

Peter Moskos Revises Greek-Americans Book

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NEW YORK – The aphorism, “To see where you are going, you must know where you came from,” applies to individuals and groups alike. Those interested in the future of the Greek-American community would do well to begin by reading the third edition of *Greek Americans – Struggle and Success*.

First published in 1980 by the late Charles C. Moskos, the third edition of the book that traces the community's experience from 1900 to today features substantial revisions and new material by his son, Peter C. Moskos.

The former worked on the first edition in the late 1970s while teaching a popular class on Greek America at Northwestern University, and the second edition was rushed to print in time for the 1988 presidential election and the Michael Dukakis phenomenon.

When father first talked to son about doing a third edition together – Peter followed Charles' footsteps into sociology despite never feeling pressure to do so – the latter was not interested, but as his academic career progressed, his interest grew.

While Peter feared the book would die with his father, who passed away in 2008, big pushes came from the publisher and a family friend but he was also motivated by the fact that he had much more information than his father at his disposal, including more census data and English translations of Greek newspapers going back to 1901.

He began in earnest in Fall of 2011 while he was on a writers retreat on the Island of Hydra with his wife, Zora O'Neill, who writes travel books.

“We had a beautiful view. We'd write in the day and trundle down the path to one of the two open tavernas at night,” he said.

Among the things he discovered was that Greeks were innovators from the start. Non-Greek restaurateurs who didn't want to be “slaves to the electric company” were angry at Greeks for using neon signs.

Moskos the elder thought Greek immigrants also succeeded because even under Ottoman rule peasants had commercial experience – they went to market to sell their crops – while groups like the Irish were serfs. Most could also read, write and do arithmetic, which also fueled their commitment to education.

Peter added information about the Greeks who settled in the Western United States and their horrific experiences in the miners camps, where they were virtual slaves – “It is a movie that is waiting to be made,” he said.

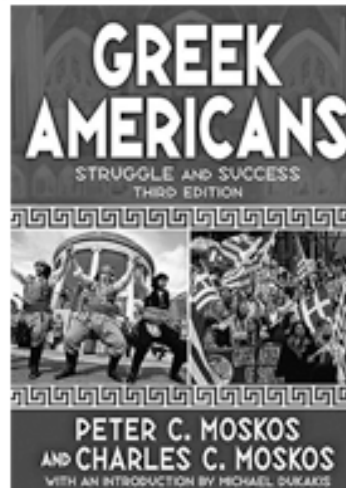
INTERMARRIAGE ADDS TO OUR NUMBERS

The two big events of the past two decades were Dukakis' presidential campaign and My Big Fat Greek Wedding. Despite Dukakis' loss – Peter appreciates the introduction he wrote for the new edition – the campaign fostered the “normalization of Greeks in America.”

Since then, people claiming Greek ancestry in the U.S. census “has skyrocketed – a 30 percent increase. Where are these people coming from? We are not having kids; they are not coming from Greece. I think the answer is intermarriage,” he wondered.

What was supposed to be the death of the community is actually a benefit, he said, and the opportunities it offers should be examined.

“My mother is German born. No member of my family ever had a Greek passport. By any definition I am more German than Greek, but I don't feel it. Greek is a trump identity.”



Peter Moskos, who now Assistant professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and the CUNY Graduate Center in the Department of Sociology.

And the census misses many who are Greeks by choice, through marriage, like his mother, who speaks better Greek than his father, and philhellenes.

Peter's path is paradigmatic of the younger generation.

He did not go to Greek school and Church did not make an impression on him, so growing up he did not feel a strong Greek identity – he later realized he had more ingrained in him than he knew at the time. “My father was very proud of his Greekness.”

But when he got to Princeton University he took Greek classes with “a wonderful professor, Richard Burgi – the most Greek man in the world though he had no Greek blood in him.”

“I took a year off from Princeton and got some money to go to Greece and lived in Athens and loved it and took more language classes.”

“Getting kids to Greece is absolutely essential, and Israel has done that very successfully...but it costs money,” he said, and noted it's important to support college Greek studies programs and that the Ionian Village should be expanded.

As for getting today's children to study the language, it's a challenge he said, noting “You have

to have a pull. I only learned Greek because I liked Greece.”

In forecasting the future, he said three elements must be examined: language, church, and ties to the old country, and all three of those are in decline in America.

But culture has not been looked at enough. “It may be a weaker tie, because it is more optional, but that doesn't make it any less real.”

His wife believes the best thing to do is to expand the Greek Festivals, “because that introduces so many Americans – and Greeks – to Greece.”

Thus, there has been both a broadening and a shallowing of Greek identity, but it is counterproductive for purists to say they are not real Greeks.

He insists it's better to say “that's what Greek-Americans are...The purist ideology of what it means to be Greek-American has to change because they are going to lose. If you demand that they all go to church and speak Greek, and visit Greece every summer, it's not going to happen.”

He warned against setting the sights too high because “we need that base of people so say ‘I'm Greek-American.’”