



Example of
village life from
1960s.

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True Grit: A snapshot from a longitudinal study about Greek Migrant Women in eastern Australia

As suggested by the title, this paper is based on a longitudinal study recently published as a book; *Black Night, White Day* (2015). To try to summarize the 45 years of research that went into that study in a 20-minute presentation (and associated paper), is near impossible, so I won't try. My co-authors Reg Appleyard and Anna Amera dedicated many, many years to this particular study. I'm a late comer to the work. When I first became aware of the project in the late 1980s, it was already over 20 years in the making. Only in more recent years did I become directly involved in the project.

The said book presents the results of a longitudinal study that began in 1964. This was a time when matters of confidentiality and associated legalities were less emphasised than today and when verbal agreements and understandings between individuals were sufficient collateral, rather than the written contracts of today. Though approval was received to undertake the interviews and associated questionnaires, the names of people were changed to help protect their identities and those of their families. Nor was it the intention of this research to identify and chronicle every major event, decision and outcome in the lives of those who participated in the study. Furthermore, it was decided to alter the names of villages and hamlets to help maintain anonymity. Nevertheless, the patience, diligence, and fortitude shown by Appleyard and Amerato complete this distinctive 45-year-plus study is most commendable.

Quoting Appleyard: "Imagine a young woman from a small isolated village in Greece in the early 1960s; unable to speak English and never

having left her home or family. She literally takes her life in her hands as she boards a plane and travels to the other side of the world for a new life in Australia. I remain (some 50 years later) in awe of the courage and sheer grit of the women who embarked on this journey.”

Yet, while women have frequently shown such courage in the migratory journey, they are often relegated to second or even third place when migration is discussed. Until recently, the female migrant was seldom discussed as a person in her own right. Generally, migrant women are invisible and under-researched. Greek immigrant women have been treated no differently. These women tended to be marginalised within the migration discourse with few of their stories, until recent times, recorded or recognised.¹

Contemporary research has, however, become somewhat more discerning in the study of Greek female immigrants, identifying differences in their backgrounds, roles and experiences (here and abroad), while recognising their contributions to Australia’s economic, cultural and political circumstances. There is a growing body of research that seeks not only to explain the reasons for their marginalisation, but provides more insight and discussion about the Greek female migrant and her experiences. The research presented in this study is at the forefront of this fresh direction. With many new settlers still coming to Australia’s shores there are lessons to be learnt from that experience regarding the importance of women to the processes of adaptation in new lands for today’s governments, immigration officials and community leaders.

A recurring theme for many of the women, who were part of this study, and a refrain articulated by many Greek migrants, inspired the title of the book. Beyond the general description of the black, foreign land (*mavrixenitia*), by Greek migrants, the difficulties of adjusting to life in the new society and then waiting for the promise of the new homeland to be fulfilled, is often described and contrasted as the black night; white day. The loneliness, despair, and hard work, often during the black of night, (*mavrinychta*), on the one hand; the growing economic and social stability, the advent of family and home resulting from such hard toil, (*asprimera*), on the other: “δουλεύουμε μαύρες νύχτες για να δούμε μια άσπρη μέρα.” “We work black nights so we can see a white day”. This refrain, I was recently informed, could be heard cited elsewhere by others struggling in their newly adopted homeland back in the 1950s and 60s... namely, the UK. Hence,

while the Greek females of this study settled principally in Sydney and Melbourne, there is some universality in their experiences.

Although Australia’s post-war immigration programme had initially been justified primarily on grounds of defence, the migrant contribution to economic development soon became the programme’s main justification.

Hence, government policies had to meet this situation and led to a significant increase in migration from Greece, triggered by the government’s 1952 decision to “grant assisted passages to tens of thousands of Greeks, many of them heads of young families and unmarried males”.² By 1954, the number of Greece-born persons in Australia had doubled since the 1947 census and trebled by the 1961 census.³ In 1966, 66,000 Greece-born persons were living in Australia.

The 78 Greek women who came to Australia as part of a specific scheme, and whose adaptation is evaluated in this study, were interviewed in Greece prior to their emigration in 1964 and then followed up with interviews in Australia (and in Greece with those who returned) in 1965, 1976, 1990/91 and 2007. Issues pertaining to the participants’ health, life-expectancy or political leanings were not part of this study.

The women emigrated under a programme first devised in 1956 by the Australian government in association with the Government of Greece and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM, now IOM – International Organisation for Migration), designed essentially to even the gender imbalance created by the many single Greek males who settled in Australia during the 1950s and early 1960s.

To help redress the imbalance, single Greek women were trained for domestic work, taught rudimentary English, and sent to Australia (and Canada). The majority of the young women in our research came from mountain villages and small towns (principally from the Peloponnese and southern Macedonia, around Mt Olympus). Their average age was 19. They had acquired little formal education; the median school leaving age being twelve. Forty-five per cent were engaged in “home duties”, and nearly all the others worked mainly part-time as seamstresses/dressmakers, hairdressers or housemaids. Many also worked as shepherds during the summer months.

As an example, one of the women, interviewed in 1964 just prior to departure by Anna Amara, when asked about life in the village expressed bitterness about her family’s poverty and about her own hard life as shepherd, labourer and domestic:

“We are poor”, she said. “We own 150 goats but this is not enough to give us what we need to support ourselves ... There’s always work in the village, and the only recreation is some ‘name days’ that we celebrate, and other festivals ... The poverty made me think about migration as well as the wish to settle my life. I know I’ll have to work hard in Australia but at least I’ll be getting paid”.

In 1964, her village was home to approximately six hundred people, mostly old or children and female. Many young men, married and single, had already left for towns and cities in Greece or had followed thousands of their countrymen to factories in northern Europe. Others had emigrated to America, Canada and Australia. A weekly bus service along a rough, unpaved road was the only connection between this isolated village and the nearby provincial town. No one owned a motor car, and electricity had not yet reached the village.



A mountain hut in the Peloponnese.
Courtesy: R Appleyard



Example of village life
from 1960s. Source:
Source: NAA, Series
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women whether their migratory journey to Australia would fulfill their hopes and the promise of a ‘white day’ or whether hardships and unfulfilled expectations would create a more adverse ‘black night’. For each one of them, the outcome of their decision would vary.

The women were taken to a school at Kifissia, then an outer suburb of Athens, where they enrolled in a ten-week course that included classes in basic English, life in a modern Western society (Australia), dressmaking, deportment, hair care, and hygiene. On completing the course, the trainees boarded a plane for Sydney and another to Adelaide. The majority then travelled from Adelaide by train to Berri, South Australia, where their employment as fruit packers had been pre-arranged.



Home economics class at Kifissia. Source: NAA, Series A12111

Berri was a one-off arrangement for ICEM trainees. The short picking-packing season coincided with our group's arrival and so jobs were arranged before their departure from Greece. For many of these young women, this was an unpleasant – if not life scarring – experience. Whether the women stayed at Berri for a couple of weeks or a couple of months, the vast majority would find themselves residing on Australia's east coast.

Case studies are presented in the final publication to illustrate the cross-section of life journeys experienced by these women. Just as they needed grit and tenacity to cope with life in Greece and to undertake the arduous journey to Australia, they would need these qualities to cope in their new homeland. In a forum such as this I can only provide you with a general overview of our results and conclusions.

Of the original 78 questionnaire respondents from 1964, 55 were interviewed in 2006/07 in Greece and Australia. Most had remained in Australia, while others returned to Greece – some permanently, others only briefly. The majority who had returned permanently did so within the first decade of migrating. The vast majority married, primarily to Greece born men (as hoped for



Young women from Greece arriving at South Australian Riverland hostel by bus, January 1965
Courtesy: Murray Reporter

by the Australian government), others to Australia born Greeks. The 2006/07 survey revealed that only three respondents had separated or divorced. Most of the women who settled in Australia long term resided in Melbourne and Sydney, with a handful living in Adelaide and Brisbane.

The clothing industry provided employment for many of the women. They were typically grouped in sections of factories where only Greek was spoken. Others worked at home sewing garments that were later collected and sold in the marketplace. Both arrangements provided respondents with little opportunity to communicate with non-Greek-speaking persons. Furthermore, the employment and residence environments of Melbourne and Sydney in which the migrants initially settled bore little resemblance to the village and small town physical and social environments that they had left only weeks beforehand. Classes in English were available but few respondents attended the complete courses. However, almost all the respondents emphasised the importance of learning English as soon as possible.

Greek remained the language of communication between spouses for the forty-plus years covered by this study although English was adopted

by their children, and both Greek and English was spoken increasingly between the children and their parents.

Incidence of home ownership and investments in Australia were impressive. As was the finding that, 79 per cent of their children had stayed on to Year 12/HSC or its equivalent. Much time in the latter part of the study was spent surveying and interviewing the children of the women. Detailed results of these encounters are discussed in the book. Of those who went on to further education, 42 per cent completed tertiary courses at universities and Colleges of Advanced Education. A notable achievement when set against their mothers' village/small town life and their own upbringing in inner suburban schools in Melbourne and Sydney.

In our view, this study has thrown new light on the role played by women in international migration. Showing courage, initiative and grit, and often alone at the start of their migratory journey, they not only created homes on arrival but also contributed to the formation of families, communities and, more broadly, to Australia. Furthermore, each new female settler was unique in the experiences she brought and what she contributed to the country. And while they were essentially the anchors who stabilize male migrants, many of whom, if alone, find it difficult to adapt in the host society, they were, as attested in our research, very much more.

Examples of Greek migrant poetry (mid 1960s) inspiring the title of The book *Black Night, White Day: Greece-born Women in Australia Results of a longitudinal study, 1964 to 2007* (translated by A. Amara)

The Foreign Factories by S and P

In the foreign factories
I work night and day
With the hope in my heart
To see a "White (better) Day"

I will return to Greece

I've decided to leave
From the black foreign land
To return to Greece
To see my little house again

Notes

- 1 Palaktoglou, 2013.
- 2 Tsounis, 1988, p. 18.
- 3 Bureau of Immigration and Population Research, 1994.

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