

Remarks delivered by Gregory C. Pappas on October 28, 2008 at the American Hellenic Institute Noon Forum celebrating OXI Day.

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Good afternoon and thank you all for coming to this Noon Forum, sponsored by the American Hellenic Institute. Congratulations to Gene Rossides for what he has built here—together with Nick Larigakis, the executive director of AHI and all those who have offered their time, their talents and of course, their treasures to this and other important causes for the benefit of our heritage, and of course our history... which is what I am here to talk about today.

The posters you see scattered throughout the room are part of a much bigger collection of memorabilia, original newspapers and magazines, photographs, maps and dozens of other items that tell a story that cannot—*that must not* be forgotten with the passing of time, and of course with the passing of the actual people who lived it.

The collection—and my interest in the particular time period, began with the discovery of a letter—a tattered, folded letter that I found under my father's bed, rubber-banded together with old photographs, expired passports and boat tickets from his journey across the Atlantic.

The letter was addressed to his mother-- my grandmother—and thanked her for the role she played in helping allied forces escape Crete after the failed attempt to push back the Nazi forces, which invaded the island in the summer of 1941. The letter was signed by the Allied Supreme Commander of the Mediterranean theater.

I am not a historian and I am not here today to teach, or lecture about the history of Greece's heroic role during World War II. I would be preaching to the choir, as most of you have probably read these stories before and know even first hand from your parents or grandparents what happened during those extraordinary times.

On the contrary, I am here today to talk to you about the things that I learned, while growing this collection, that evolved from the discovery of that letter, and the importance of the preservation of our history through projects like this—much like many others have undertaken in various forms, like video documentaries, books and digital collections.

But my remarks do require a bit of a historical recollection, so allow me a brief diversion so I may take you back to late October 1940—coincidentally, sixty-eight years ago today, when in the middle of the night, the Greek Prime Minister Ioannis Metaxas received a wake up call of sorts in the middle of the night in the form of a hand delivered note from the Italian Ambassador to Athens, asking him to surrender Greek territory to the Italian army, which had amassed its military might on Greece's northern border.

From the November 11, 1940 edition of Time Magazine, which is part of my collection, we learn the following:

*The odds were appalling:*

- *250,000 Italians against perhaps 150,000 Greeks;*
- *The fourth biggest navy in the world against one obsolescent cruiser, ten destroyers, 13 torpedo boats, six submarines and a few miscellaneous craft;*
- *500 modern planes and as many more in reserve against perhaps a few old rust buckets;*
- *The tacit support of Germany, with some 70 divisions of 1,125,000 men poised in the Balkans, against overt help from Britain, militarily pinned down at home and in Egypt.*
- *Despite this apparently overwhelming disparity, the Greeks chose to fight. Ancient valor was reborn.*

Representing all the Greek people in one, single, voice... Metaxas turned away the Italian Ambassador with a single word—Oxi. No.

The Italian Ambassador's response... *Ok then, it is war.*

Indeed it was war—and what Hitler thought would be a quick and decisive victory in Greece actually turned out to be a major part of his eventual demise in Russia, as Mussolini—to whom he entrusted the Balkan thrust of the Axis campaign, would find the poor, ill-equipped Greeks to be one of the fiercest fighting forces in the world at that time. So fierce that the Greeks pushed the Italians back—way back into Albania and almost into Italy itself.

It was the first Allied victory of the war. A remarkable moment in history. Newspapers in Detroit, Pittsburgh, New York City and even Omaha, Nebraska wrote about Greek Americans dancing in the streets and major celebrations as Greek victories were reported in the press.

It was called Mussolini's mess.

The Italian Catastrophe.

The Nazis' Nightmare.

Try for a moment to picture the mood in this country, as one by one European nations had fallen to the Nazi war machine. The United States had obviously not yet entered the war. There was doom and gloom as the unstoppable Axis plowed its way through the free nations of Europe.

Life Magazine famously featured an Evzone—the Greek, skirt-clad soldier on its cover in December 1940, while inside, the headline read “THE AMAZING GREEKS WIN FREEDOM'S FIRST VICTORY.”

Time Magazine wrote in an editorial “Fight on, sons and daughters of Socrates, for you are the hope for the entire free world.”

Newspaper headlines throughout the nation proclaimed the news of the Greek victory in the Balkans and that “hope” had been instilled in the hearts and minds of the American people that the Nazi war machine was not invincible, after all.

The headline on the editorial page of the December 1, 1940 edition of the Boston Globe read: *"Armies Cannot Slay the Spirit of Greece"*

The editorial that followed included the following paragraph:

*"The Italian attack on Greece has aroused the old Greek spirit of national pride, freedom and personal courage. This spirit expressed itself in Greek philosophy, literature and arts that have been the basis of European culture. All European nations have gone to the school of ancient Greek artists and philosophers. Roman art and literature as well as philosophy started flourishing after the Roman armies had defeated the Greek Empire, rival of ancient Rome. Greek artists, poets and philosophers were taken to Rome as teachers. Now, 2000 years later, the Roman armies are on the march against Greek independence. Modern Italy, with her German ally, may defeat the Greek army, but the Greek spirit is deathless."*

The winter of 1940-41 was simultaneously a glorious era—and a difficult one for the Greek nation—but nothing compared to what would follow.

As a result of the Italian debacle, Hitler was forced to divert valuable forces and resources into the invasion of Greece in April 1941 and the subsequent airborne invasion of Crete in June of that same year.

Upon setting their first footsteps in Greece, Hitler's forces faced their most ferocious opposition yet in the war. Herbert Schoneman, a German infantryman wrote in his memoirs that “the Greeks were like no other people the German army faced anywhere in Europe.

They were proud of their heritage and fought to the end and defended their land, their family and their honor, even throwing themselves into the path of death, in attempt to stop us from moving forward. They were extraordinary people.”

But the might of the Nazi machine was too much for the Greeks to handle and one by one, cities and towns throughout the Greek countryside fell to the invading Germans. Athens fell on April 27, 1941.

A month later, in what was supposed to be test run for a proposed airborne invasion of the British Isles, thousands of paratroopers ascended on the island of Crete from the sky.

It was the first airborne invasion of an island fortress in history. And although Hitler suffered more losses in Crete than any other time in the war, by the beginning of June 1941, the entire nation was under his control.

This particular time and place in history is of particular importance to me, as this is where both my parents come from and the very existence of my collection comes from the stories I heard from my father, growing up in a home with war stories on an almost daily basis. But I will get to this later in my discussion, as it is important to understand the historical context and timing.

*Remember—and my apologies for the frequent digressions—we have the Italian ultimatum and the Greek rejection in October of 1940, followed by the Greek victory against the Italians during the winter of 1940 and early 1941, followed by the German invasion in April 1941 and the Battle of Crete in June of that same year.*

What followed was the single most trying time in the history of the Greek nation, as thousands of cities and towns were destroyed—burned to the ground as acts of reprisal by the Nazis against the civilian population for acts committed by the resistance fighters who opposed the Nazi occupiers.

From the April 29, 1941 edition of the Atlanta Constitution:

*The Greeks came bearing a gift. A priceless gift which we need not beware, for it is beyond compare. While we debate in fear and waver in useless longing for peace, the Greeks have shown the world that men still die for freedom, for a cause, against hopeless odds knowing that death is inevitable yet preferring it, as Socrates accepted it, before dishonor. ... It seems strange in this modern, cynical world of ours to hear of men dying for honor and glory. You have heard of men preferring to be live cowards than dead heroes -- it is symptomatic of our civilization. These Greeks of a more remote heritage without material wealth have proved richer than we thought, for they have kept alive the sacred fire that through the years has burned its beacon to the wayfarer who sought freedom and dignity. It is hard to die with dignity. But the Greeks have.*

During the winter of 1941-42, In Athens alone, hundreds of thousands of people died of mass starvation, the likes of which had never before been seen by modern man, perpetrated as a strategy by the Nazis in an attempt to suppress the spirit of the Greek people.

My collection is comprised of dozens of original Red Cross photographs of corpses laying dead in the main streets of the city, or leaning on the side of building. The people of the United States, who only months earlier had seen the Greek people stand up to the Axis and fight were now seeing unbelievable images of emaciated corpses being loaded onto trucks, picked up like trash from the sides of the streets of Athens.

Newspapers were calling on a still, neutral United States to act quickly to assist the Greek people.

What would follow was one of the biggest humanitarian movements in the history of the United States of America with the mobilization of tens of thousands of average citizens who would donate their time and their money to the Greek War Relief Effort.

In my research while building the collection, I found almost a dozen unique posters calling on the people of America to “Help Greece Now” before it is too late, with images of mothers holding on to their infants with backdrops of ancient temples.

At the time, there wasn't an electronic media like we have today and posters—like the ones you see displayed throughout this room, were the most popular used form of advertising to the masses. They were hung along the sides of buildings and in store windows, right next to posters that advertised the newest beverage or cigarette brand.

Together with the posters, I found a host of other similar items, all carrying the “Help Greece Now” message like matchbooks, dozens of lapel pins and one by one, I built a collection of over two dozen pre-printed envelopes called “First Day Covers” that carried various messages pertaining to the Greek relief efforts, encouraging average Americans to support the effort.

The Greek War Relief Effort of the 1940s was the major philanthropic cause of that time period.

In the words of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt...

"The heroic struggle of the Greek people... against Germany's attack, after she so thunderously defeated the Italians in their attempt to invade the Greek soil, filled the hearts of the American people with enthusiasm and moved their compassion."

In addition to these official statements by political figures of the time, which are abundant, I also scoured archives and biographies and learned some pretty interesting things that I'd like to share with you, much of which is chronicled in my collection.

As a result of the efforts of Spyro Skouras, the Greek American president of Fox Films, who co-chaired the official committee called the Greek War Relief Association, dozens of Hollywood stars donated money to the cause and showed up frequently at benefits.

Frank Sinatra performed his debut concert at Madison Square Garden in New York with all proceeds going towards the Greek relief efforts. Bob Hope and Jack Benny performed also and Judy Garland performed a live radio concert—a sort of telethon—that was heard live in Southern California and sent via tape to dozens of radio stations throughout the nation.

Local committees of the Greek War Relief Association as far away as Hawaii worked alongside sister committees in New York, Chicago and hundreds of cities throughout the nation.

The response of the American people—and at the very heart and core—the Greek American community, was overwhelming. Hundreds of millions of dollars—1940s dollars—were raised and sent to the people of Greece. The agency worked with food distributors to get bushels of rice and grain to the Greek countryside.

A significant piece of my collection is an actual burlap sack that has two hands shaking on it, with the words “CALIFORNIA RICE...” and across the sack, the following words are printed—“From the people of the United States to the people of Greece. With gratitude”

My mother was only a few months old when the liberation of Greece took place but her family was the recipient of this type of assistance and she remembers as a child in the late 1940s, similar care packages that were delivered to the people of Crete. Although this particular sack isn't the same exact one that her family received, it is a living connection to someone else's family that did receive US aid and maintains an important part of the collection.

The connection between my own family's experiences and my decision to begin my collection have more to do, however, with my father's side of the family, as my mother was an infant when the liberation of Crete occurred and most of the stories I heard growing up came from my father himself, who was a teen ager in May of 1941 when the Nazis invaded his island.

As I touched on before, when the Nazis invaded Crete, it was the first time a modern army invaded an island fortress—which Crete was at the time, with tens of thousands of fortified British, New Zealand and Australian troops—by air.

So, the Germans invaded first by air—with thousands of paratroopers falling from airplanes that were dropping them, with parachutes. My father was enamored with the “umbrellas” falling from the sky and what an awesome site it was. He had never before seen “flying men” and was amazed. So, the “umbrella men” were often brought up when it was raining outside and there were people out with their umbrellas.

Other stories pertained to his father (my grandfather) and how he hid (successfully for almost 2 years) his best friend and next-door neighbor, who was a Cretan Jew. My father's family was Christian, but happened to reside in the Jewish quarter of Hania, which is still to this day referred to by locals as ‘Ovreaki’ (Hebrew-town), to this day.

My collection contains a 1944 copy of Time Magazine with an image of Archbishop Damaskinos on the front cover. Damaskinos was the Archbishop of Athens at the time of the Nazi invasion and subsequent deportation of the country's Jewish community to the concentration camps. He was the first—and only—major Christian leader of a major European church to publically defy Hitler himself in the form of a letter denouncing the deportations. His acts, including the issuing of thousands of falsified baptismal

certificates to Jews with non-Christian sounding names saved thousands from certain death.

In addition to that copy of Time Magazine which honors Damaskinos, I also have an actual identification card that was used by a Jewish man to escape Nazi capture and ultimately survive the war.

The son of this man, a Jew from central Greece who used an assumed name to defy Nazi check points for almost two years before being shuttled away to Palestine, gave me the ID card as a gift and thanked me for continuing to tell the story of Damaskinos and other Christians during that time who risked their lives to help the Greek Jews.

Another story was a tragic one that involved the rounding up of all the men and boys of the village of Kontomari, which was the neighboring village of Agia Marina, outside Hania in Western Crete where my grandmother hailed from and still had a family home at the time of the war.

My father happened to be in the village that day and was rounded up, along with many other family members. Most of them were shot in a firing squad. In the commotion, my father and a few others managed to run for their lives.

This story is particularly important to me, as years later, I found photos in German military archives of a mass execution in Kontomari... It may or may not be the same event that my father described to me in his stories, but the chronological similarities and description of the surrounding events – when compared to the photos, are bone-chilling. These photos are also part of my collection.

The collection was turned into a traveling exhibition and together with these posters, will be on display in Washington DC in November. Having first opened in Chicago a year ago at the Hellenic Museum and Cultural center, the exhibition will also visit Philadelphia, New York City, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles and Portland, Oregon.

It is the result of my own personal interest in this important time period and the stories that I heard repeatedly growing up, I was able to manifest this into an amazing collection that tells the story of the Greek role in World War II—when Greece gave the free world its first, decisive victory against the Axis and gave light to a dark world.

Of course, this intangible – yet so important gift, as was described in that editorial that I read earlier from the Atlanta Constitution—didn't go unnoticed by an appreciative US population, which responded in a resounding manner.

This collection, which was ultimately turned into a traveling exhibition that will travel the nation and be viewed by thousands, is my small part in perpetuating one of the most important chapters in the history of Greece and the United States, two countries which are inexorably linked and share over two centuries of friendship.

This particular time in history was a shining example when the people of the United States, the world's largest democracy, offered their assistance to the people of Greece, the world's oldest democracy. Indeed they were extraordinary times.