

BECOMING AN AMERICAN WOMAN:
THE PATH FROM KYTHERA IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY¹

Vasilikie Demos

Professor Emerita of Sociology

University of Minnesota, Morris

E-MAIL: demosvp@morris.umn.edu

Address: 1214 Orchard Circle

Salisbury, MD 21801

This paper is written explicitly for people of Kytherian heritage and their families and friends in

Celebration of the Feast Day of the Panaghia Myrthiotissa and Kytherian Day,

Celebrated in Baltimore, MD, on October 1, 2006

Girls and women from the Greek island of Kythera began migrating to Australia and the United States at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Girls left as children with their families to settle in the new lands, and women left their homes in Kythera as adults to join husbands or to marry men who had already left the island to settle in Australia and the United States.

From 1990 to 1993, I interviewed 95 women of Kytherian heritage living in Australia, the United States and Greece to learn about changes in the construction of identity among women of Greek heritage throughout the twentieth century. In granting me the interviews, the women presented me with narrations of their lives. Since transcribing them, I have reviewed them many times, and I have come to an understanding of the concerns, struggles and victories in their lives.ⁱⁱ The narrations reveal that the women experienced stringent limitations on the exercise of their will, but that they often succeeded in negotiating the basis of these limitations.

In this paper, I focus on the story of “Sophia,”ⁱⁱⁱ who migrated from Kythera to the United States as a child in the first decade of the twentieth century. In re-telling her story, I show the extent to which Sophia’s life resembled that of other Kytherian Greek migrant women born in the early part of the twentieth century, and I point to ways in which her life differed from that of her counterparts, particularly that of Valentina who had migrated to Australia. I have selected Sophia because she provides an especially good example of a migrant woman who exercised her will. My purpose in writing this paper is to reconstruct and confirm the social reality early twentieth century Kytherian Greek migrant women experienced as well as to affirm their struggle for self-determination. In the paper, too, I point to differences between becoming an American woman and establishing oneself in Australia.

As already noted, in the typical narrative of Kytherian migrant women, migration cannot be separated from marriage and the family. Sophia and Valentina both left Kythera in the early part of the twentieth century. Sophia was five years old when she left with her mother and brothers to join her father in the United States. She arrived, and according to the law of the land began public school there. At 15 years old, Valentina was a woman when she migrated to Australia to marry. Valentina observed, "I lived in Kythera until I was 15 1/2 and then I came to Australia and I celebrated my 16th birthday and engagement on the same day. My husband asked for me when I came; I was here in June and married in January. At 16 [I] married and [I] had a daughter straight away and I was very happy; I was living with my sister-in-law (brother's wife) and had help."

From the time she was a child, Sophia expressed her will. Sophia had not wanted to leave Kythera. She said,

I didn't want to come; I didn't want to leave my grandmother nor "Eleni," a cousin my mother had taken in. Oh, did I cry.... My mother couldn't put me on the boat to go to Athens. My mother could go, and I said, "you go. I'm not leaving Eleni." And the captain came with sailors and they picked me up and put me on the boat and my mother said, "What is going to happen with this child? She will die from her lipi [sorrow]."

Going to School, Learning the Language and Becoming American. As was the case with some women who migrated to the United States, Sophia's mother never found happiness there. Sophia's explanation for her unhappiness lies in her mother's never having learned English. Sophia said, "My mother didn't like it here. She never learned the language. She came here to be with her husband. She wanted to be with her husband."

Between 1880 and 1920, the time of the "Great Migration" to the United States from Eastern and Southern Europe, a wave of nativism swept the nation (Blee 1991). Groups such as

the Ku Klux Klan expressed their fear that the influx of Eastern and Southern Europeans would change the “American” character of the society. The movement succeeded in closing down Eastern and Southern European immigration by 1924. It, also, succeeded in generating an “Americanization” program to assimilate those who had already immigrated. Because the public school system was the primary vehicle of the program, the laws mandating compulsory school attendance facilitated the Americanization of immigrant children.

Sophia learned to speak, read and write English in public school. For her, learning to speak English was critical to successful life in the United States, and to being a “good American.” Learning the language was difficult for Sophia, but she was determined to do so. She explained, “In first grade I told my teacher I liked it here, but my parents didn't, and they wouldn't learn the language; I had a hard time.” ‘A good American’ was my slogan. I had approached a teacher about learning English and I would go to her house after school everyday and learn.”

Sophia’s mastery of English empowered her within the family and in American society. She became the spokesperson for the family, including the representative of her father, and she was able to negotiate conflicts between her family and the outside world. Sophia spoke eloquently about the importance of learning the English language and how it empowered her:

I was the head of the family then. I was the speaker. One day my father got a notice from the city hall that he had to go, something he did; and I went down and I said, “Oh, he did something.” So I went with him to city hall. So you see: I was in school at the time; I was in school and I knew how to speak the language and. I said to someone there at the office, I want to see “John Smith,”.... [the mayor] and he realized that we were foreigners and I said, “This is my father, and we got a letter, and you requested that he owes money to you, and he doesn't know what it is. And would you please tell me? and I'll tell him.” And he said it

was a tax form that he owes to pay for his fountain and he didn't pay and that's what he owes. "Oh," I said to him, "Oh, then you are not going to put him in jail."...And he said, "Little girl I would never put your father in jail and you are a wonderful daughter to be able to talk for your father. Why don't you teach him to learn the language?" And I said "It's hard for a big person to learn the language." I stuck up for him.

Sophia used the English language to secure her father's place in American society, and to "stick up" for him. Recognizing that her ability to speak English "Americanized" her, Sophia expressed ambivalence towards her father's inability to use English. She defended his inability, but, she, also, criticized his reluctance to learn the language. This ambivalence is revealed by a second account Sophia related of speaking up for her father. She said,

When my uncle decided to go on his own, he had a lawyer send my father a notice to get his money back from my father and I had to go with my father to the lawyer's office to find out what he was going to do. I was a cute little girl, I was Americanized, and I stuck up for my people, and I said, "Are you going to put my father in jail because he owes money to his brother?" And he put his arm around me and said "Little girl, I would never put your father in jail..." He told my father that you have a nice little girl who talks for you and, "You learn to talk the American language..."which was no more than right... but they were thick headed, those men, those people in that time. They had me, my father had me."

Sophia learned English because she immigrated to the United States as a child and attended school there. Those who left Kythera as young women learned the English language through less formal channels. Valentina communicated with her daughter, "Maria," in Greek until Maria began school. Then Maria taught her to speak English as well as to read and write it.

For Sophia learning English and attending school were the principal means by which she could become Americanized. Sophia enjoyed school and wanted to complete high school. She placed a high value on education, but her father did not, and he would not allow her to go further

than 8th grade. Instead, he had her working in the family store, managing the business. Sophia honored her father's wishes, but she did not hesitate to speak her mind about her brothers completing high school, and in this she was able to prevail over her father. In so doing, she argued it was more important for her brothers to be "good American citizens" than it was for them to hold on to Greek ways. Sophia said:

I was the boss in the store and I took care of everything. I was a teenager. I was 14 when I stopped school in the 8th grade. I was going to the high school and my father said I had to stop. He wouldn't let me go to high school. My teachers liked me and they brought me books. I pushed my brothers. I told my father, "You are not going to take them out of school; you are going to let them go to high school." I made my father let my brothers go to high school. I participated. They were like my children--that was how strict I was. I wanted them to be good American citizens; I didn't want this Greek stuff.... They adored me. They listened. My brother, "Costa," broke his nose playing football and he came home crying and my father didn't approve, My father raised hell....and I said, " I want him to participate in all the things the other boys do; You can't deny him." He shut his mouth and didn't say nothing. I was [a] holy terror. I really was. I was a Good American.

Sophia was responsible for her brothers completing high school, and, later, when she had her own family, she instilled educational values into her own children, subsequently taking pride in their graduation from college.

Women and Marriage. Family and community control of marital partners is critical to the maintenance of a people's heritage. Traditionally, women have had relatively less freedom than men in selecting their husbands. Traditionally, too, women in their positions as mothers have been more influential than men as fathers in passing on to their children cultural values.

Typically Kytherian migrant women married men who had specifically asked for them or who had been selected by a proxenia or matchmaker. Valentina's husband, Manoli, had "asked

for her.” She said, “My husband asked for me when I came.... I saw him at gatherings [namedays, baptisms, dances]. He asked my oldest brother. and my oldest brother asked me to think about it and told me not to tell him today, and I told my brother in two days because I liked [my] future husband and I could see that he liked me. Valentina was 16 and Manoli was 31 years old when they married.

Pleased to be able to say that Manoli had asked for her, Valentina flatly stated that her marriage was not “a proxenia.” Valentina was fortunate that her brother had not pressured her to marry. While her brother gave her an opportunity to defer the offer, she did not have the freedom to select her own husband. That was contingent on Manoli’s decision to ask for her and her brother deciding that Manoli was suitable.

Sophia married Harry when she was 21, and he was 35 years old. Her marriage was “by proxenia,” arranged with the help of a third neutral party. Typically, when a family agreed to the proxenia’s selection of a husband for their daughter, the daughter accepted the selection. Marriage was an arrangement decided between families or between a woman’s family and the prospective husband. The last person to be consulted was the prospective bride. .

Speaking up and negotiating the basis for selecting a husband. Sophia was adamant that she would not remain silent in the negotiation of her marriage; she informed her father she had to approve of the man, and he had to meet her standards. Sophia recalled the years when young men began “asking for her.”

When I was 16, young Greek boys would come around and I was nice [a] looking girl and they saw me and they ask my father in marriage and I gave my father hell; one day I said [Translated from Greek] “You don't have to tell that one from [a city nearby]...” and he wanted me and I didn't want him; he was a big slob. I said; “I don't want him, and you are not gonna give an answer to who I'm going to marry, and you've gotta ask me if I like him or not. I am not gonna to

marry a shoe shiner.” I wanted someone better than that. “I want him to have big business and I want him to know the American language that I wouldn't have to worry like I'm worrying now,” and I said, “You'd better.”...And I told my mother, and they were scared to death; I blew the top.

Clearly, Sophia had assessed her life in the United States and determined that she wanted a better life than she had as her family's spokesperson. She wanted to marry someone who had already navigated the difficulties of immigration to American, and someone similar to her, who had ambitions for the future.

You know how many I had? Oh, my God I used to get sick and tired of them ; I could tell when they were going to my father, and pssspss about my daughter, and I said to my father, I said, “You tell them that you have to ask me-- that I can't say yes to her. She doesn't want to marry the one that I want. It's the one that she likes.” And do you know: I got the cream of the crop. I had the most wonderful husband.

Oh, its a long story... he was so wonderful... ask anyone... ask anyone what kind of a person “Harry” was... he was Americanized. He was a Mason. He was in the Episcopal Church. He spoke the English language. He was in the city hall. Harry was everything and that was what I wanted to marry.

Sophia's husband, “Harry” was a Kytherian Greek immigrant. There was no question, but that Sophia would marry within the Kytherian Greek community. Yet, Sophia was able to exercise her will and have the husband she wanted, one that participated in American society. In fact, Harry, was so Americanized that there had been “talk” of his marrying an “Americanida,” a woman born in the United States of non-Greek heritage.

Sophia explained that someone had said to Harry's older brother, “Why don't you marry your brother before he takes an Americanida?” Sophia noted that the brother was told, “There is a very beautiful girl ..., and many ask for her, but her father wouldn't let her.”

Sophia said:

My uncle told my father, “Wake up, and make sure she gets someone good not some shoeshine.” My father said, “I want to meet him if he is so good.” My father talked to me. Oh, he was afraid of me. My mother and father were scared of me. They knew what I wanted and they didn't blame me.

Sophia met Harry and quickly decided to marry him. She said,

I was upstairs in my parents bedroom when they came, and they came in a big car, and that was a big thing then, and I listened to him talk and he said he wanted to marry a Greek girl, he didn't want to marry an Americanida, and he was talking to my mother and father and my uncle and aunt...and my husband said, “Well, where is she?” And they said, “She's coming down. She' s upstairs.”

My first impression was that he was short and a little heavy, but that didn't bother me because I heard what he talked about and that's what I wanted and he was so Americanized and so wonderful..." And my uncle got up and said [translated from Greek], “Now that we are here, do you want to take my niece?” And he said, “Yes, if she wants me.” And my uncle turned around and said "Sophia, do you like Harry to take for a husband?" I said, “I have heard all the beautiful words that he said, and I believe, and yes, I would like to take him.”

In looking back at their marriage, Sophia said, “My marriage was extraordinary because I was between the old people and the new generation... oh, I just worshipped the ground he walked on.”

In conclusion: Sophia’s story of migration and integration into American society is typical of its time. Many left Kythera for Australia and the United States in the first part of the twentieth century. In both places, the Greek immigrants held an ambiguous position. In Australia, under the “White Australia” policy, Greeks were considered different and not quite white, but because of Australia’s subordinate position within the British empire, a unique

Australian identity had yet to develop (Anderson; London, 1970) By contrast, in the United States, there was a strong push to forge an American identity and to assimilate immigrants. In particular, compulsory education laws ensured that immigrant children would be targeted for Americanization and ideas counter to ones embraced by the immigrant family.

In addition to the association between education and Americanization is the association between Americanization and upward mobility. Sophia wanted to marry “someone” who would be “somebody,” someone who had a big business and who was not stuck in the same job he had when he migrated to the United States. Thus, Sophia had embraced the idea of the “American dream of success,” that one could through one’s own efforts change one’s station in life.

While policy makers may have had the idea that Americanization would eliminate all differences between the immigrant population and those already settled in the United States, Sophia’s narrative reveals a different effect. Family control of Greek migrant women in the early part of the twentieth century insured they would marry Greek migrant men. Greek migrant men who married Greek migrant women implicitly decided to maintain identification with the Greek community. Sophia noted that Harry wanted to marry her because she was Greek, not an “Americanida.” At the same time Sophia viewed both herself and Harry as Americanized. For Sophia and Harry as well as other migrants Americanization facilitated a better material life and upward mobility in the new society

Sophia’s story of migration and integration is typical; it is, also, uniquely her story. It is her story because from a very young age, Sophia exercised her own will to negotiate the terms of her life. Sophia expressed her will from the time she was five years old when she refused to board the ship for America. She voiced her resistance to leaving Kythera and her mother heard

her. Though she did not succeed in staying behind, she left only because the captain and his sailors had to carry her on to the ship.

Once in the United States, Sophia actively sought help in learning English from the public school teacher. Having taken command of the language, she used it to negotiate between her family and the greater society. Her ability to negotiate meant that her father could not exercise absolute authority over Sophia. Sophia became “the boss.” Sophia married by arrangement, but she determined the criteria for selecting her husband. Thus, Sophia’s ability to exercise her will meant she had an “extraordinary marriage,” one that put her “...between the old people and the new generation.”

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Notes

ⁱ I presented a version of this paper titled, “Gendering the Twentieth Century Greek Diaspora in Australia and the United States,” in Durban, South Africa at the International Sociological Association Meeting, August, 2006

ⁱⁱ I am indebted to the ninety-five women who allowed me into their lives and told me so much about themselves. I cannot thank them enough. I have learned a great deal about our Kytherian heritage, and I have been personally enriched by these interviews.

ⁱⁱⁱ The names for people in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the people I interviewed.