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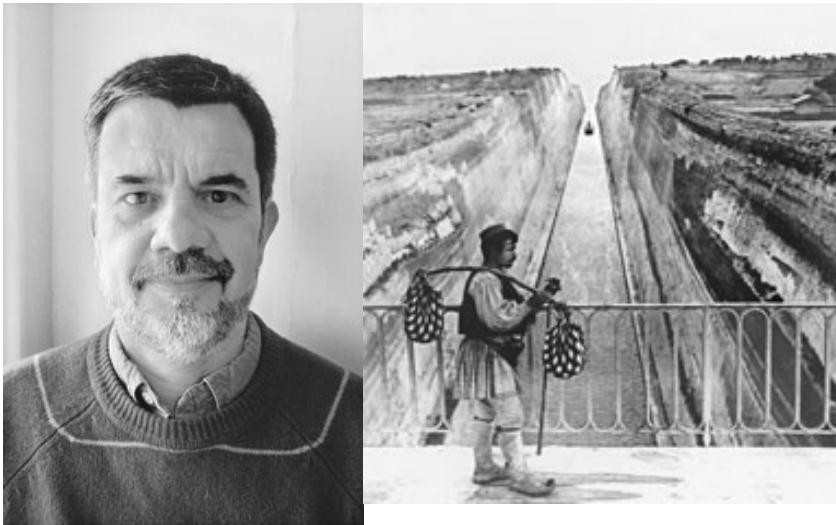
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Both descendants of dishwashers and heirs to a classical heritage

Alexander Kitroeff on fourth-generation Greek Americans



'Departure,' a photograph from 1906 (reprinted with the kind permission of the US Library of Congress), is in Maria Iliou's book and documentary 'The Journey,' to which Alexander Kitroeff (left) made a significant contribution.

By Margarita Pournara - Kathimerini

With roots in Chios and Alexandria, a Russian-sounding surname, studies in Britain, and a university career in the USA, Alexander Kitroeff has a natural interest in the subject of migration. Now a professor of history at Haverford College in Philadelphia, he researches the history of Greek Americans. He recently contributed to Maria Iliou's documentary and book "The Journey," about Greeks in pursuit of the American dream. Kitroeff talked to Kathimerini about what native-born Greeks have in common with the descendants of those who migrated.

What is your own background?

I was born in Athens but my father and grandfather were from Alexandria, Egypt, while my mother's father was from Istanbul. So from an early age, I had the feeling that I came from a diaspora family. My surname probably comes from Kitro Effendi, a family of notables from Chios who crossed the Black Sea.

What made you decide to study the Greek diaspora?

It started with my doctorate at Oxford, which focused on the Greeks of Alexandria in the interwar period. When I went to Egypt, I saw obvious traces of the once-powerful Greek colony. My interest was academic, but I was deeply moved by everything Greek I saw in the city.

When did you start studying the Greeks in America?

In 1986, and I hope to complete the study soon. I don't want to replace the work of Theodore Saloutos, which came out in 1964, but I want to supplement it with new data and update it theoretically. I have already published some papers on those subjects in advance of the book.

Does your research reveal any features that are typical of the Greeks who migrate, regardless of the era or the places they settle?

There are similarities in the way Greeks organize their communities, their unaltered relation with their particular birthplace and also with the Orthodox Church. There are differences, of course. In America, for example, the Church is more powerful than the communities, which were usually created by rich merchants. Such Greeks went to the United States only in the 19th century. Later on, there were people who struggled for economic survival. So, from the outset and until the 1950s, there were no distinct social strata among Greeks in America, in contrast with today, when they are apparent. A Greek-American middle and upper middle class has sprung up, as there was formerly in Alexandria. Four Greek Americans figure on the Forbes list of the richest people in America.

Self image

Twenty years ago, you began researching Greek emigration to America, but you didn't proceed. Why are conditions more favorable now?

It has to do with the way Greek Americans see themselves. Now they are confident that they have succeeded, so they now look with pride on their forebears who did manual labor.

To what extent have Greeks become assimilated into American society?

At first they had a dual identity, part Greek, part American. A phase of Americanization followed the First World War. Since 1960, there has been a return to one's roots, with pride in ethnic origin. Now Greek Americans not only feel they are the descendants of Euripides and the heirs to ancient Greek civilization, but they also accept that they are the descendants of shoeshiners and kitchen hands who managed to make a better future for their children and grandchildren in America. The crucial point at which the Greeks acquired self-confidence was in 1988, with the presidential candidacy of Michael Dukakis – the first migrant's son to have risen so high in politics.

How do fourth-generation Greek Americans, who don't speak the language and may not go to church, define themselves?

They have definitely been assimilated into American society, but they maintain a lively connection with Greece. There is a version of being Greek that they express. They'll tell you with pride, in English, "I am Greek." There is a guileless, unfeigned love of Greece. You should have seen what happened after the wildfires last summer, when so many people of Greek origin mobilized to offer whatever help they could.

In conversation, Greek Americans often voice a sense of bitterness at being forgotten, or at only being remembered when there are ulterior motives at work.

That's true. That is the view of many American-born Greeks. There is a group of people of Greek origin who have set up organizations and clubs to exploit the Greek state and acquire various privileges, political connections and free tickets to Greece, like some who are involved with the World Council of Hellenes Abroad (SAE).

After the junta, cracks appeared in relations between Greeks and Greek Americans. How do you see things now?

Many Greeks rightly believed that the Greek Americans did not show their opposition to the colonels forcefully enough. Iakovos, the archbishop of America, held a conference for the clergy and laity in Athens during the dictatorship and many called him "CIAkovos." After 1974, however, relations were restored and the archbishop emerged as a national leader with the Greek lobby acting on the Cyprus issue. Relations have inevitably weakened because pressure to assimilate is greater now in the US. The more that Americans of Greek origin establish themselves economically, the more they lose part of their identity.

Do you think that Greeks see Greek Americans as naive, especially those who support President Bush?

In comparison with Europeans, Americans, including Greek Americans, tend to be more socially open and tolerant, but that doesn't mean they are naive or stupid. Forty percent at most of Greek Americans support Bush.

Recently the Greek lobby's leaders were briefed about the FYROM issue by the Greek ambassador to Washington. Are they likely to take action?

The lobby was active in 1974 to 1978 on the issue of Cyprus. Since then, their activity has abated and they admit that their scope is limited. They don't want to change US policy in the southeastern Mediterranean but to blunt it. The Greek lobby often boasts that it does a lot but it doesn't achieve anything. I think the lobby's role is overestimated by the Greek Foreign Ministry and other circles: It does have a certain clout but it is limited.

What would you advise the Greek state to do?

To treat diaspora Greeks seriously, and allow them to act independently. They are people with skills, a desire to contribute and a sincere love of Greece. But Athens and the SAE put all the emphasis on the Greek language, when three-quarters of Greek Americans only speak English and access Greek culture through English and audiovisual media. There are many other Greek-American cultural organizations that do what they can on a voluntary basis, with literature, music and theater. But not everything can rely on our patriotism. That has to change.

The DVD and book "To taxidi" (The Journey) is published by the Benaki Museum and the non-profit organization Proteas. It is on sale at the museum and some bookstores.