakis). Recently, through Sunset Tours of Chios and the guide Ali Papazoglou, we visited Kato Panagia and saw Greek stucco homes, empty since 1922. They are now properties of the Turkish government. They show an air of once being aristocratic. The neighborhoods appeared like Southampton, Greenport and Mattituck, Long Island. Fertile rolling fields bordering the sea. We did not mingle with the community and stayed in the coach bus. When I returned to Chios City with Argyro of Sunset Tours, I purchased the books *Mika Asia Explorer* and *Stefanides Chios* and a Smyrni travel guide. In these Modern Greek books, I pieced together the rich history of the areas. In order to understand the truth, one must be knowledgeable in Modern Greek sources. There does not exist in English any in-depth history of these communities and their life style.

“The beauty of Smyrn was not the houses or streets. The beauty of Smyrna was us, the Greeks, the Romans, the Smyrneoi. The beauty of the Greeks was not the locations or the marbles. It was the bravery (Leventia) they had in their souls,” said author Angela Papazoglou. Tseme was a province in the state of Smyrna. The municipality of Tseme had komopoli (small cities) such as Kato Panagia. Erythrae was a town. Today, Tseme is known as Cesme Belediyesi, an important seaport and vacation spot in Turkey. Tseme means Krini in Greek and fountain in English. It was a city of fountains. Tseme has daily departures from Chios. It has a medieval fortress. A declining tourism is causing a crisis in the economy.

See next week’s edition for second installment.