

[Greek Restaurants]

PERSONAL LIFE HISTORY

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Greek Restaurateur

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WHY SO MANY GREEK RESTAURANTS? C9 - N.C. - Box 2

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Pete has a great little restaurant. He buys his steaks from a Chicago packer specializing in "top choice" ribs and loins. He uses a fine blend of coffee and serves real cream with his coffee. Cold storage eggs and [?] butter never enter into his cuisine. His fixtures are modern; his kitchen a model of orderliness and efficiency. And Pete is forever busy. When he isn't waiting on tables, ringing up sales or inquiring after the pleasure and comfort of patrons, he is filling up sugar bowls and salts and peppers, packing his butter tray, scalding out the coffee urns, replenishing his ice cubes, folding napkins, polishing glasses, mopping up, putting things generally to rights. I had to get his story in broken installments.

Drawing himself a cup of coffee during a morning's lull he dropped down beside me at the lunch counter.

"Are you always busy like this?" I asked him.

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“Always,” he replied; “there is always something to do in a dining room if you try to run a first class place and hold customers. I learned that long ago on an ocean liner and I have never forgotten it.

“I was dining room helper on this liner. One day after lunch, when all the dishes had been taken back to the kitchen, the table cloths changed and the sideboard put in order, I sat down and opened up a magazine.

“The head steward came along and asked me what I meant by sitting down with a magazine?

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“I told him I thought I was through with my work until the next meal time.

“He said to me, 'Your work is never done in a dining room as long as you keep your eyes open.'

“Always something to do as long as you keep your eyes open! It is true. I never forget that.”

In a succession of such interviews I pieced together this personal life history of a typical Greek-American restaurateur, such a fellow as one will find in almost any small town or city in America. His story, interspersed with more or less of his comment on life and its livens, takes up like this:

“My family name is Petrakis; everybody calls me Pete for short. When I got my naturalization papers in 1925 I gave Pete as my first name.

“I was born in the village of Dervenion near the ancient Greek City of Corinth. Dervenion was a rural village where the people lived by agriculture and fishing. My people, like most villagers, grow fruits and vegetables and raised flax from which they spun and wove their

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own linen and made the cloth, on hand looms, from which most of our clothing was made. We made wine and olive oil and cured raisins, much of which we sold for cash. Our food was simple; bread and cheese, fruits and vegetables, with occasional meat or fish meals.

“When I was 12 years old I went to Piracus, the seaport town of Athens, to live with an uncle. He was a pharmacist and I worked in his drug store. And it was a drug store; no soda fountain, no cigar counter, no confectioneries, no novelties.

“At Piracus ships came from all parts of the world. A Greek boy with lots of curiosity about the world of which he had learned much in school could hardly escape the call of the sea at Piracus. When I was 14 years old I shipped on a British steamer bound for Australia.

“For six years I roamed the seven seas on everything from tramp freighters to ocean liners. I crossed the Atlantic 17 times, went twice around Cape Horn, crossed the Pacific three times, visited first and last [28?] countries. I worked as a coal passer, fireman, deck-hand and dining room helper.

“Once I almost lost my life. It was on a British steamer, loaded with munitions, bound from New York to Havre in October 1917. We were torpedoed by a German submarine without warning, about four o'clock one morning, about halfway [the?] Atlantic Ocean. There were 52 men on board. All turned into the water, many without other than the clothes they slept in. No time to lower a life boat or find a life preserver. By clinging to pieces of timber that floated up from the sinking ship 17 of us managed to survive and were rescued by an American destroyer after being in the water for 49 hours. We were nearly frozen and dead from the waist up. We 4 had been in the chilly ocean more than two days without food or water. They had to revive us slowly, so nearly frozen were we. One of our men died after being taken from the water.

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“I made good money in my years at sea. Wages were usually good and the tips were good when I got into the dining saloons. On a trip from Cape Town or Singapore to Liverpool the tips would sometimes amount to 20 pounds, or about \$100 in American money.

“But money wasn't all I got out of my sea-going; it was an education for me, seeing new lands and meeting strange people, taking in their customs, their manners and their ways of living. My mathematics was helped too, learning the rates of exchange and how to figure in the currency of the many countries I visited.

“And, believe me, a fellow traveling all around the world has a lot to learn. I had to learn that P.M. in Greece means one thing, and in England the opposite thing. I got shore leave one day from my ship at Liverpool. I inquired as to when the ship was to sail so I wouldn't over stay my leave. I was told the ship sailed at 6 P. M. Now in my country P. M. means Before Noon; but in England it means After Noon. I got back to my ship's dock about midnight to find that the ship had sailed six hours earlier. And there I was stranded in Liverpool without money or a change of clothing. But I found another Greek fellow who took me to the Greek Consular 5 agent who helped me out and got another berth for me.

“What was the greatest thing I learned in all my travels? Well, maybe, it was that people are just people wherever you find them; black men, yellow men, brown men, white men — all just human. All eat, sleep, love women, love babies, like their fun and treat you right if you treat them right. I have never found but one race of people I don't like, and I don't dislike all of them. They are the people who think they are better than everyone else; they push, they shove, they sneer, they want more for their money than anybody else. If I had to depend on their trade I would close up my business.

“How I came to locate in America was like this. I was a member of the International Seaman's Union. The union called a strike on my ship which docked at Norfolk in 1921. While we were still on strike the ship got another crew and sailed. I was stranded in Norfolk.

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"I couldn't get another berth right away but I had a little money; \$944 in fact. I was 25 days out of work and had spent \$25 when I got a job driving a bread wagon for a Greek bakery. I had learned to speak a little English. I drove that bread wagon for six years. I had only 15 restaurants on my route when I started. When I left I had 111 restaurants on my route and was making \$175 a month.

"In those days, making good money, I tried to live like a big shot; I owned a big car, gambled, played the 6 ponies, thought nothing of taking a day off to see a prize fight. But I found it didn't pay, that I'd never got ahead that way. I was making the mistake that most people in this country make — spending more than I could make.

"For three years I attended an Americanization night school in Norfolk, learning to speak English. The principal of the school told me I should take out citizenship papers. I was afraid to do this, because I had entered the country illegally. But the principal of the school, a mighty fine woman, told me what I should do to get my papers and helped me to make up my record.

"I came to North Carolina in 1932 to help another Greek that I had struck up a friendship with in Norfolk. I came to help him for two weeks in his restaurant and stayed with him six years. I worked hard, saved my money, made friends and went into the restaurant business with a partner in 1936. My partner knows the kitchen end; I know the dining room end; we have been very successful. People have been very kind to me."

"Tell me," I asked: "Why do so many Greek people come to America and go into the restaurant business?"

"As simple as hot cakes," he replied. "A Greek comes to America; he can speak little English; he doesn't feel himself above any kind of work. In looking about for a job he finds dish washers in demand. He gets a job in a hotel or restaurant kitchen washing dishes. He

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learns to cook. He gets five or six hundred dollars 7 ahead and opens a little restaurant of his own.

“We are used to work, used to long hours, we are a sober people, our eyes are bright, we don't always waste money. The Ahepa tells us that no member of its society has ever died in the electric chair or served a life term in prison.”

“And what is the Ahepa?” I asked.

“The Ahepa is the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association. It aids American citizens of Hellenic descent to become better Americans. The Ahepa strives to bring the best in Hellenism to the solution of the problems of American. It teaches loyalty. It tries to keep our people from being a Relief problem, it is building homes for the aged and orphans in Florida; it maintains a fine tuberculosis sanitarium in New Mexico and provides \$200 for every family of a deceased member. It's a fine order; it keeps us Greek Americans on our toes.

“I crossed the Atlantic my last time in 1937; I went back to visit my old home and my people for the first time in 21 years. Everything had changed, except the people.

“When I left home as a small boy we had no automobiles, no electric lights, no telephones, no rouge, no lipsticks. All this had changed; automobiles, busses, trucks, electric lights everywhere. The telephone and telegraph had come to our village. The girls were using 8 rouge and lipsticks, just as in America.

“But the greatest change had come in our government. Our country was ruled by rich men when I was a boy. In our village, for instance, five or six rich men living in their palaces took almost everything the people made. The people were always in debt to them. They owned the stores and we had to buy from them at their own prices. When we sold our olive oil, our wine, our raisins, our fruits and our vegetables the rich men got together and fixed

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the prices they should pay us. We were always in debt to them. They charged high rates of interest.

“All this has changed. The government now lends money to the little man on the farm. The drachma has been devalued. Five drachmas were worth a dollar in American money when I left home. When I went back a dollar would buy 108 or 112 drachmas. And the government had said to the rich men that they must accept the drachma at its old value in payments on debts, and give the debtor 12 years to pay. I saw some of these big men, living in palaces, going to work same as little men. The little man is no longer bound to the rich man. He doesn't have to sell his fruits and vegetables, his wine and olive oil, to a few rich men who fix prices; motor trucks take his produce to the markets in Athens.

“Another thing, I found Greeks and Turks who were once always at war with one another, now living on terms of peace and good neighbors.

“Many wise changes have been made by our new government.

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Any boy out of high school could go to college and study to be a lawyer, a doctor, a teacher or an engineer. Result was too many doctors, too many lawyers, too many teachers, too many engineers. Not all of them could make a living; some of them became cooks.

“Now the government fixes the quotas, how many lawyers, how many doctors, how many teachers, how many engineers the colleges may turn out. Only the students who make the highest marks are selected to fill the quotas. Wouldn't that be a good thing for America to copy? Wouldn't we have fewer crooked lawyers, fewer crooked doctors and fewer teachers and engineers of what you call mediocre ability?”

“Do you plan to go back to the old country to spend your last years?” I asked.

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“No; I do not think I shall go back; I am used to America and American ways now; and it is so much easier to make a living in America. A Greek can make enough in one week over here to live a month on. One does well in the old country to make enough in a month to live] half as well for a week as he could live in America.

“America is a land of easy money. There is more money in America and, strange to say, more suffering than in the old countries. The trouble in America is easy credit. It is so easy for a fellow making \$25 a week to try to live like a fellow making a hundred dollars a week. You can buy a suite of furniture for a 10 dollar down and a dollar a week; a radio or a suit of clothes the same way. You can buy an automobile on time, trading in your old car as down payment. Credit is too easy.

“This restaurant you see here represents an investment of \$10,000; me and my partner had only a thousand apiece to put in it to start. We would have had to put in \$5,000 to start a \$10,000 business in the old country. Yes, this America is a great country.

“No! I don't think I shall ever go back to the old country except for a visit. It has nothing much to offer me since I became accustomed to the American way of life.

“Still, my old country has its good points. If we Greeks are a law-abiding people it is because we have lived all our lives under strict laws. Our laws are not loose as in America. Our towns and villages don't make their own laws; all laws are Federal laws; all our judges are Federal judges; even the policemen are Federal employees. A federal judge tries you for even a petty misdemeanor. And to keep our judges free from personal bias and favoritism, they shift the judges from province to province, never letting a judge stay in one town long enough to form friendships that might warp his judgment. The same way with policemen; they are not kept long in any one place.

“But we Greeks are in some ways a peculiar people.

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If any person offends or insults us, or wrongs us in anyway, we never have anything more to do with him. He may beg our pardon a thousand times, and we may forgive him; but we never have anything to do with him any more, for the man who insults you, abuses you or lies to you is by nature an ignorant or mean person that you can not afford to trust or respect. We don't take any more chances with an ignorant or evil fellow when we get — what you call it — his number.”