Greek Immigrants In Springfield
1884 - 1944

by: George T. Eliopoulos

In 1821, the Greek Revolution began against the oppressive Turkish Empire. Long before the Greek immigrants had arrived in Springfield, they received the sympathy of the Springfield press. The Hampden Patriot, an early Springfield newspaper, reported a meeting at Peabody assembly hall on December 13, 1823. The meeting was held to pledge support for Greek freedom and independence. The participants claimed that Greek emancipation was of utmost importance to all free people everywhere. Springfield continued to express its sympathy for Greece throughout the entire war. When America celebrated its independence on July 4, 1824, Dr. A. J. Miller of Springfield composed a poem in honor of the memory of Lord Byron, himself a poet and a hero of the Greek Revolution. Another mass meeting in support of Greece was held in 1827. O. B. Morris presided, and Reverend Bezaleel Howard pledged arms and ammunition for the Greeks in their fight against Turkish tyranny. Samuel Bowles, editor of the Republican, wrote at this time: "We revert to affairs of Greece as of first importance to the cause of freedom and liberty."

Although Americans had sympathized with the Greeks since early in the 19th century, it was not until the 1880's that Greeks began to filter into the area. Those who came to America did so for many reasons. First, Greece was always a poor country. The difficulty of scratching out a meager living on the rocky soil of Greece led a number of Greeks to seek a better way of life. The Greek immigrants who came to Springfield were not only from Greece proper; many came from Eastern Thrace, Asia Minor, Crete, Northern Epirus, and the Aegean Islands.

Eleftherios Pilalas was the first Greek in Springfield, but the exact date of his arrival is not known. He apparently came around 1884, however. He lived on Calhoun Street and worked at the Kibbe Company candy factory. After a few years, he became manager for the Kibbe Candy Company on Harrison Avenue. When other Greeks began to arrive, Pilalas was instrumental in bringing them to the Kibbe Company as employees. He later purchased Vaughan's Candy
Store on M Street, became a successful businessman, and accumulated an appreciable amount of property before his death in 1910. Stavros Pilalas came to America a short while after his brother and he also went to work for the Kibbe Candy Company. For five years, Stavros attended night school, which enabled him to become proficient in English. He was later employed as a part-time Greek interpreter in the local courts. After the Pilalas brothers, a young man from Sparta, Theodore Carellas, came to Springfield in 1886. He also went to work for the Kibbe Candy Company, where he remained for sixteen years. Another early arrival from Greece, John D. Cokkinias, opened the first Greek-owned candy stores in Springfield. By the turn of the century, the city's Greek population steadily grew to about five hundred.

Some of the young Greek immigrants had adventurous backgrounds. One of these was Alex Kefalas, a successful duelist. During the 1896 Olympic games in Athens, Kefalas, who was impressed by the numerous American victories, decided that he would like to come to America. He was at the University of Athens in 1897, when hostilities broke out between Greece and Turkey over Crete. Because other Greeks disagreed with him over political beliefs, Mr. Kefalas fought and won two duels. His family insisted he become a politician, but because of the volatile nature of Greek politics, he left Greece and came to the United States. When he arrived in Springfield, he enrolled at American International College.

A larger influx of better-educated Greeks came to Springfield in 1905-1906. They learned the language while working as waiters or as mechanics. By 1912, more than half the Greek citizens in Springfield were a younger generation of Greek college graduates. The limitless opportunities offered by America attracted the best men Greece had to offer. In Greece, they would never have been doing such menial labor, but in America, even the best educated often were forced into menial work before starting up the ladder of success.

Due to many problems, life was never easy for the early Greek immigrants in Springfield. The language barrier was difficult to bridge, and a number of young Greek boys could find nothing better than to work in shoe shiners' establishments. During World War I, a controversy arose because of the "enslavement" of these boys. The protest centered around working hours and bad working conditions. In 1916, the Saloniki, a Greek language Chicago newspaper, reported on the Greek bootblacks in Springfield. The newspaper claimed that a hundred Greek bootblacks in Springfield had gone on strike to attain better working conditions.

In 1908, more Greek boys left their homeland. The Ottoman Empire made military service compulsory, and the Greeks were being forced into the ranks. This included the Greeks of Asia Minor and those living in Constantinople (Istanbul). As a result, many Greeks escaped to America. It is reported that more than half the Greek male population in Springfield at this time (1908-

From the turn of the century, Greeks from the island of Crete had settled in the Springfield-Chicopee area, and they had established the oldest chapter of the Pan Cretan Association of America. The local Cretan Society would later help organize the American Pan Cretan Union, in 1929. In October of that year, Harry J. Erinaakis represented Springfield and Chicopee at the first annual convention of the Pan Cretan Association of America, in Chicago. Erinaakis later compiled a history of the Pan Cretan Association of the Springfield-Chicopee area.

Now that the size of the Greek community was increasing, it was natural for Greek organization to develop. Attempts to organize the Greek community before 1906, however, were failures. John D. Cokkinias tried to organize a "Pan Hellenic" society, which soon disbanded. Eleftherios Pilalas also tried to organize the Greeks, but again to no avail. It even proved difficult to establish a Greek Orthodox Church in Springfield. Meetings were held in a room over a shop at Stearns Square, and finally a hall was rented at State and Maple Streets. Shortly thereafter Reverend Athanasios Sideris came to Springfield as the first Greek priest. When the hall soon became too small for the growing congregation, it became necessary to locate another facility. With a number of strong-willed leaders who disagreed, however, it appeared that the church might be destroyed. Then in 1905, Paisios Ferentinos of Pittsburgh, the first Greek priest in America, was invited to help regain unity in Springfield. As a result of his help the problem was solved. In 1906, Reverend Jacob Leloudas arrived and became the first priest of the newly-founded church. Land and a brick house were purchased on Auburn Street, and in 1907, the building became St. George Church. According to one report, it was easy to select a name for the church. When the Church Society was established to purchase the land on Auburn Street, twelve of the twenty members were named George. As a result, that name was selected for the church on Auburn Street. After a few years, Reverend Leloudas made plans to expand the church and replace some old decorations. The beginning of the Balkan War in 1912, however, prevented the completion of his plans. Many young Greeks left Springfield to fight against Turkey, and those who remained donated as much as they could to support the War effort.

The social life of Springfield's early Greeks centered around their clubs. By 1912 there were six Greek clubs in Springfield. Four of these clubs were located at the corner of Main and Cypress Streets. The clubs were actually open cafetypic restaurants, where the Greeks gathered. One of these was the Greek club, run by Panteles Hectere. It was an open cafe where the Greeks would gather to read Greek newspapers, drink Greek coffee, discuss politics, and exchange ideas. Hectere was a hero to many of the Greeks, being a well known athlete. He
had competed in the 1904 and 1908 Olympic Games. When the Greek population had outgrown the Auburn Street Church, again new land had to be purchased. In 1919, Hector headed the society that bought the new church lot on Patton Street.

The Greeks had come to Springfield so quietly that for a whole generation they seem to have been unnoticed. The Greek population had been steadily growing, but an incident in 1912 drew attention to the local Greek community. A large crowd gathered at Union Station in October to bid farewell to many young men who were going to Greece to fight in the Balkan War. American International College was directly affected when two Greek students returned to Greece on October 8, 1912, and within a short period, four others had joined them.

In World War I, Greeks from Springfield served with the U.S. Army, and two men won recognition for bravery. Constantine Veniopoulos Nestor was killed in the Argonne, and he was later praised for valor. Hercules Gorgis also spent considerable time in Springfield, but at the time he enlisted, he lived in Lynn. Gorgis was credited with having captured 257 Germans single-handedly. Following the war, K.P. Tsolainos who lived at 37 Sargent Street, represented the Greek-Americans at the Paris Peace Conference after World War I. Educated at McGill University in Canada, and at Columbia University in New York, he became secretary to Greek Premier Venizelos. In the 1930's Tsolainos became an officer at the National City Bank of New York.

From 1910 to 1930, the Greek population in Springfield grew rapidly, and the Greeks began producing professional men. The first Greek physician was Dr. Soerates J. Paul who graduated from Tufts Medical College. He was active in politics, serving for many years on the Republican City Committee from Wards 4 and 5. Another Greek physician was Dr. Louis G. Spelios. For many years, the only practicing Greek lawyer was Dimitrios V. Constantinou. In 1935, he was an unsuccessful candidate for Alderman from Ward 5.

During these years, many Greek immigrants rose to prominence and distinguished themselves as citizens of Springfield. Some became successful businessmen. Nicholas Cassavetes founded the Pharos Tourist Agency, and was instrumental in initiating Greek-American excursions to Greece. George Bacoopoulos, a graduate of American International College, served as a member of the Chamber of Deputies at Athens, Greece, and became Greek Minister of the Interior. Charilaos Lagoudakis, associated with Springfield College, became Director of Athens College, in Greece. Another Greek from Springfield, Anestis Fanos, became editor of the Atlantis, a New York newspaper which was the oldest Greek daily in the United States. George N. Pitalas was a businessman, proprietor and manager of the Forest Park Restaurant. John Regas, native of Kalavryta, Greece, was a manager of the Star Lunch Company of Springfield. He later owned three Springfield restaurants. Elias Janites, another early arrival from Greece, was an author of distinction and had many books credited to his name. Some of his works were His Majesty, The Immigrant, and a patriotic play Martyrs and Avengers.
The 20's were still the formative years of the Greek community, and much thought seemed to prevail over all others. The desire to make a fortune and return to Greece was prevalent among a large percentage of the Greeks. In 1922, the Greek press estimated that twenty percent of the Greeks in Springfield eventually planned to return home. Many were waiting for better relations between Greece and Turkey, while others were waiting to make their fortunes. In time, their attitudes changed, and many who wanted to return to Greece never did. They began to assimilate, and eventually they adopted America as their home.

For a generation, Nicholas G. Veniopoulos Nestor was the leading member of Springfield's Greek community. He was born in Sparta on November 25, 1886, and came to America as a young man. He graduated from the American Law School in 1920, after which he founded the Nestor Realty and Brokerage Company. He was the first Greek-American in the city to become a Notary Public and Justice of the Peace. Nestor spoke English, Greek, French, Italian, and Arabic, and he became an expert in naturalization, immigration, and Americanization. He became known as the "citizen maker," not only among Greeks, but also among other foreign-born residents. He served as adviser to Greek ministers in Washington, to the Greek diocese in America, and to the Greek consul in Boston. He was author of several works, including Nestor's Parliamentary Law and Rules of Order. Nestor was founder, president, and editor of the National Union, which was reportedly the only Greek-American newspaper printed in English. The monthly newspaper was established to assist those who chose America as their home, by helping them learn the language, familiarize them with American laws, and promote civic and social responsibility.

A natural politician, Nestor was constantly organizing within the Greek community. In 1919 he was founder of the Massachusetts Republican Club. Nestor was President and William Kimberley Palmer was Vice-President. Palmer was a poet and a great admirer of Greek ideals. He also served as contributing editor of the National Union, and he was a close friend of Nestor. Nicholas Nestor also organized the first Springfield branch of Ahepa (American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association) in 1924. The purpose of Ahepa was to Americanize the Greek immigrants. One of 360 Ahepa Clubs nationwide, the local chapter was located at the Young Building, 1653 Main Street. Nestor later served as Supreme Warden of the National Organization of Ahepa.

The Greeks in Springfield founded many other clubs, one of which was the Greek-American Progressive Association (G.A.P.A.). Its purpose was to preserve and perpetuate Greek ideals in American life. For young people, there were such clubs as the Sons of Pericles and the Maids of Athens. The Philoptohos, another club, was a women's organization devoted to charitable work in coordination with St. George Parish. On January 28, 1934, the "Proodos," a Cretan ladies' organization, was established in Springfield, to perpetuate the traditions of Crete.

On June 2, 1928, just before the seventh annual convocation of Ahepa was to take place in Springfield, Nestor received a letter from Mayor Fordis C. Parker. The mayor welcomed Ahepans to Springfield, and the city placed the Municipal Auditorium at the disposal of Ahepa.

Nestor was elected president of the Foreign Language Publishers Association of America in 1929. As newly elected President, he gave the opening address at the first convention at the Statler Hotel in Boston, on November 24, 1929. He placed emphasis on America's foreign-born citizens and their contribution to American life.

Nestor was very involved in state politics and in 1922 was an unsuccessful candidate for State Representative. In 1928 he was the first Greek-American in Massachusetts to win a primary election for State Representative. Nestor won the Republican nomination from the fourth Hampden District with a total of 1915 votes. He carried the East Springfield and Berkshire Districts, and it was the first time in 20 years that a Republican had ever won in the latter district. Nestor's success became the inspirational factor for the success of Representative George Demeter of Boston, who served two consecutive terms in the Legislature, in 1932 and 1934.

Dr. Nicholas Iliopoulos came from Greece and entered Springfield College in 1932. Quickly recognizing the need for organizing the youth in Springfield's Greek community, he assembled 120 boys of Greek descent and organized a program in coordination with the Y.M.C.A. He called his group the "Olympians." In 1933, he organized a group for girls called the "Olympiad." Archbishop Athenagoras helped organize the groups on a national scale after World War Two, and he renamed them G.O.Y.A. (Greek Orthodox Youth of America).

By 1936 Springfield's Greek population had grown to about 3,500 and had scattered to all parts of the city. Springfield never really had a "Little Greece"; by that time, the Greeks lived in all parts of the city including the North and South Ends, Forest Park, and the Hill sections. They owned and operated about 100 lunch rooms and restaurants in Springfield, and owned a variety of smaller businesses including ice cream, candy, and fruit stores. Shoe shining, hat cleaning, and tobacco shops were also owned by the Greeks.

In 1936, when Springfield was planning Tercentenary activities, John Micharalos was selected to organize the Greek community. Micharalos was President of the Altis Chapter of Ahepans, and he was a leader in the Greek community. He had a turbulent past, barely escaping from Turkey with his life during World War I. For a short period he was interned in France and then with aid, he came to America. On his arrival, he enrolled at American International College and later went into business.
Early in the Second World War, Greece had tried to defend itself against invasion, but it was eventually overwhelmed. The Greek War Relief Association was established to aid the war torn country. It was organized on a national scale, with about 1,000 chapters in the United States. On the local level, letters were sent out to business leaders of the Greek community to discuss ways and means of conducting the war relief campaign. Nestor was invited to attend by Chairman Christopher Kantianis, an architect who was deeply involved in the affairs of the Greek community. The initial meeting was held on January 6, 1941, at Greek War Relief Headquarters, at 2309 Main Street.

In July of 1942, when King George II of Greece arrived in Philadelphia, a delegation went to greet him. The Springfield contingent was led by Nicholas Nestor, who invited the Greek National Organization to bring the next Archdiocese convention to Springfield. Shortly before his death, Nestor received two letters from Athenagoras, the Greek Archbishop of North and South America. One was written in November of 1943 and the other in March of 1944. Both letters were inquiries about his failing health, as he was very sick for many months before his death in 1945.

Since the founding of the church in 1907, the council has always been in charge of church affairs. Over the years, to the late 1930’s, there were many disagreements between the council and the priests, which resulted in a great turnover of priests at both the St. George and the Holy Trinity parishes.

The Greek Orthodox Church was still being organized in the 1930’s. In 1931, Demetrius Steven Zades, a musician who sang on the radio in five languages, organized the first Greek choir in Springfield.
3. Ibid., p. 1.
5. Ibid., p. 465.
9-10. Ibid.
11. Unidentified Newspaper, April 20, 1936, located in Nationality Group - Greeks folder, Genealogy room, Springfield Public Library.
13. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
18-19. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
31-33. Ibid.
34. Unidentified Newspaper, July 10, 1936, located in Nationality Group - Greeks folder, Genealogy room, Springfield Public Library.
38. Ibid., p. 2.
39-42. Ibid.
44-45. Ibid., p. 467.
46. Ibid., pp. 466-467.
49. Ibid.

55. National Union, May, 1928, p. 11.
57. Ibid., p. 78.
58. Ibid.,
60-61. Ibid.
67. Ibid., August, 1928, p. 6.
68. Ibid., May, 1928, p. 4.
75. Ibid.
78. Ibid., July, 1928, p. 12.
83. Ibid.
84. Unidentified Newspaper, September 12, 1955, located in Nationality Group - Greeks folder, Genealogy room, Springfield Public Library.
85-87. Ibid.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid., pp. 467-468.
91. Ibid.
92. Christopher Kantianis to Nicholas Nestor, Springfield, January 3, 1941, MS located in private collection of Mrs. N.G.V. Nestor.
93-94. Ibid.
96. Ibid.
97. Archbishop Athenagoras to Nicholas Nestor, Springfield, November 4, 1943, March 10, 1944, MS located in private collection of Mrs. N.G.V. Nestor.
98. Ibid.
101. Ibid.

The church was partially destroyed by fire early on the morning of April 16, 1944. The fire occurred when a candle was left in the choir loft after early morning Easter services. Damage was estimated at $70,000, and Reverend Joseph Xanthopoulos lost many priceless possessions. *Springfield Union*, April 17, 1944, pp. 1, 7, col. 2.