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Q & A with military historian Peter Giakoumis

Written by Dimitris Polymenopoulos



Peter Giakoumis



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Peter Giakoumis is a Greek-American military Historian with a master's of arts degree in Political Science. He is a former Captain in the New York State Guard-Army Division, a 20-year Federal employee and a living history practitioner.

You recently visited Chicago. What brought you to the Windy City?

Actually, I visited with my significant other, Janet. She was a presenter at the National Planning Conference, hosted by the American Planning Association, given at the Magnificent Mile, here in Chicago. Her interests in engineering and architecture led us to the architecture book store across the street from the Art Institute of Chicago. There, I found two books: "The Greeks in Chicago", and "Greektown Chicago". A great find, by the way, falling right in line with my project, along with my very special visit to "Jane Adam's Hull House".

What about that project, how would you characterize what you've been developing?

Well, one day about 6 months, ago in Corona, NY, I found myself dressed in a 1912 military uniform standing in front

of an audience. And what an audience! There was Rev. Fr. George Anastasiou, Mr. Evangelos Kyriakopoulos, Consul of Greece, Ms. Koula Sophianou; ConsulGeneral of Cyprus, and Captain Nikolaos Armpouniotis, Greek Military Attaché to the United Nations. This, by the way, is not just name dropping. After all, their attendance made the occasion very special indeed. But, on a personal level, in that audience, I could see my father and my son. That's three generations of Greeks, right there! So, this, is the realization of a dream: to underline and dramatize the contributions of my Fathers generation, and those Greeks before him, and to have my son, his generation, hear, see, and partake of that legacy - a Greek legacy, that has been put aside, buried as mere historical footnotes and nothing more.

Can you be more specific about this Legacy?

Well, I've researched and started to present my work on the Greek American Immigrants and their role in the Balkan Wars of 1912-13. Thousands left America and fought, many died, and millions of dollars was gifted to the homeland to help with everything from transportation tickets and to purchasing Naval warships, gun batteries, and some of the first planes ever used successfully in combat reconnaissance. Many of those same men returned to America and became very successful in their adopted country after the war. Those heroes represented an ideal blend of proud American and patriotic Greek. And, since I am a product of immigrants, I wanted to build a bridge to the past and open a window to peer into the lives and stories of these brave men. I am happy to say I have done just that. I discovered many unique and fascinating stories, and, at the end of my presentation, many have asked me to write a book. And, now, I certainly will.

Has this brought you deeper into the present day Greek community?

Absolutely, one of the great delights about this project is meeting all the fascinating people in the international Greek community, who have been very helpful in handing over so many insights, knowledge and enthusiasm. They have allowed me to enter their own personal worlds and that is such an energizing and motivating factor in this whole endeavor.

For instance, I met the film director Maria Iliou, her new movie is called "Smyrna: the destruction of a cosmopolitan City [1900-1922], presented at the Quad Cinema in Manhattan - which I got to see through the recommendation of the co-founder of the Greek Museum of New York, Ms. Kathyren Buloukos, whose collection of Greek historical memorabilia should be given its due notice. This film, you've just have to see it, it's her 'Guernica', powerful and stunning! And, not just for Greeks, but for anyone that wishes to have an extraordinary experience in the cinema.

Did you get to meet her personally?

Yes, and, she, herself, was impressive, a sophisticated internationalist. Personally, knowing the trials and tribulations of any creative act, I wonder how one keeps the passion intact from genesis to first screening, amid the whole obstacle course that is movie making? How do you keep the passion alive? This is the question that always comes to mind when meeting such creative artists. I love to ask: how did you do this? What was the motivation?

And talking of motivation, there is Professor Christopher Tripoulas at St. John's University. This is a man who has catalyzed the whole project with his own personal enthusiasm and energy. Every artist should have a guiding hand, and his positive and helpful attention has been so very valuable in keeping the passion alive.

Speaking about nurturing passion, I visited the National Hellenic Museum in Chicago. Talk about inspiring! It's become, this museum, the focal point of the Greek American experience, just walking the halls brings alive the past, making it real. I'd love, one day, to give a presentation there! What a dream come true, to be Greek and to be under

those hallowed halls, giving my presentation, can you imagine the thrill!

Regarding the project, you wish to create a 3D, 360 degree environment, wherein people actually walk into a space that recreates the time.

Yes, exactly! I'll go to whatever lengths possible. The music, posters, pictures, and even those wonderful miniature figures of soldiers of the era, are done by this wonderful artisan, Argyris Argyriou. They are marvelous! Small works of art that help give the feel of what was worn by the men of that time, going off to this war.

Why 1912?

It's a gateway to the past, even as it prefigured the future. This is a war before the Great Wars, the mechanical constructs of the coming corporate societies. This is when men could still search for adventure and fight for causes that could be understood on a personal level. It looks to the past and carries the seeds towards the great holocausts to come.

Is there a greater personal level to this?

You bet, and that's the great Holy Grail. Indeed, the question: why 1912, this war, this time in Greek history? As, yet, I don't know. But, definitely, it's tied to identity.

You mean your identity as a Greek?

Yes, and beyond. Remember, after all, that the great mad, bad boy, Lord Byron, had died in Greece, bringing the implacable imprimatur of the Romantic Movement and placing it squarely behind the creation of the first modern nation state: Greece. One can see, therefore, Political freedom evolving hand in hand with the freedom of the Psyche, a powerful ongoing Greek legacy. Far beyond just politics, therefore, Classical Greece gave us all the tropes and archetypes by which we define consciousness itself. And, in terms of Modern and Post Modern Greece: Nietzsche, Freud, Jung, they have all come to the great well that is Greece with its rich creative legacy. Greece, therefore, is the well spring, the heart and soul of Western Europe.

So, obviously, there is more here than just a specific time and place. After all, why did these men, in 1912, come to fight, traveling across the seas, leaving both hearth and home? Why did Byron die in the swamps of Missolonghi, refusing to leave till "the Cause" had been, finally, achieved? The siren call that is Greece is primal, it's universal, it speaks to the very soul of Western Man. And, I want to go there: this is my gateway, the key to that soul.