

100 Years in America Commentary

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The descendants of the first immigrants of Tsamantas held their Centennial Celebration on the weekend of October 10-12, in Worcester, Mass. The affair was titled "100 Years in America: 1908-2008, Tsamantas-Worcester." The events were sponsored and organized by the St. George Hellenic Benefit Society of Tsamantas. The celebrations began on Friday evening at the Worcester Art Museum with a showing of "The Journey: The Greek American Dream," a documentary by film director Maria Iliou, and followed by a reception. His Eminence Metropolitan Methodios, the Greek Consul General of Boston, the Honorable Constantinos Orphanides, Archimandrite Methodios of Holy Monastery of Giromeni, Reverend Father Dean N. Paleologos of St. Spyridon Cathedral of Worcester, Mass., attended and offered their greetings and congratulations to the board and members of the St. George's Hellenic Benefit Society of Tsamantas.

This event was followed by an academic conference on Saturday, October 11 at the Hellenic College and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Mass. A group of scholars, arriving from as far off as Spain, Belgium and England and as near as Maine, Pennsylvania and New York City, presented their research on issues of immigration. Nicholas Gage, journalist and author, opened the series of presentations as he discussed his own experiences of migrating from Epirus to Worcester, Mass., as a child. Dr. Alexander Kitroeff was the Keynote Speaker for the day's events, presenting his research on Greek Americans' experiences in the U.S. W.W.II and Greece's resistance to Mussolini and the Axis Powers placed Greece in the media in a new and favorable light. Greek Americans were beneficiaries of this new image of Greece as heroic and a lover of democracy. Dr. Dimitrios Konstandakopoulos presented his research on immigrants from Tsamantas, and pointed out that due to economic hardships, there were many push factors for emigrating out of the region; two men were initially responsible for the chain migration out of Tsamantas and into Worcester. In fact, he traced over one hundred and twenty families immigrating to Worcester from Tsamantas within a twenty year period. Dr. Lynn Morrison, a museum curator, discussed her own preservation work at the Tsamantas Folklore Museum as a volunteer in the summer of 2007, emphasizing the importance for locales to create and maintain such museums in which the local histories and cultures are preserved. Dr. Torsten Feys presented on the important functions that immigrant banks played in immigrant communities throughout the U.S., in terms of their contributions to the communities themselves and also the hometowns of immigrants. Dr. Anna Karpathakis presented statistics from the Census showing Greek Americans' assimilation and integration into the U.S.; Greek Americans are quite successful and are found throughout economic sectors, industries and institutions. More than half of Greek Americans earn middle income and above, while nearly a quarter still earn low income, a statistic that is often lost on many of us who wish to simply celebrate our successes. Dr. Antonia Sagredo Santos spoke on the Irish migration to the U.S., as being the largest of the migrations in the 19th century; there are a number of similarities between Greek and Irish immigration, but the Irish are unique in that they were the first ethnic proletariat in the U.S. and also faced a strong racist treatment from the native born whites at the time; the Irish were seen as the Blacks of Europe at the time. Finally, Prof.

Paul B. Frederic, presented his research on migration from a rural area in Maine to the rural Midwest in search of land.

Sunday was the last day of the celebration. Archimandrite Methodios led the liturgy, presenting holy relics of St. George to those gathered for the day. Archimandrite Methodios gave the sermon on the parable of the seeds from Luke 8:5. He reminded those gathered that it is in an open heart that God's words for goodness, love, understanding and compassion will grow and come to fruition. After religious services, a luncheon was held in the St. Spyridon Community Center. Rep. James McGovern (D-MA) attended and congratulated the Association for its commitment to both the Worcester Community as well as to Tsamantas, for their commitment to preserving the Hellenic culture among the American born and creating a community to which they can trace their roots. Mr. McGovern presented the Association's president, Mr. Charles Keratsis with a Congressional letter of acknowledgement published in the Congressional Record of the Association's contributions to the pluralism and richness that makes up American society. Worcester Mayor Konstantina B. Lukes, similarly presented a letter honoring and thanking the association for its contribution to the community of Worcester. After the luncheon, Mr. George Tselos, Archivist at Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island, spoke of the intricacies of tracing family lineage, organizing, researching and preserving records of immigrants that arrived through Ellis Island from the 1880s to the 1920s when the port was closed to new immigration.

To describe the weekend's events in one word: phenomenal. It is incredibly impressive that a Benefit Association sponsored and organized an academic conference as part of its centennial celebration. Mr. Athanasios Athanasiadis, an immigrant from Tsamantas and a member of the St. George Society, had a few years ago suggested to the board for a centennial celebration. As his son said, he and others on the board, wanted to "do something different, something more than simply a dinner dance, something that truly commemorated and honored the early immigrants and their struggles." And so, the hard work began. Messrs. Charles Keratsis, Stavros Zoulas and Helen Pilitsis, the Board of Trustees Executive Committee, working tirelessly alongside Mr. Soteris Zoulas and Dr. Dimitri Konstadakopoulos (in England,) organized a three day commemoration and celebration of the original immigrants from Tsamantas and their descendants and their community's history. Mrs. Athanasiadis along with Mr. Nicholas Gatzios were in the background lending time and support for the event. And yet, one got the sense that the wives of these men also worked alongside of them in their efforts, and it is especially commendable on their part since not all of these women are of Greek descent. Mrs. Carole Keratsis was a tireless and gracious hostess making tired travelers feel at ease and in comfort, especially after a full day of an academic conference; Ms. Grace Ann Sahagian, and Mrs. Maryann Koullisis answered countless and tedious questions about Worcester from those of us outside of the area. Prior to these three days, the women served as unpaid secretaries to the husbands who were more than happy to be told and reminded of scheduled appointments, telephone calls and of emails to be checked and sent.

These immigrants' and their descendants' story is a fascinating story to tell and learn. Tsamantas, a village high on the mountains of Epirus, on the border with

Albania, has a fascinating history going back to the 13th century. The village with a population of approximately 1,800 in the 1940s, began depopulating soon after the Civil War, which was especially brutal in this region of the country. The out-migration which began in the early part of the 20th century, increased in the 1940s and 1950s, leading to the eventual depopulation of the village. There are currently no more than a few dozen people, mostly elderly, living in the village. The descendants of those who left the village decades earlier, now occasionally visit in the summer months, mostly around dekapentaugousto (August 15th) for the local celebrations of Panayia.

And yet, what I, the visitor, found most intriguing during this weekend, was the love, interest, fascination and loyalty that the children and grandchildren of the early immigrants out of Tsamantas still share for this tiny village of 50-60 elderly on the mountains of Epirus, just on the border with Albania. And they of course expressed this and honored their community's history with a three day commemorative symposium and gathering.

Those who are interested for more information on St. George Hellenic Benefit Society of Tsamantas, the village of Tsamantas as well as the weekend celebrations, can visit the web pages that were created for this event at www.100yearsinamerica.org . It is with the sincerest hope and wishes that other organizations throughout the country will follow in these footsteps and organize more such conferences for the numerous communities in the U.S. and regions of Greece.