

Historical Note

The Greek Community in Mount Victoria

Stathy Booleris:

“My forefathers date back to about 1900. They were the ones who came here in 1900 and laid the foundation stones for the second wave who came in 1950. The reason the Greeks came out here in the 1900s was obvious. In Europe, especially in the Balkans, life was extremely difficult. There was a lot of poverty, a lot of persecution – you only have to realise that Greece was 70 years into so-called new statehood as a country because they had been ruled by the Turks, under the Ottoman empire. So a lot of Greek migration took place around the late 1800’s. The ones who came to NZ didn’t even know where they were coming most of the time - some knew of Australia and often only by chance came to NZ.

When they arrived, the early Greeks had difficulty getting work. Firstly, they didn’t speak the language. A lot of them tried to get work wherever they could. There were Greeks, of course, who went to the gold rush down in the South Island. They came up to Wellington and a few started their own businesses because it was hard to work for someone because of the language difficulty. And there was a reluctance to take on these new settlers who looked different - were different - Greece is where East meets West, as they say. So they set up their own businesses and what easier business than the food business. When they established eating places in Courtenay Place they had to live somewhere and where else would they live – “a handy spot”, as an elderly relation of mine said. A lot lived in Moir Street, Home Street. Around the 1920s they were able to afford to buy their own homes. Where did they buy them? Mt Victoria. Why? Because it was handy to work. Then there were waves as they brought out their relations from Greece. And where would they rent? In Mt Victoria. So it was a natural progression that Mount Victoria became ‘Greeksville’ as I used to say as a youngster.

Then, of course, we had no church here. The first Greek Church was established down in Lloyd St on land donated by a Mr John Kathisteles, who was a Greek Cypriot. It was just after the war and they got some barracks, which were placed there and modified to resemble a church (because it didn’t have a dome as our present church has). Prior to that, if a Greek died, they had an Anglican priest who used to conduct the funerals in English but he knew a little bit of Greek which he put in his Anglican service.

Life for the Greek migrant prior to 1950 was very tough – they felt quite lonely, there was a nostalgia. They all thought, prior to the war, that they would go back to Greece. They came out here with the intention of working, earning enough money and going back to Greece. But when the war occurred, of course things changed. Then there was the second wave when they realised there was no way they could ever go back to Greece. Greece just after the war was in the grip of a bitter civil war and they just wanted to leave the country and come and settle in NZ for example.

The migrants who came out in the 1920’s especially, wanted to be part of the English speaking community. Some of the early names I feel I must mention –Galaty(?) who came out to New Zealand in about 1895; another name – Karantze - they came out here around 1895; the Gerondis family, who established the Zelandia Oyster Bar in Courtenay Place between Blair and Allen Street. I do admire these people – they had to set up businesses to adapt to a rather formal anglo-saxon way of dining. People would go nicely dressed to these restaurants. These people set up quite a few well-known restaurants. There was the Garland family who had Garland’s restaurant in Manners Street and, prior to that, Featherston Street. In later years – towards the ‘40’s - the Green Parrot appeared. And the Green Parrot has actually been owned by one Greek family since about 1970. Prior to that some Greek Cypriots owned it, from about 1950. And, of course, there were numerous fish and chip shops in Courtenay Place, Dixon Street.

These people, probably even more than the community of the ‘50’s, or the second wave as I’ll call it, tried to assimilate at a time when it was difficult to assimilate, because they looked different – their religion was totally different And they are a part of our Greek history here in New Zealand that I am really proud of because they achieved a lot. For example, on Mt Victoria, in the mid-forties during the war, there were the Ionian Flats in Brougham St built by a Greek who migrated here in the 1920’s. So in Mt Victoria these Greeks were prepared to make their stamp on the suburb. They obviously loved Mt Victoria - the sun, for example. That reminded them of the Mediterranean – they liked plenty of sun.”