

My Papou

Pa-pou \ n : Greek, for the father of one's father or mother. In this case, Dimitrious Kourkoulotis, my grandfather who was the father of my father. Years later it was my *father* who became papou when my sister had a few kids, and then later when one of *those* kids had a kid, my dad became papou papou. Really not sure if that was proper Greek but Ron thought it seemed to make sense at the time so who were we to argue? But, I digress. Dimitri was born in Mantoudiou, Evvia, Greece on November 14, 1878 to George and Stamatiki Kourkoulotis. He was one of five children. Dimitri must have been an ambitious and industrious guy because in 1903 when he was 25 years old, he had saved up enough money to leave Mantoudiou and come to the United States. His main goal seemed to be to work hard in the states and eventually save enough money to send for his wife, Maria who he had left behind. (On a side note, Dimitri could speak four languages- Greek, English, Russian and Italian. I struggle with *one*!) Anyway, he traveled with his brother-in-law who supposedly had the same good intentions but who instead, ended up being a cad when he abandoned his wife and three daughters back in Mantoudiou once he made it safely to American shores. Dimitri was always mad at his brother-in-law, the scoundrel, who abandoned Dimitri's sister (Morfo) and her daughters, Matina, Sofia and Eleni. These ladies, who were all well into their late 70's or early 80's when I traveled to Greece and met them in 1977, were still foaming at the mouth at their father who abandoned them way back when. (Some of the information here and in the pages to follow was garnered from my trip to Greece in 1977).

According to the locals I met in Mantoudiou, Dimitri boarded a boat out of the port near Agia Ana, and eventually made it to Boulogne, France where he caught the S.S. Rotterdam bound for the States. Dimitri arrived on the east coast of his new country on September 30, 1903 with \$14 in his pocket. What his overall plan was once he reached the U.S., no one knows for sure, but he eventually made it out to San Francisco by early 1906. (Thank you very, very much for that one, papou!) But the journey was not without intrigue.

Dimitri slowly made his way across the country, traveling in the company of his crooked brother-in-law, another Greek, and apparently several (possibly five) Italians. Since he only had \$14 to begin with, and I am guessing the other folks were fiscally challenged as well, it's pretty safe to assume that they stopped periodically along the way to earn some money to complete the next leg of their journey.

According to the stories handed down to my father and his brothers, and then to my siblings and I, the Italians at one point killed a snake and cooked it. The Greeks, having

a more sophisticated sense of what they put in their mouths, politely passed on their portion of the serpent and so, it was consumed by their non-discriminating friends from Italy. This apparently was a wise move on the part of Dimitri and his buddies because according to the story, the Italians ate the snake and then promptly rolled over and died from doing so. (Thanks a *whole* lot for *that* one, papou, because I'm guessing I wouldn't be writing this thing had you been a little less picky about what you ate!) I'm also guessing that this may explain my dad's extreme aversion to snakes, but why he hated rats, I don't know. Maybe just because they're about as disgusting as snakes are.

Anyway, Dimitri's next brush with his demise came in Colorado of all places. It seems that one day Stevie asked his dad (Dimitri himself), "Why do you have that big old dent in your forehead?" I never noticed the blemish on his face but hey, kids don't pay much attention to that kind of stuff. So apparently Dimitri sat Stevie down on his knee (well, maybe he was too old for that at the time) and told him a short story. It seems that while he was working in a silver mine somewhere in the high frozen tundra of Colorado, the mine he was working in gave up the ghost and collapsed down on everyone, and he ended up being buried for two days. But once again papou came through by doing his best groundhog impersonation and managed to dig his way out to fresh air and sunshine. *Free at last!* Or who knows, maybe he just got dug out by someone else. No one knows for sure of the details but however he escaped, he got the heck out of Colorado and made his way to San Francisco as quickly as possible. Apparently the mine collapse is where he got the dent in his forehead. I've yet to discover any recorded accounts of the mine collapse but it would be absolutely fantastic to know when and where this little episode took place.

Eventually Dimitri reached San Francisco some time right before the 1906 earthquake because he did say that he was there at the time of the event. He also wondered aloud more than once what the heck he was doing in this country- it wasn't a very safe place! For years we had an old newspaper from the days after the quake with photos and stories of the catastrophe. But now no one seems to know what happened with that newspaper. The last I saw it, it was in the hall closet along with an old, really old copy of Dante's *Inferno*. I'm guessing that these got trashed in the "great move out" of '91 along with my grandmother's handwritten genealogical records of her family from the time they came over to the states in the early 1700s. I sure wish I had all of that stuff now!

Well, once in The City, Dimitri at some point started a grocery store at 18th and Kansas on Potrero Hill and built the business up over time. Old photos of the building show it growing from a single story to several stories. I know that our family (dad, mom and three kids) lived in the house until we moved to Belmont in 1951 and apparently there were

several apartments or at least one other living unit as part of the complex. The place also had a garage and a big room that my brother describes as a dance hall or party room. It was basically the place where papou made bootleg liquor and ran a gambling establishment during Prohibition. According to my dad, he was given the task of driving the bootleg liquor all over town to customers beginning at the age of eight. (You could never complain to dad about his driving because he always came back with, *you can't tell me how to drive, I've been driving since I was eight!*) Papou told my dad, "No one's gonna suspect an eight-year-old kid of running liquor, so you'll be safe." And I'm thinking, *and no one's gonna be wondering what an eight year old kid is doing driving a car all over The City?* Anyway, along with the gambling accessories, wine presses and stills, there were trunks of fine China, several pianos, and apparently at least one trunk filled with some of John Afendras' violins. (John was from Mantoudiou also and he worked in papou's store. He later became a famous San Francisco musician and conductor of the San Francisco Municipal Orchestra. On a side note to the side note, I got to play with those guys one time at the Civic Auditorium.) So anyway, as far as I know, all of this stuff was left behind when dad sold the place and we moved out.



Papou in his store with coffee on sale

Dimitri apparently had at least seven children with his first wife, Maria, only three of whom survived into adulthood, probably in part due to suffering from Thalassemia Major. My brother, Jim and I have Thalassemia Minor and we've made it this far but unfortunately my sister wasn't so lucky. To start with, Dimitri and Maria may have had a boy named George back in Greece, but he must have died because he never made it to the U.S. as far as I can tell. Once Maria made it out to San Francisco (maybe in late 1908 or early 1909- I've yet to find a shred of evidence on how or when she got there), they had John (11/20/1909 - 04/26/1922) who died of Thalassemia. Dad always shed a tear when he talked about how John struggled to exist during his short life. Next came my dad, George (11/5/1911 - 04/09/2003); Efstraitisos (03/03/1913 - 05/13/1913); Stamopoula- dad called her Martha, so go figure (05/31/1914 - 12/09/1916); Gus (12/25/1915 - 09/20/1916); and Stevie (06/25/1917 - 09/24/2000). To top off all of this bad luck of death and destruction, Maria (my manou) died in November of 1918 during the resurgent second wave of the Spanish flu. Word of note- keep that in mind come this fall. After Maria died, Stevie went to live with a Spanish family for a few years and so learned Spanish as his first language. Then when papou re-married, he came back into the household and learned Albanian and Greek. English was his fourth language!

Papou re-married around 1921 to an Albanian lady named Filla. She already had two kids, a boy named Chris and a girl named Irene. Johnny, my dad's half-brother, was born in 1925 and as papou's run of luck would have it, Filla herself died in 1932 when Johnny was around seven years old.

According to Uncle Johnny, the structure at 601 Kansas consisted of a kitchen, two bedrooms, a dining room, living room and bathroom when he lived there as a kid. He slept in the bedroom with papou and Filla. My dad and his brother, Steve, and step-brother, Chris slept in the other bedroom. Irene (step-sister) slept in the dining room. Chris who was six years older than my dad, and apparently it was *he* who got my dad his first job at Postal Telegraph. Just a side note, but that would prove to be a *huge* game-changer in my dad's life moving forward. Chris lived to adulthood, married and later died, according to Johnny, when *his* wife Christine was pregnant- so I am guessing this would have been around 1947-49. Irene who was one year older than dad and had two daughters named Diana and Sylvia).

Dimitri I believe was a good business man because the store thrived on the hill until my dad took it over in 1946. But one funny story from the past has always stayed with me. Dimitri would go down to the farmer's market or whole-sale district once a week to pick up

supplies for the store. He would up hitch his trusty steed (sure wish I knew its name) to the wagon and head on down the hill early in the morning. As Dimitri would stop in to buy goods at the various vendors, it seems it was sort of a custom to have a drink with the wholesaler before moving on to the next dealer. By the end of the day, Dimitri would be toast, but his trusty steed would haul Dimitri and the load of booty back up the hill to the store without ever waking the slumbering shopkeeper.



Papou with his horse (what was the name of that beast?) and buggy. The store is on the corner in the background.

After we moved to Belmont, I believe moved in with my Uncle Steve and his family though I do remember a brief time when I was a kid when he stayed with us, but maybe for only a few weeks or so. My dealings with Dimitri were few and far between and I don't remember much about the man. He died on September 25, 1955 from I believe was colon cancer, a disease that has plagued our family for generations. Oh the questions I would have for that man if I could go back in time for a little chat. Most will remain unanswered, but I am glad for the bits of insight I have gained through my travels and research. He was a remarkable individual, unlike his rat-faced brother-in-law, but probably *not* unlike most of those pioneers who braved the journey and experience of tearing up one's roots and setting out for a new life in a strange land. Here's to you, papou!