**Our “Australian Story” – the migration of Kastellorizians to Australia**

The Kastellorizian Association of Victoria, which was originally known as the Kastellorizian Brotherhood, first met in 1925 at the Omonia Cafe in Lonsdale Street, Melbourne. The Melbourne of 1925 was a very different place to present day. In the 1920’s the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture reigned supreme, racism was rampant and discrimination abounded, and so of necessity, the Kastellorizian Brotherhood was not merely a social club.

Today, multiculturalism provides new arrivals with services such as interpreting, ethnic radio and SBS television, to help them adjust to their new homeland. However, in the 1920’s it was a ‘sink or swim’ attitude. Therefore, the Brotherhood provided a vital refuge in a harsh world. It also served many practical purposes such as finding accommodation and employment, but above all, it provided the security and bonding which was necessary when settling in a new land.

The Club’s first Annual General Meeting was held in the humble abode of the Salvation Army Hall at 35 Little Bourke Street, Melbourne. It later moved to Lonsdale Street, then to 185 Russell Street before moving to its present location at 250 Dorcas Street, South Melbourne.

The founding fathers who were present at this first meeting included: Spero Fermanis, Con Amonis, Nicholas Vayanouthis, Stavros T. Koufos (Secretary), John Hatziyanakis (Vice-President) with Michael Economides (Conos) becoming the first President.

The Club was well supported by the Kastellorizian men of Melbourne, many of whom had already travelled to the far-flung corners of the Australian continent in search of work. Some had sweated at the Vestey Meatworks in Darwin while others had laboured in the deserts to build train tracks that eventually became the major connection and communication lines for modern Australia.

Life had been tough for these men, particularly for those who had done back-breaking work on the sugar cane plantations of Northern Queensland and for those who had endured the unhealthy and hazardous conditions in the Port Pirie lead smelters of South Australia.

Others came from Kalgoorlie where they had been ousted in the racial riots during the First World War; nevertheless, each and every one of them persevered so they could make a go of life in their new land, before eventually migrating to Melbourne to lay down more permanent roots.

Pressure to find acceptance, and work, had actually forced many to Anglicise their names, and so you found Greeks sporting such surnames as Coates, Gillard, Symons and Peters.

After settling in Melbourne many were able to exploit the entrepreneurial traits that they had inherited from their ancestors, by setting up their own retail businesses, whether they were in shops, markets stalls or roadside barrows.

Moreover, Kastellorizian Cafe owners, Greengrocers and Fishmongers made their presence felt in the inner suburbs of Melbourne, such as Collingwood, Carlton, Prahran and Port Melbourne.

For many, a considerable portion of their hard-earned savings went back to Kastellorizo, not only for support but as a ticket to the much longed family reunion that would one day occur. In the meantime, their lives had become more secure and established and the Club became like a second family for them. It was, no doubt, a place where many marriages were arranged. In fact, it possibly led to a rapid increase in the immigration of young Kastellorizian women.

Despite the fact that many families ran businesses entailing long and arduous hours of work, one day was also set aside on the calendar – picnic day! Such an occasion involved a trip to what was then regarded as country locations, such as Mt Evelyn, Warrandyte and Queenscliffe. Since not everyone owned a car, buses were always hired to transport people. Accordingly, the journey itself was inevitably a great bonding experience, and at the picnic itself the Club organised activities such as running competitions and presentations. These picnics were held annually and were always occasions of great anticipation and enjoyment for young and old.

Philanthropy was also important to the Brotherhood. It was always prepared t help members who had fallen on hard times, and on a large scale, it became nationally involved through playing its part in the war effort. This was evidenced by the sight of Kastellorizian boys and girls, sometimes in national costume, collecting donations in the city streets as the AIF boys went off to war. Members of the Kastellorizian Club have continued this tradition of philanthropy by supporting such bodies as Pronia Home for the Elderly and the Australian Greek Welfare Society.

At this time the women, although not on centre stage, played a vital part in the wings. It was chiefly due to the womenfolk that the next generation of Kastellorizians grew up with a sense of ‘Greekness’. They kept the culture intact through the food that they prepared and the traditions that they preserved, particularly through the weddings, christenings and ‘name-days’.

The second generation of Kastellorizian women, who were more privileged in terms of time, money and education, were able to bond together to form the Kastellorizian Ladies Society in 1961. This was an important milestone, as the spread to the suburbs might well have dissipated the strong community ties. Instead, the Kastellorizian Ladies Society strengthened them.

The inaugural committee, led by Marika Bisas as President, Eva Peters as Vice-President, Maria Adgemis as Treasurer and Tess Hondros as Secretary, was responsible for a busy social calendar which incorporated both Greek celebrations and popular features of Australian culture at the time such as progressive dinners, Halloween parties, Melbourne Cup Nights, New Year’s Balls and Dinner Dances. This combined well with the sporting activities that had gradually been adopted by the Kastellorizian Club over the years. Australian born Kastellorizians fielded many teams in those Australian sports that they had grown up playing, like Australian Rules football and Cricket, whilst the women fielded an international rules basketball club.

It is interesting to compare what you would have observed when walking into the Castellorizian Brotherhood in 1925 and what you now observe when entering the Kastellorizian Club in 2005.

In 1925 the Brotherhood was patronised by men speaking in their mother tongue, playing cards and reminiscing about an island that they thought they would probably never see again. They were learning to cope with prejudice and intolerance in their new land, their newspaper was written in Greek and its contents covered affairs in both Australia and the old country.

However, in 2005 the women are involved in the Club as much as men. English is the dominant language, although the odd Greek phrase still emerges when the occasion demands. Activities are far more varied than simply a game of cards, and members no longer discuss the problems of coping with racial prejudice. In fact, through marriage and close friendships some Australians have become adopted Kastellorizians. Certainly there is much talk of the island, but the reminiscing now centres on past holiday activities and future plans for more.

As such, Kastellorizo is no longer an island that has been impoverished by the ravages of war but a glamorous holiday destination where Kastellorizians from all over the world come to bond and renew family ties. In other words, the Kastellorizian Club of Victoria has morphed into a meeting place for the Kastellorizian Diaspora. Its medium of communication is not only a newsletter, now written in English, but also Email, along with a new website that has already brought us in touch with Kastellorizians in far-flung destinations.

The fact that the Club has survived so strongly for over eighty years is a testament not only to the loyalty of its people and their pride of place, but above all to their flexibility in being able to adapt and adjust to a changing environment.

These traits are the very essence of being Kastellorizian. This has been reflected throughout our history, both in how the Kastellorizians coped with the harshness of their island’s physical terrain and how they survived the frequent invasions which best their homeland.

Throughout it all, they did not capitulate and remained proud Kastellorizians. Such is the spirit of the Club. Today it incorporates the best of both worlds, not only reminding members of their proud heritage and family ties, but also engaging fully with the evolving new possibilities of the 21st Century.