

Coming Home to Tsamantas

by Soterios C. Zoulas

For more than 35 years ago, I have not been back to my ancestral village in the high mountains of Northern Greece in the province of Epirus, next to the Albanian border. It is home of my parents and siblings. I was called the American child, the youngest, born in the USA, and spoiled by that reality as my brother and sister remained me to this day.

I was there once with my mother when I was ten. I have vivid memories of poverty and the ravages of war, of seeing the butchering of a lamb by a small river bed. I shared the pride and excitement of a neighbor who installed a small electric motor to power a lonely light bulb in his home. Memories of a village that had not change much since it was a distant outpost of the Ottoman Empire.

I suppose my siblings were right. I was spoiled. Living in this village for several months seemed at the time as some form of penance for my life in the US where I could have milk shakes and hamburgers and read comic books at father's luncheonette.

I am retuning to village this time as a different person – older, grayer, successful and more knowledgeable about myself and my place in the world. But the reason I am returning I owe to the village and its pull to all those who left. The legacy of my father's cousin has drawn me back to the village.

Steve Bellos was a Greek bachelor restaurant short order cook like Garrison Keillor's Norwegian bachelor farmer on Prairie Home Companion. Born in Tsamantas. the poverty and lack of opportunity of his hometown, forced him to immigrate to the United States in 1939. He worked in many of Worcester's Greek restaurants including my father's prior to and after World War II. He served in the war as an American GI. There is a photo of Bellos in his Army uniform holding a baby in his arm. The baby is me.

After he retired from the restaurant business, he was involved with the St. Spyrydon Greek Orthodox Church and the St. George's Society of Tsamantas. He never married. He lived sparingly in a rooming house in Worcester without a phone or a car. He walked to church every Sunday to attend services. He also walked to the Worcester Public

Library to read the financial newspapers and magazines like the Wall Street Journal, Barron's, Business Week and Fortune. When he died in 1999 he left an estate of \$2 million. Besides leaving some funds for nieces and nephews here and in Germany, he left the bulk of his estate to St. Spyridon's Church , the village of Tsamantas and St. George's Society.

Last summer I attended an academic conference in the UK. During the trip I met an academic from University of West of England in Bristol, UK whose parents were also from the village of Tsamantas. His academic area of interest is in economic development in cross border communities. I have an interest in intercultural communications. We had dinner in London at a Greek restaurant and discussed plans for a conference on those topics in the village.

The village of Tsamantas in Epirus, north-western Greece, which borders Albania, has remained poor for most of its history. Over the centuries, its inhabitants have migrated to other parts of Greece and other parts of the world including the United States, Germany, and Australia seeking a better life. The end of World War II and the ensuing Civil War brought about considerable economic, social and demographic change that led to severe depopulation and stagnation, not only to the border communities but also the entire region of Epirus. The collapse of the Communist regime in Albania in the early 1990s, which led to the opening of the Greek-Albanian border, resulted in mass illegal immigration of Albanians to Greece, and the beginning of the economic and social transformation of both countries' borderland communities.

When I returned, I contacted St. George Society about help to fund the conference. My father was one of the founders of the Society in 1907 and my brother today is the treasurer of the organization. With Dr. Konstadakopoulos' assistance, I made a presentation to the Society about the conference and the need for financial assistance. The Society agreed to fund the conference and asked me to be their official representative to the conference. In addition, Eastern Nazarene College, where I chair the communications department has also supported my attendance at the conference.

The workshop will be held September 15-16, 2005 in Tsamantas, Epirus, Greece. It is called *Common European Heritage: Museums, Borders, Intercultural Understanding and Increasing Communication Between Border Communities*. The workshop will take place in the grounds of the Folklore Museum of Tsamantas. The purpose of the

workshop is to “facilitate dialogue and understanding around specific cultural aspects of economic regeneration policies for border areas, within a broader social, economic, political and cultural context.”

I am returning to a village that has changed as I have changed and I am looking forward to see if I can find ways that to help my ancestral village with jobs and understanding. In the meantime, maybe I can also find part of myself there.

Soterios C. Zoulas is associate professor and chair of the Communication Arts department at Eastern Nazarene College in Quincy, MA. He also provides communication consultation to education organizations and other nonprofits.