The Life and Legacy of Athena Malapanis Theokas

Emily Webster

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______________________________
Carey Martin, Ph.D.
Thesis Chair

______________________________
Amy Bonebright, M.A.
Committee Member

______________________________
Chad Magnuson, Ph.D.
Committee Member

______________________________
Marilyn Gadomski, Ph.D.
Assistant Honors Director

______________________________
Date
Abstract

The life of Athena Malapanis Theokas provides insight into the world of Greek immigrants in America during the early 1900s. Her own recollections and her family’s memories of her trip to America, her jobs in mills, the Greek community and her family’s struggle during the Depression are described, not simply as a story of one woman overcoming challenges. It is a legacy for realizing that the world of today would not be the same had it not been for those who worked tirelessly to ensure their children had something in their bellies at night. It is a story of how one woman changed the course of history for her family.
The Life and Legacy of Athena Malapanis Theokas

Entering the house on Butterfield Street in Lowell, Mass., the distinct smell of anise entertained the children’s sense of smell before their eyes could even adjust to the lighting. With that one smell, they knew what awaited them in the kitchen.

The smell of koulourakia was not an uncommon one upon entering this house. There was always a fresh plate of the Greek butter cookies ready and waiting for their arrival.

Another commonality of the house was the rocking chair placed beneath the lamp in the living room and, more impressively, the woman sitting in that chair. A hand-crocheted afghan always covered her lap, her hands folded on top until she would lift them toward her guests, receiving numerous embraces. Her skin was soft, but the creases and folds beneath her eyes and on her neck betrayed her age. The crown of curls that circled her head was pure white.

Just looking at her, one could see her beauty, but not until listening closely would one make the realization that her English sounded slightly broken and mixed with Greek mutterings. Her wrinkles might have shown her age, but they did not show the worries and hard work that brought them to rest upon her face. For Athena Malapanis Theokas, the life that bestowed upon her those wrinkles would leave a legacy described as incredible. Through the history and culture at the time of Athena’s life and through memories of Athena provided by her children, Athena’s life can be looked at in order to determine the legacy she left for her descendants.
Life in Greece

Born in July of 1902 to Dionisios and Sophia Malapanis, who lived as poor Greek farmers, Athena spent the first 14 years of her life assisting her parents on their farm in Poliani, Greece. This village nestled high in the Taygetos Mountains outside of Kalamata was all she knew. These mountains, one of the most ancient areas of the Peloponnese according to George Venizeleas’ website on the Taygetos Mountains, dominate this area of Greece. With the Taygetos looming in the window, Athena’s one-roomed house with a dirt floor and the occasional chicken running in and out was home. But Athena knew this was not all that life promised her. She had heard of the possibility of a better life in America, and a desire grew in her to experience that better life.

“She was the only girl in the family, the rest were brothers,” Athena (Tina) Krueger, namesake of her grandmother, recalled. “She was never educated. The life was really kinda an existence. Just trying to maintain (was) very difficult, because they had to grow their own food, and they had no … obviously there was no electricity, and so everything they had to do by hand, and the work was hard, and I think it was a very, very difficult life.”

Living in Poliani in the early 20th century consisted of farming and working the land on a daily basis. According to Peter Walcot in his book “Greek Peasants, Ancient and Modern: A Comparison of Social and Moral Values,” the Greek family worked as one economic unit, meaning that the men and
boys of the house were not the only ones who labored in the fields. The women and children worked with the men to keep the farm running.

Athena’s family was no exception. At a young age, Athena was taught what running a family consisted of: hard work and dedication, no matter what the cost.

Although unsure of exactly what Athena’s day-to-day life consisted of, Stavroula Theokas, Athena’s second child, had a general idea of her mother’s life in her homeland. Recalling memories of stories and days she spent with her mother, Stavroula’s brown eyes lit up with every detail, her long, colorful, clay-beaded necklace swinging back and forth against her red collar neck sweater with every excited movement.

“Way back then, they were farmers,” Stavroula said, remembering the things her mother had recalled of her life in Greece. “The children worked on the farmlands. (Athena) never went to school, whether it was to learn Greek or English.”

As Tina also recalled stories she had heard about Athena, she brought with her personal memories of Greece. With the chance to visit Poliani and see for herself what Athena’s home and village consisted of, Tina and her family traveled to Kalamata, taking the steep, mountainous road up through the Taygetos Mountains in order to set foot on the dirt road that was once home to her beloved grandmother.

As the Taygetos provided a rolling green backdrop for the visitors, a small church stood in the village where special celebrations and feasts took place.

“When they pulled over on the road—and I’m gonna get tears now—and we got out by that church, I just … it was just overwhelming,” Tina said, gently placing a finger at the corner of her eye. “The thought of, ‘Wow, this is where she came from, this far
away, up on this high mountaintop in the early 1900s when she had to walk down or take a donkey.’ Yeah, it was just overwhelming to me.”

Walking from the town square down a dirt road, Tina and her family saw the remains of Athena’s home. The collapsed walls revealed how small of a dwelling it was.

“This was it,” Tina said, her head shaking back and forth as she remembered the sight of the crumbling home. “It was a one-roomed house, and there were seven people that lived there, and they had no heat, no plumbing or anything. It was just a place where … I doubt they even cooked in this place.”

The remains show where Athena’s house stood.

The Chance to Come to America

Greeks first began to arrive in America during the 1820s, according to Bethany Pierce’s article on the website Immigration in America. One reason for immigration was a result of the Greek war of independence from the Ottoman Empire, which left Greece in significant debt.

As life in Greece for the farmer grew more difficult toward the end of the 1800s, the thought of traveling to America became more and more appealing for many people. According to Thomas Burgess, who wrote “Greeks in America: An Account of their Coming, Progress, Customs, Living, and Aspirations,” the main appeal of uprooting life and moving to a strange and new country was the promise of money. The reason was purely economic. Those remaining in Greece heard the stories and read the letters of the
ones who had braved the journey and were living in a place that Athena could only dream of seeing one day.

According to Stavroula, other young girls in Poliani began leaving the village with America as their destination. Once she realized the trip to America could become a reality, Athena could not push the idea out of her mind. And with that, she brought the idea up to her parents.

However, Stavroula said Athena’s dreams and courageous spirit were not the only factors involved in determining if this trip would turn into reality. Her parents could not afford the $58 ticket. With the truth of her family’s economic status weighing down upon her, Athena’s hopes for a life in America began to dwindle back to just dreams and desires. Until one sick young friend changed the course of Athena’s entire life during the year of 1916.

“Lo and behold, there was a young girl, a friend of hers who was ready to come to America,” Stavroula said, the fluid motion of her hands and arms talking with her words as she described this turn of events. “(Her friend) had her ticket, she had everything. She got sick. She could not come. So (Athena) took over her ticket. She finally convinced her parents, ‘Yes, I’m going.’ (Her friend) had the ticket, you know, they didn’t have any money to do it, so (Athena) took the ticket.”

With $12 in her pocket, Athena said goodbye to her family, to her life in Greece, and went down the mountain on the back of a donkey, unaware of the legacy she began with this one decision.

Because of Athena’s poor economic status, she was placed in steerage where the third-class passengers traveled. According to the Ellis Island website, those in steerage
lived in crowded and unsanitary conditions near the bottom of the ship. Many suffered from sickness as a result of the rough waters during the course of the trip.

According to Greg Krenzelok’s page on ancestry.com, the terrible steerage conditions brought about an investigation in the early 1900s by agents from the Immigration Commission who found revolting conditions that caused not only sickness, but death as well.

“All I can say is, you know … it was a rough trip, it was a very rough trip at the time,” Stavroula said, the softening in her voice betraying her thoughts of the suffering of her mother living in these conditions for 24 days.

Not only did unsanitary conditions and seasickness promote potential issues for those traveling across the ocean, but World War I also raged during this time, with German U-boats posing threats to safety. The History Channel website states that the U-boat was “the Germans’ most formidable naval weapon.” According to Feross Aboukhadijeh’s article on AP U.S. History Notes’ website, these German submarines did not fight fair when it came to destroying vessels.

“Americans reacted in disbelief when a German U-boat attacked the Lusitania, a British passenger liner that was traveling from New York to Liverpool, England,” the website states. “Nearly 1,200 persons were killed, including 128 Americans.”

Whether or not Athena or her parents knew of these frightening conditions, the threat was real and the danger imminent.

“Imagine going to another country, not knowing how to say hello,” Stavroula said. “I mean, (Athena) had a lot of nerve, she had a lot of nerve way back (then). But a lot of them were coming over, so it was the thing to do. And she did it.”
Her First Years

Upon her safe arrival to Ellis Island, Athena took a two-day train ride to Lowell, Mass., where she met her cousin, Jim Malapan.

Athena’s cousin welcomed her into his home where she lived with him and his wife. Knowing she could not simply live off of her cousin’s kindness, Athena secured a job working 12 hours a day in the Suffolk Mill where she earned $5 a week, Stavroula said.

According to the Federation of Hellenic Societies of Greater New York’s website, New England was the second major destination of Greek immigrants because of the mills that hired them. Burgess states one of the reasons for hiring Greeks was the reputation they had as steady workers who would not come in to work hungover or drunk. Because of this, the supervisors asked their Greek employees to encourage their friends to come work.

Mill life in Lowell began in the early 1800s after Francis Cabot Lowell reinvented the power loom, according to Deborah Hopkinson in her book “Up Before Daybreak: Cotton and People in America.” Mill owners began to spread the news that jobs for young women were available, and many women moved to the city to accept these positions. Lowell.com states that Lowell was one of the first true American factory towns.

“In addition to the many immigrants flooding the area, Francis Cabot Lowell and the Boston Manufacturing Company begin recruiting young girls from all over New England, setting up boarding homes in which to house them and promising them decent wages paid in cash daily,” Lowell.com reports. “These women, who became known as
the Lowell Mill Girls, were the heart and soul of Lowell’s mills.”

According to Hopkinson, the Merrimack River powered the enormous brick buildings, some standing five or six stories tall. As factory machines grew faster and employees were required to work more machines at one time, working conditions declined, according to Open Collections Program: Working Women, a Harvard website. For Athena, these conditions became a way of life.

“I make the spool to take in the weaving room to make the cloth,” Athena said in an interview with Lewis Karabatsos in 1974, transcribed in Bruce Webster’s “Theokas Family Heritage Book.” “I make the yarn, and … I’m a cutting, make the yarn and take it to weaving room and make cloth, make velvet cloth that time.”

While Athena worked at the Suffolk Mill, Jim decided it was time for her to marry, according to Stavroula. He knew of a man named Andrew Theokas, and he arranged for Athena to marry in 1920.

“The cousin that she came to live with … mentioned to (Athena), ‘We have someone for you, and it’s time you get married and go on your own,’” Stavroula said, her index finger pointing and shaking with authority, giving emphasis to her words. “She says ‘OK.’ In those days, you said yes, you didn’t say no to your parents. ‘OK, if this is what you want me to do, this is what I’m gonna do.’”

Athena said during this time, Andrew lived with Greeks who came from Kalamata, which was near her village in Greece. She recalled how, in those days, young women did not have a choice in whom they would marry. Stavroula described such marriages as a benefit for women if they trusted those who set them up in the marriage.
“The men got to know each other in the coffee houses,” Stavroula explained. “They all had somebody to fix them up with. And this is how it all happened. … For (Athena), it was wonderful. She was marrying somebody that (her cousin) knew, that, ‘I’m not gonna go wrong. I’m gonna be OK.’”

Stavroula rolled her eyes, her gold, hoop earrings swinging with the motion of her head as she described how there was no such thing back then as falling in love.

“So she … married (Andrew),” Stavroula said. “They lived in a town called … let me think now … Chicopee. That’s where they lived. That’s where they started the family.”

As Athena and Andrew began their lives together, their family grew quickly. According to Stavroula, they brought five children into the world in five years, continuing in this way until they were a family of 12.

Life during the Depression

Despite the happiness of raising children with her husband, whom she had grown to respect and care for, Athena soon felt the full force of the Depression.

“(Life was) very hard, very hard,” Athena said. “At that time, they don’t give us nothing. Staying alive, it takes a piece of work. You can’t buy clothes for the kids. You know they very lucky. Pretty rough times, very hard times.”
Athena said she no longer worked during this time, and Andrew worked at Scriptures Laundry making a mere $9 a week. According to Stavroula, life was extremely rough, but the joyful and carefree spirits of the children enabled them not to realize how bad their living conditions truly were.

“We were very poor, there was no doubt about it,” Stavroula said almost matter-of-factly. “The Protestant Church, they helped us not financially, but during the holidays they would bring something for the family … to (eat).”

Stavroula remembered how her mother depended upon the church to help her feed her children every now and then, which meant putting aside pride and asking for help.

“You would call the church and say, ‘Can you bring something for the Theokas family?’” she said. “And they would bring it over. So that’s how we (lived during) the hard days.”

According to Peter Theokas, sixth in the line of Theokas children, he never thought of how much money his family had as he grew up with his brothers and sisters. Sinking into the edge of the couch, Peter clasped his weathered hands together, eyes narrowed slightly and voice deep, carrying a tune of remembrance as he recalled the days of the Depression.

“As far as I was concerned, we were doing great,” Peter said, his white eyebrows lifting with innocence as he called back memories. “We lived right across from the park. We had places to go and play, and they’d call us in for supper or whatever. (There was) nothing to complain about, because that’s the way you lived.”

Despite Peter’s memories of the simplicity of their lives, he pointed out his realization now of how hard life was for his parents.
“Of course, there were 10 of us—that was no easy deal, you know,” Peter said with soft laughter. “Three rooms in the apartment. It was rough. It was tough on (Athena), but in those days, that was living. They knew what they needed to do, and they did it. They didn’t complain.”

The rough conditions during the Depression soon became a way of life for the Theokas family. Athena described their home as a “big block.”

“They small rooms,” Athena said.

“Always cold house. You got to get up in the morning and light the stove, the wood, make the breakfast and eat and come back to work.”

Stavroula also recalled the small rooms, stating that three children would share one bed, some even taking to the hallways to find room to stretch out for the night. The corner of her eyes crinkled and a slight smile played across her lips as she disclosed how baths were never taken more than once a week.

“It was fun being poor,” Stavroula said with a lightness in her voice that seemed to contradict her words. “Everybody was poor, so it was OK. It was OK, yeah. … Life was different. But see, everybody was in the same boat, so it didn’t matter. All your friends were poor, see? So it didn’t matter at all, which was good, in a way.”

Despite the children’s innocence to the seriousness of their living conditions and lack of money, Athena and Andrew barely made ends meet, often buying food and coal on credit and many times not paying their $3.75 a week rent, according to Athena.
“Well, I pay you today and pay next tomorrow and if I start to work,” Athena said as she remembered the struggle of paying the family bills. “… But during the Depression time, course I don’t pay my rent straight. I don’t pay no bread sometime because I need shoes for the kids. I need coats for the kids, I can’t pay everything all together.”

Because there was a lack of money to pay bills, Andrew bought food and coal on credit, according to Athena.

“My husband has good credit, because he pay his bills,” Athena said. “He know he’s going to take his money, so I don’t have no hard time for that.”

Stavroula smiled with pride as she told how her father would pay his bills a little at a time, cementing a good reputation among the shop owners.

“(O)ne time, he had only a $100 balance, and he had saved enough,” Stavroula described, her clear eyes showing how the memory was coming back with precision. “So … he says to the baker, ‘I want to pay my bill.’ And (the baker) says, ‘Andrew, it’s $100.’ He says, ‘Yes, I know. I have $100, I want to pay my bill.’ ‘Andrew, I’ll tell you what. You always pay your bill. If everybody came in and told me they wanted to pay their bill, I’d be the richest man in Lowell. But you take that $100 and go back home and support your family with it.’ And (the baker) did not accept it.”

Despite Andrew’s respectable reputation, the bills ran high and money was in short supply. According to Stavroula, once she was old enough, she knew she needed to help carry part of the weight for her family.
“(Andrew) was the only one working, and he didn’t make much money,” she said, her hand waving back and forth, showing the insignificance of her father’s paycheck. “He was … adding bills to these places, but then … I quit school and Johnny went into the service at the time, I think, and we went to work. Now, I started working for 25 cents an hour. That was the minimum wage back then. So, I went to work, and John went to work. Between the two of us, we managed to pay some of the bills for my father. We had meat once a week. That was on a Sunday. We had lamb and potatoes.”

Although Athena did not have a steady job, she picked up extra work whenever she saw the opportunity. With a steady hand and an eye for embroidery, Athena said she would sell her work in order to help buy her children what they needed.

“Yes, yes womans come and ask me to make bureau scarfs and things like that,” Athena said. “I make it by machine and make little money and buy things for my children, because my husband don’t make no … enough money to raise the kids.”

Stavroula recalled how her mother would make a few extra dollars using her embroidery when times were especially tough for their family, describing Athena’s skills with a needle and sewing machine as “unbelievable.”

“She was always there doing something for us,” Stavroula said as she remembered her mother’s sacrifice to make sure she met all her children’s needs. “(She) used to get a piece of cloth. … She would take these pieces, put the pieces up that were already made on another piece of cloth and … embroider on the sewing machine. Not by hand, it was on the sewing machine.”

Athena’s Legacy as a Mother
Athena’s love for her children and desire for them to grow into respectable adults translated into the way she raised them. With little to do for entertainment during a time when money was scarce, Athena said she would stay with her children instead of looking for entertainment outside the home.

“I never leave my kids except to go to church,” Athena said. “I never leave my kids to going like today, (women go to) nightclubs and (dancing)—leave babysitter. … I watch them every minute. Course, I can’t read and write teaching them, you know, but I taught them like my mother taught me.”

As thoughts of her mother rose to the forefront of her mind, Stavroula described how Athena brought her children up in such a way that they knew how much she loved them, but they also “wouldn’t dare” to dabble in too much trouble.

“Oh, she was very good to us,” Stavroula said. “She had full control of us, really. There were times when she had to yell at us, and we’d yell. We’d have fights with our family, naturally. You had 10 kids, you were gonna have disagreements, no doubt about it.”

Peter did not hesitate to describe Athena as a “great mother” whom he never heard complain of their difficult circumstances.

“She knew it was just the way it was, and that’s it,” Peter said matter-of-factly, before a laugh rolled from deep inside his chest as he continued to explain his mother’s style of discipline. “You got disciplined differently than you do now. You did something wrong, you were scolded for it. … You’d get belted across the
head or against the back.”

Stavroula looked past the pain of a belt and saw how she learned from Athena during her childhood.

“I learned to respect people, because she respected people a lot, even with us,” Stavroula said. “Even though she’d get mad at us, she respected her children, ain’t no doubt about it. And, oh, we were brainwashed to keep the house clean. I mean, every Saturday, … we each had a job to do.”

Explaining how Athena assigned tasks to each of her children, even the boys, Stavroula said she remembered her mother’s reasoning.

“Well, she figured, 10 kids—if they don’t clean house, who’s going to do it all?” she said. “‘I can’t do it,’ she said. ‘You gotta help me.’ First, it was just the girls who had to clean the house, and every once in a while, she’d have the boys do it. But most of the time, it was the five girls who would do the housework.”

**The Greek Community in Lowell**

As times grew more difficult, the Greek community in Lowell became a strong force around the Theokas family, bringing a sense of the homeland into a place that could prove dangerous for Greeks. However, Lowell soon became home for the immigrants who realized they might never return to their place of birth.

According to the Lowell Hellenic Heritage Association’s website, Lowell was considered America’s most distinctive Greek-American region, with Lowell journalist and historian Charles Sampas describing the city as the “Acropolis of America.” Burgess painted Lowell as a colony for the Greeks.

“… (E)very shop and coffee house along the street displays Greek signs and
Greek meets Greek except for Irish policeman and capitalist landlord,” Burgess wrote in “Greeks in America.”

This tension between the Greeks and the Irish resulted from the Irish holding control of the city and of the jobs before the Greeks began to immigrate to Lowell. According to Matthew Lavallee, who wrote the article Immigration in Lowell: New Waves of Nativism, competition and opposition arose whenever new workers arrived in Lowell.

“They didn’t like the Greeks,” Stavroula said of the Irish. “They didn’t want them to get involved with big jobs, or something. So, for many years, even when we were growing up and in school, the young folks had something about the Greek people that they didn’t like, only because of what the parents had (against) the Greek people.”

Stavroula pointed out that the Greeks showed more aggression with acquiring jobs than the Irish did, but the Irish had an advantage, because their English proved more accomplished than that of the Greeks.

“They went to City Hall to get help,” Stavroula said. “Well, the Greek people, they didn’t know where to go. So they just went out to get a job if they could and take it from there. But as far as anything else, they couldn’t get anywhere back then. Not until their children started to grow up and go to college, and the Greek took over, way back then.”

As Peter searched his memory for how the Irish and the Greeks felt toward one another, he stated the real trouble arose before his time. He recalled with soft laughter how at times he could feel the tension between the adults, but the kids just wanted to play with each other.
“It was close-knit, I’d say, like all the others,” Peter said of his childhood community, eyes searching for different memories. “You had Greeks in one section, Polish in one, French in another. So we were all in what they called the Acre part of the city. It was all mixed in, that was how you got to know the people—Polish, Irish, whatever. We got along. At least I did, anyway.”

Despite the trouble with the Irish, the Greek community was strong in the Acre, which was an area of Lowell that was concentrated by the Greeks, according to the National Park Service’s website.

“The things I see today, I used to have good life,” Athena said. “Even very poor people, they work together and love each other. The neighbors never fight. I used to live in that block Common and Cross Streets for 18 years. That block, that block was 52 children in that block. Fifty-two children—no big people, just children. (They) never fight each other. Mothers never fight each other, just used … you’d hit kid none, never fight for that. And the working people worked together, and they treat each other now like they’re brothers and sisters.”

The close community and friendly neighbors was something that Stavroula remembered with ease as memories rolled off her tongue, one after the other.

“We were very close with all the families, actually, because everybody looked for the same thing—they wanted friends,” Stavroula said. “The house was a social spot. People would come over and visit whenever they felt like it, and it was OK.”

Stavroula described her mother as a very personable woman who loved welcoming friends and neighbors into her home.

“In those days, you could go up to someone’s house and just walk in and say, ‘Hi,
how are you,’ and if you were eating, ‘Come in and have a seat,’” Stavroula said with a wave of her arm, welcoming the memories as her mother had welcomed her neighbors. “(Athena) would have 10 kids, and then we would have our friends come in and feed them. But it was wonderful. You had your own family, but you had a lot of friends. It was great. She never minded having a lot of people, really.”

Even with a house full of 10 children, Athena never thought twice about inviting friends to stay for dinner or to come over on a Saturday night to spend an evening dancing. Stavroula said Athena welcomed her home to everybody. As Athena entertained company on a regular basis, Andrew spent time once a week at a coffee house.

According to Burgess, the coffee houses were a place of recreation for Greeks. “Imagine a room, sometimes shabby, sometimes neat, filled with little tables, about which are seated mustached Greeks, talking, joking, playing cards, sometimes singing, pouring over newspapers, and smoking cigarettes and drinking their thick, sweet, Turkish coffee, served in tiny cups,” Burgess wrote.

A place of fellowship, Athena stressed the point that coffeehouses were not a place to get drunk.

“Well, people worked, like the other places, make coffee and serve the pita, give them a piece of candy, … a cup of coffee, and drink and some butter, that’s all,” Athena recalled. “They don’t give nothing—the old times, they no have no drinks in coffeehouses, no. They just talk each other, see each other, but nothing else. My, especially my husband, he never stay long to make speeches and talks and drinks and play. Just, he like go out just once a while. Once a week … that’s all.”

The Significance of the Greek Orthodox Church
Another major aspect of the Greek culture during this time was the Greek Orthodox Church. According to the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church website, Holy Trinity was America’s first Byzantine Greek edifice, opening its doors in 1908 as a place for Greeks in the Acre to worship.

“The Holy Trinity Church has become a source of pride and inspiration for the Hellenic-American population, and for all of Lowell as well,” the website states.

According to the Greek Orthodox Archdioceses of America’s website, those who attended the Greek Orthodox Church believed in the seven sacraments. Athena remembered how church on Sunday mornings consisted of the separation of men and women as well as standing the entire time because of the absence of pews.

“Because of the religion, the believe in God, the going the God house, the bread of the God,” Athena described in her broken English, remembering why people went to church. “Course, you can pray in the house everyday … You got to go home every night just the same as (at) God(’s) home. Got to go every Sunday to pray to God for healthiness, for different things.”

Athena described the giving spirit of those who tithed to the church despite the hard times and the lack of money.

“That’s important,” Athena remembered. “You know, the time they build the church, the people were so poor, they make $5, like I said, ($3 or $4 a week, 12 hours a day work. But they don’t think they’re going to spend their money outside like today and forget the church … Have $3, they give $2 to the church.”

Stavroula recalled how important the Greek Church was to her mother and to the community as a whole.
“As far as religion goes, part of it was from the folks, from the family, but a lot of it was from going to church, learning about our religion and what it was all about,” Stavroula said. “Most of it was always in Greek, and we had a hard time understanding what (it) meant. But eventually, they would start teaching to us in Greek, and then explaining to us what they meant in English, which is how we got to understand the Greek religion, by doing that. … That was part of (Athena’s) life.”

Despite going to Holy Trinity Church every Sunday morning, Stavroula said Athena sent her children to The Church of All Nations—a Protestant church—on Sunday afternoons, an act that was looked down upon by the Greek community.

According to Edgar James Helms, author of “Pioneering in Modern City Missions,” The Church of All Nations welcomed children after the public school hours where they could not only have a safe place to play, but they also learned the English language.

“And that’s where we kids learned the Bible,” Stavroula said. “And the people would say, ‘Athena, why’re you sending your kids to a Protestant church?’ She said, ‘That’s OK. They’re not gonna change. They’re still gonna be Orthodox. Just let them learn.’ To my mother, it was a place for the kids to be safe, more than why’re they going there. That’s what it was all about. She felt safe, we felt safe there.”

**Learning the English Language**

Living in the Acre with their fellow Greek immigrants meant the Greek culture was not lost on Athena or her children. The Greek atmosphere saturated the way of life for the Theokas family.
“We only spoke Greek at home,” Stavroula said. “We went to school not knowing English. We learned our English while in school. We were talking Greek all the time (at home). When we went home, we couldn’t speak English to the folks. They didn’t know English, so we had to speak Greek. … That’s the way it was.”

As the children began learning more and more English, Athena began to desire to learn as well. According to Stavroula, a Greek woman learning English was not a common occurrence. Despite the fact that she only spoke Greek when she was with her friends, Athena made a point to start learning and speaking English a little at a time.

“She started speaking English and was trying to understand the English language, and she did very well with that, too, but none of the other ladies knew English,” Stavroula said. “She was about the only one way back then who spoke a little bit of English. And by the time she passed away, she was fluent with it.”

Stavroula readily admitted her admiration for her mother’s dedication, who learned to understand and speak English mainly from listening to her children and asking them to help her learn.

“She said, ‘I have to know what you’re saying,’ and she said, ‘Now, I’m in America—I have to learn English, too,’” Stavroula said, pride seeping through her words as she described her mother’s determination. “She said, ‘What am I gonna do … What if I have to go to work? I have to learn English.’”

It was this determination that was the driving factor behind Athena learning to speak the English language.

“And when she had to speak English, I was with her,” Stavroula recalled. “I would never say a word. Whoever was speaking to her, I’d let her talk. And I used to
admire her because I knew there was very few Greek women who would talk like she did. It took years. And then when TV came along, of course, she learned even more. So she was, really, pretty well learned in the English language.”

**Life after the Depression**

As the Depression came to a close, and World War II began unfolding, Athena went back to work in 1941, this time at the Merrimack Mill, making $15 a week in conditions she described as “very hard.”

“The people making you work so hard,” Athena said. “After the war over, the Second World War, they doubled the work of the people. If I worked 10 machines, they give 15 machines. So the people work double hard.”

Not only did Athena work in the mills during this time, but she also kept up her duties as mother and wife. She described life as tough for women who worked on top of their household duties.

“I used to wash by hand,” Athena said of the days without washing machines. “I used to dry them outside winter and summer. No dryer, no washer, no nothing. I used to wash by my hands and put the clothes outside at night. Next day, I’m going to work in the mill. Course, sometime I don’t have no enough clothes for my kids, I’ll have to put them on tonight, the top of the stove, dry the clothes, iron them tonight and they going to wear them tomorrow to going to school.”

Stavroula watched day after day as her mother came home tired from not only a tough and demanding job, but a dirty one as well.

“She worked in the mill—the second, what they call,” Stavroula said. “From 2 (p.m.) till 10 (p.m.). So I would get home from work a little bit earlier so I could be home
with the children. She would cook a meal for supper if she had the time. Now, if she didn’t have time because of what she had to do, I would come home, and I would cook supper for the family.”

Adding to Stavroula’s description of their mother’s life during this time, Peter emphasized how long a day it was for Athena. However, complaining about a job, something Athena desperately needed, was not in her character.

While describing the trouble he and his brothers and sisters gave their mother while their father was at work, the corner of Peter’s lips moved upward with mischief.

“We might’ve (given her trouble),” Peter said, laughter mixing with his words. “I’m sure we did at one point in her life. I’m sure we did. My father worked crazy hours. He’d work from five in the morning and not get back till six. But then, they figured they had to work. That was the big thing: work. You had to work to bring up the family. Make sure we were dressed, make sure we ate right.”

Peter’s head nodded up and down, his eyes landing on a memory in his mind as he described Athena’s attitude while raising her children.

“She was a strong one. She was very strong. … She always had a good outlook. Made sure we were dressed and cleaned, you know the whole bit. Don’t ask me how she brought up 10 kids.”

Describing her father as a quiet man during her childhood, Stavroula said she never went to her father for advice, but would always approach her mother instead.

“Now (Andrew) never said a word, never yelled,” Stavroula touched two of her fingers together and moved them across her thin lips in demonstration of her father’s
quiet nature. “Of course, if we did something he didn’t like, he’d speak up. … He wasn’t that typical person, but we all respected him as a father, there’s no doubt about it.”

The children seemed to understand their father’s silence had, in part, something to do with the long hours he worked.

“Well, he used to work 10 to 12 hours a day,” Stavroula reasoned. “I mean, when he came home, he was tired. He was likely to just get a dish of food, you know, and he’d go to bed. He didn’t have time for his children, yeah. But that was OK. We were used to that, we didn’t expect it from my father.”

Stavroula added that her mother was always there for her children, making a point to mention through laughter that her mother was always around when she needed to teach her children a lesson and give them a slap for punishment.

Although Athena and Andrew had an arranged marriage, Stavroula said she knew her parents loved each other, despite the fact that showing physical signs of affection never occurred in front of the children.

“You could see the respect for him, but no such thing as going over and hugging him,” Stavroula said as she dramatically threw her hands in the air, a hint of humor flowing through her voice. “I didn’t even know what a hug was until I grew up and found out from other people.”

As World War II progressed, three of Athena’s sons joined the service—John, Dionisios and Vasilios. According to By the Numbers from the National World War II Museum’s website, more than 1 million minorities fought in the U.S. military.

“We had three brothers in the service at the same time,” Peter, who also joined the service during the Korean War, leaned forward with pride as he discussed his brothers.
“It takes its toll. They’d worry about them. Because at one point, we had one brother who was missing in action and another wounded at the same time. So that kind of took her through a loop, for all of us. … It was quite an experience for her.”

There were mothers, sisters, aunts and grandmothers around the country worrying about the precious lives of the men fighting to protect freedom. And with the number of total deaths during World War II reaching 405,399, according to Hannah Fischer, information research specialist, the fear that women held concerning their family members and friends was not uncalled for.

Athena was no exception. Stavroula remembered how her mother dealt with her sons fighting in the war, in constant danger of losing their lives.

“She was always worried about it, naturally, but fortunately, we were corresponding with the boys and would tell them what was going on, … but she’d still worry about them,” Stavroula said. “She’d still pray all the time for the boys, you know, in the war like everybody else.”

**Athena as a Grandmother**

With all her sons returning after the war, Athena’s children grew to adults and soon to parents, giving her the opportunity to not only be a mother, but a grandmother—a yiayia. Nine of her children married, giving her 25 grandchildren.

Two of her grandchildren, Susan Webster and Sharon Stacy, children of Athena’s youngest daughter, Helen MacArthur, recalled growing up with their yiayia and described her as “unique.”

“(She was) very loving,” Sharon said. “I think she treated us, when we were in her company, like we were the most special person. She talked to us all the time.”
As a grandmother, Athena would, on occasion, put aside whatever she was doing to entertain her grandchildren.

“I never saw her just sit and smoke, but when the kids were around, she would take a cigarette and blow nose rings and circles from her mouth,” Susan said, gracefully holding an imaginary cigarette up to her mouth and creating smoke rings. “And she’d drink a beer right out of the beer bottle, and we just thought that was the greatest thing. She loved everybody.”

Athena’s love for people and love for life flowed into everything she did, pouring out in numerous ways. One of the ways her love for life flowed out was her voice.

“I always think of her singing,” Sharon said, her memory listening for the sound of her yiayia’s voice. “She was always singing. Always. It was all in Greek. … You’d walk into her kitchen, she was singing. She would be doing anything, she could be ironing—she was singing.”

Along with her love for life came her love for education. Because Athena never learned to read or write, she impressed the significance of an education upon her grandchildren.

“She definitely knew the importance of education, because she didn’t have an education, and she was always asking about school,” Susan said. “I remember her wanting her grandchildren to stay in school.”

**Athena’s Later Years**

As time passed and grandchildren grew up, Andrew became sick to the point of needing more help than Athena could provide him with. He moved to a nursing home.
“(She was) very patient (with Andrew),” Sharon said without hesitation, the nodding of her head confirming her statement. “They had such a loving relationship. … Every single day, someone drove her over (to the nursing home), and she would bring food for him to eat. … And the kids were devoted to them. (Peter) would go over and shave him. Anytime Yiayia needed anything, her kids were there. They were really devoted to each other, and all their kids were devoted to them.”

There were arranged marriages in those days that did not follow the same path that Athena and Andrew’s followed. According to Helen, a friend told her she was very lucky to have a father who treated her mother well.

“There were some fathers who had these arranged marriages, and they would cheat on their wives, and they would slap them around,” Helen said, swiping at the air with her hand. “They were not very good husbands. Many of them, many of them. But my father—no.”

After nearly 52 years of marriage, Andrew passed away Jan. 26, 1972. Stavroula recalled how Athena never emotionally broke down in front of her. Helen, however, saw a more vulnerable side to her mother.

“One thing she told me when my father died, … she said, ‘You know, I have to tell you, I lost my best friend,’” Helen said. “That’s pretty strong. She didn’t say anything about a husband, but, ‘He was my best friend.’”

Returning to Greece was something Andrew never had the desire for, according to Peter. However, Athena wanted to return to her homeland to see her family. Once she had the opportunity, Athena went to Greece, back to her village, with Stavroula.
“I feel bad,” Athena said of the difficulties occurring in Greece at the time. “I feel awful. Hard for my heart. Course, … I leave the Greece from 15 years old, but still, my heart there, because that’s my country. So, I says after 55 years, I come back in 1971 to see my people.”

According to Stavroula, when Athena returned home, she saw one of her brothers, causing the thoughts and wonderings of her family’s difficult life to transform into a reality in front of her eyes.

“She cried and cried for days,” Stavroula said, remembering her mother’s reaction to seeing her relatives. “I don’t think she missed her life, because her life was hard. They were out in the fields from 12 years old.”

Despite Athena’s love for her people, Stavroula said her mother was ready to come home to her family. Even though she was leaving her siblings and her cousins behind, she came back to the legacy she had begun to create the moment she accepted that ticket from her friend.

**The Legacy Athena Left Behind**

Athena lived until she reached 98 years old. After she died, she left behind a legacy for more than 100 descendants.

“(She) had to be doing something right,” Peter smiled, laughter bubbling through his teeth. “I hope to follow in her footsteps. She always had a smile on her face, that’s one thing I remember about her, always had a smile on her face.”
Peter also said his mother taught him the simple beauty of treating others with kindness, not only through her words, but through her actions as well.

“I don’t think she ever said a bad word about anybody—maybe once in a while,” Peter pulled out that mischievous grin again. “That’s another thing: Respect your elders. That’s a big thing. Respect your elders.”

For Helen, the most important lesson her mother taught her was to live as an example. Athena could not read the Bible on her own, but she memorized Scripture and lived according to it, Helen said.

“The other thing she told us about people, she said, ‘Never be jealous about people, and never talk about people in a jealous manner,’” Helen said. “Because you never heard her criticize. … At least I didn’t, you know. You don’t criticize people. And that’s very scriptural.”

This life by example was not only something her children witnessed. Athena’s grandchildren watched each day as their yiayia proved what hard work, determination and a willing spirit can overcome.

“Her value system was impeccable,” Susan said. “(I don’t know) whether she was a believer in Christ as her Lord and Savior, but she truly, truly believed in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and she raised her children like that. I mean, it really was incredible. Ten children during the Depression, and, I mean, they might’ve gotten in a little trouble, but they were all good kids.”

The legacy that Athena left proves true through the women of the family, according to Susan.

“I really believe we women are who we are because of (Athena),” Susan said, her
head nodding in agreement. “I mean, it has come down. When you think of all the (people) who look at the glass half empty, and it’s always woe is me—that’s just not the Theokas way.”

As his mind placed back each memory in its rightful spot, Peter swept his gaze over the members of the family in the room before him.

“We always say it: See what two people started,” Peter said. “Think about it. Right? Isn’t it true? Think, ‘Wait a minute. Two people started all this.’”

With one brave little girl stepping onto a boat, clutching tightly her only belongings in the world, came an entire family made up of people who have the opportunity to hold onto the teachings, warnings and blessings provided by the life and legacy of Athena. She left the example of her nerve and adventurous spirit for whoever will take the leap and accept the challenge of living fully, of not accepting defeat, and of leaving one’s own legacy.
References


