

Roots and Family Trees

By *George Kourkoulotis*

January 1976, we were preparing to trip on down to Scanlon's Lagoon in the Gulf of Mexico to catch the gray whales in their breeding grounds. Or maybe they were there for fun in the sun after trekking down from Alaska. How am I supposed to remember? That was like 44 years ago, but you know, I *do* remember the rest of this story with rapier-like precision. As our plans were all but finalized, Jodi gets a phone call from her friend saying that she knew of a band that needed a drummer. I was mildly interested. Apparently, they played a lot of 50's rock 'n roll! Now they had my attention! Oh, and by the way, they were going on a European tour in March. I was snagged. When I auditioned, I found out that they played a lot of 40s big band music and guess what, I played plenty of that stuff with my old man in our living room over the years and I had it all down pat. Now it was *their* turn to be snagged 'cause *no one* my age played drums to 40s big band music. No one. So I got the job, and played with the band for several months before heading out for the Continent.

We played all over Europe for eleven months (you need to read my book to get all the gory details) and when the tour came to an end, I had accumulated a good bit of cash. So, Jodi and I decided that we'd stay in Europe until the sources ran dry. Our first order of business was to go to England and Scotland (I got to play St. Andrews!) for about three weeks and then head south to Greece. When we returned to Amsterdam from the U.K., I met my buddy who manned the A'dam office of The Magic Bus (question: which came first, the Magic Bus travel company or the song Magic Bus by The Who?) and secured transport to the land of the birth of democracy.

I had always thought it would be great to visit Greece and what better time to do it? I got paid to travel around and see Europe and now I was using the rest of that pay to see my father's homeland! So, we boarded The Bus and off we went, but as you might guess, not without a little mishap. Somewhere in the middle of Yugoslavia, a rock that was innocently sitting in the middle of the road jumped right on up and came through our windshield, blowing the entire thing out and leaving us to deal with the elements on our own. The driver pulled over and cleaned up the mess, and then told us to cuddle on up because we would have to drive through the rest of the night with the wind blasting through the space that was previously occupied by the now-departed invisible protection. So, we all hunkered down and weathered the night, and come morning, we pulled into some sort of an establishment that was able to take care of our problem. After many hours we were back on the road again and headed towards the promised land.

On my birthday, we entered Greece for the first time but the delay in Yugoslavia meant that instead of reaching Athens at around noon, we got there at midnight. Wandering the city for an hour or so we found a youth hostile where they had room in the penthouse

suite- in this case, space on the roof where we could throw down our sleeping bags, gaze up at the stars, and fall asleep without a care in the world. After spending several days checking out the Parthenon and the rest the city's sights, we took a bus to the train depot, hopped the train to Halkida, and caught the bus that went over the bridge to the island of Evvia, and several hours later deposited, us smack dab on the main plaka of Mantoudiou, the largest town on the island. My dad had supplied me with a note to present to the first person I met there that said in Greek, "My name is George Corcoleotes. I'm from San Francisco and my grandfather, Dimitri Kourkouliotis came from Mantoudiou."

Stepping off the bus, we looked around and I spotted a guy who came up to me probably wondering why some hippie and his chick had invaded this peaceful little hamlet. Not knowing even how to read the note my dad had given me, I just handed the thing to the guy. He looked at it for a minute, got really excited, and motioned for us to follow him into a little building just off the plaka. By now there were a number of people who seemed pretty curious about our presence and they followed us into the little room. The guy I believe told us to stay put while he ran out of the place. Within a minute or so he came back with another man who would become the key to my entire indoctrination to the Greek culture and Mantoudiou itself. Yani was from Mantoudiou, but he had spent 40 years as a lawyer in Chicago, so he knew English better than me, and had come back to Greece to retire with his family. I was now in business. After chatting with him for a little bit he motioned for one of his operatives to leave, for what, I don't know.

Within minutes the guy returned with a jolly old dude wearing an apron which looked like it was covered in blood who took one look at us and then began some frantic chattering back and forth with our buddy, Yani. By now this little room was jam packed with probably 50 people, with another 100 standing outside peering in through the windows at the spectacle inside. Turns out, the man Yani brought in was named Panayote. He was the main butcher on the island, in fact his butcher store was just on the other side of the building we were in, and, he was my dad's first cousin. Again, Yani sent out his trusty assistant and soon he arrived with another bloody-smocked guy named Demetri who was the second biggest butcher on the island, and was Panayote's brother. The connections were falling into place.

Within an hour or so, Panayote secured us a place to stay for a little while but in the meantime, there were a million questions for us to answer about who we were and how our families were back in San Francisci, the Greek word for The City. Over the course of the day we were introduced to Matina, Sofia and Eleni (daughters of the shyster who abandoned them and their mother Morfo when he went to America with my papou in 1903). My family was rapidly expanding.

Within several days we met Maria who was Eleni's daughter and she had a husband, David who was quite fluid in English. Bingo! I now had two people who I could talk to and

shortly thereafter I met a lady who had a taverna on the plaka who was Greek but had come from Canada and she spoke English better than me. I had three operatives at my disposal!

Over the next few weeks, Greek dictionary in hand, and with the help of my English speaking assistants, I slowly began to learn the language. On a daily basis I was introduced to another relative or two, most of them being either my dad's first cousins or their sons and daughters, and I began putting together a family tree. By the time I left Greece over 6 months later, the tree included 144 people on my papou's side of the family, 47 whom I met while on the island, and 97 people on my manou's side, only three of whom I met.

While living in Mantoudiou, and then later on in Piliou, I met and partied with many of these relatives and me and Jodi learned the language well enough that when we went to visit a relative, we could actually carry on very intelligible conversations with my relatives. I was very crappy on verb tenses but other than that we could both carry on a conversation with anyone about any subject. Case in point. The one lady I met who was the daughter of my manou's brother could not speak English at all. Neither could her husband, son or daughter. But in talking with them I constructed a family tree of 97 people and I had very spirited discussions with the husband who had fought against the Italians who overran the island during World War II. It was he who told me that the Nazi's had taken over the island and made Panayote's butcher shop their headquarters. He was still quite angered with the Italians over *this* one.

While living in Greece during the spring and summer of 1977, several things come to mind. After a while, I actually started to think and even *dream* in Greek. Now if you haven't learned another language, *that* is quite a trip! The only thing I had no idea about was how to *read* that language. I mean, the road signs had three different spellings of a town's name. So how was I supposed to figure this out if *the Greeks* couldn't even settle on the correct spelling of a word? To this day I remember a little bit of the language, but I really wish I had been able to keep up with it. It's pretty neat speaking in another language, especially the language of one's ancestors.

One day while we were walking along a road taking us from one beach to another (doing our best to practice what it's like to be retired), we ran across an old guy walking towards us who stopped us and said, "I went to grade school with your grandfather." Yeah, the guy actually went to grade school with papou, like maybe 85 years earlier! What a treasure! The guy was probably at least 90-95 years old but hey, he was still walking the ridges along the coast of Evvia with the rest of us. I'm glad I had by then learned the language or I would have had no idea what this guy was talking about. Word of note- once we arrived in Mantoudiou, we became celebrities so to speak. We'd be hanging out on the plaka in Mantoudiou and someone would show up and question, *who are those hippies who've invaded our little Shangri la* and someone would tell them, *hey, they're relatives of Dimitri and*

Panayote Kourkouliotis and then everything would settle down. But we were *definitely* known around the island (Greece's second biggest island) and soon we were accepted as locals.

The problem with that though eventually came to pass when one day I got letter in the mail. Now here's how the mailman did his job on Evvia. He would roll into town sometime during the day, settle down at a table outside a taverna on the plaka, and order an ouzo. Several of the locals would pull up chairs and after a while and several ouzos into the experience, he'd start calling out names associated with the letters he had to distribute. If the named recipient was not on hand, someone would tell the mailman that he'd take the letter to the guy, and so it went. I always showed up for this event just in case I got a letter from my brother, sister or parents, and I was often rewarded on a regular basis. Like *how are the Giants doing? Or had Ribit come home yet? My cat spent the year and a half while I was in Europe running away for a month or two and then mysteriously showing up again for whatever reason.*

Anyway, one day I got a letter from who knows who? I opened it up and found it written in Greek. Like I said, I couldn't read that language to save my soul. But I was somewhat on alert tough 'cause it had a bunch of eagles and spears in the header, and eagles and spears are not a good combination in my experience. Well sure enough, my suspicions were not unfounded. I handed this to Yani (the Chicago lawyer) who looked at the letter, looked up at me, looked back down at the letter, looked back up and me and said, "You've been drafted!" *Drafted!!! What do you mean I've been drafted?!?!?! Well apparently, the law in Greece was that if you have a Greek surname and you are in Greece for 4 months, you are now property of the Greek army. Holy Christopher, I'm too young to die!!! Besides, I already dealt with that one once before. On a side note, I have since lost that letter much to my chagrin.*

So how was I going to deal with it *this* time? Inquiring minds want to know. Upon further inspection, I was told that if I left the country for a little while, I could come back and stay another four months until I would once again receive another summons for my services in the Greek armed forces. Armed with that tidbit of knowledge, we booked ourselves a trip to Jodi's homeland, Israel (another country with amazing people), stayed there three weeks, and returned to Greece for another two months. Problem solved.

One funny episode occurred while in Mantoudiou when my brother Jim showed up for a visit from the States. I would take him around to visit with the various relatives, none of whom spoke English, and so I would be the interpreter between my brother and the relative. This worked out great because I was somewhat competent in both languages and my brother was able to have some great discussions with everyone. Well one day we went to visit Maria and her husband, David. We all sat down, and Jim asked me some question for David which I immediately translated into Greek, and David answered back in Greek and I gave Jim his answer in English. Well this went along fine for about five minutes or so until it dawned on

me, *David is fluent in English! They don't need me to interpret because we all speak the same language!* And just then it seemed to dawn on David also because he said, "You don't need to translate for me because I understand what he's saying." Well, duh! We all got a big kick out of that one.

While in Greece I partook in every activity that I could- weddings, baptisms, town festivals, you name it. But there was one bit of the culture that I wished to see that was not to be discovered. One day I asked where the old cemetery was. I thought it would be great to visit the place and look for the graves of my old ancestors, genealogical work that at the time I didn't even *know* was genealogical work. But my hopes were dashed a split second later. Whoever I asked the question of said, "Oh, see the high school over there? They plowed the graveyard over and built the high school right on top of it." *What? You have to be kidding me!*" Just recently someone (maybe from our Society) told me that when this sort of thing occurred, they would dig up the old bones of people, write their names on their skulls, and put them down in the crypt of the local church. Had I known that then I could have asked to go skull hunting next time I went by the church but as it was, I had no idea.

So like I say, I became immersed into the culture and one of the best experiences was Easter with the family, or should I say *families!* During our stay in Greece we were often invited to people's homes for lunch or dinner and we enjoyed some of the best food we ever ate- barbecued lamb or goat being the prime menu item. But on this day, we met our match. You see, Uncle Panayote invited us over for his Easter dinner around 1:00 or so. No problem there. As usual, the spread was fantastic and Panayote wasn't happy until I had consumed my usual five or six lamb chops at his table. But we couldn't stay for dessert because Dimitri had invited us to *his* place for Easter as well. So we moseyed on over to Dimitri's and sure enough, the lamb was just about to come off the spit and we were just in time. About four or five lamb chops later, it was time to move on because Maria and David had asked us to come over as well and we were hoping that by now they had moved on to dessert. But *no*, not our luck. We were just in time to sit down for a full course meal of, you guessed it, barbecued lamb and all the fixings. When we politely tried to beg out of consuming one more mouthful of food, the reprimand came, "Why don't you eat? You don't like my wife's cooking?" There was no getting out of *this* one and so, I proceeded to consume another number of lamb chops that by now put me well on my way towards the upper teens! I later felt sorry for the damage I did to the lamb population that day.



Left to right- Sofia and Dimitri (Maria's kids), Jodi, Eleni (Dimitri's wife), Maria (Dimitri's daughter), her husband Taxis, and Dimitri. In the foreground, dinner!

And speaking of lambs, Uncle Dimitri seemed to be the designated lamb and goat assassin for the whole of Mantoudiou. If someone needed the dirty deed to be done, Dimitri was the go-to guy. He would head out to whatever field the unsuspected beast was grazing, or they would bring the thing in on leash to his dungeon of doom, and Dimitri would perform his magic for a small fee or maybe a hunk of the critter, I'm not sure. But *this* was where I drew the line. He would always invite me with a gleam in his eye to come along as if it were a spectator sport, and I would always decline. I eat meat like there's no tomorrow on a regular basis but if it were up to me to do the throat slitting maneuver, I would be barbecuing portobellas and tomatoes every night instead of ribs and goat.

Another interesting question that never got answered while I was in Greece was when I asked people where our last name came from. My question stemmed from the fact that our name was spelled Kourkouliotis, and, there just happened to be a little town about 25 kilometers away named Kourkouli. Hmmm, there had to be a connection there somewhere. But no one had any idea. They all just shook their heads and said it was coincidence or something. *No way, there had to be a connection there somehow!* Well several years later while working at SERI in Golden one of the guys in International Programs who was a European scholar told me that in that part of the world, when people traveled to another town to live, the locals would add the letters "otis" to the end of the name of the town where they came from. Therefore, one of my old ancestors left Kourkouli a long time ago and went to live in Mantoudiou and he became the first Kourkouliotis. Now wouldn't *that* be cool to find out who *that* guy was and when this all took place? I'd have no idea where to start.

I must say that my stay in Greece was one of the most humbling experiences of my life. The last anybody knew, Dimitri had gone to America almost 75 years earlier and that was that. I was the first person from the States to come back to Mantoudiou in all that time. But they took me in like I was their long-lost puppy and the time I spent eating with, talking with, and partying with these people was one of the great highlights of my life. On a side note, we helped several of our relatives drain their entire year's supply of Retsina over the course of our stay. I got to see the homes where both my papou and manou grew up. I got to see how these people had lived for centuries, but I was also a witness to the end of an era as the young people moved out of Mantoudiou to seek their fortunes in the greater world out there. Neither Dimitri nor Panayote had any children who stayed in Mantoudiou to tend the goats and lambs and so, the island was beginning to transform itself from a herding society to one that featured huge pig farms where pigs lived out their lives in individual troughs barely big enough to contain them. (By the time Uncle Johnny visited Greece in the late 90s he said there was hardly any lamb or goat to be had- just pork.) I got to hear the harrowing stories of life during World War II when the Italians and Germans took over the island and commandeered Panayote's shop and made it their headquarters. And I experienced the love and generosity of a very humble people who took me in as one of their own and asked for nothing in return. Mantoudiou was a beautiful little town, about four kilometers from the beach at Kymassi, and I actually wondered on many occasions, *could I stay here and live? Could I really!* But it all came down to this. They had no rock and roll. I could play in a bouzouki band but, no, strike one! Speaking of baseball, they *had* no baseball. I could play and watch soccer, but soccer, *really? Soccer?! Gimme a break.* Strike two. And, then there was that slight little issued that if I stayed I would *get drafted!* Strike three game over. Besides I was running through money and we still needed to see Italy and France. It was time to leave Greece once again, but the memories will always remain. Yasou!

Postscript- Upon coming back to the States, it took about 15 years, but in solidarity with my heritage I changed the spelling of my last name from the Americanized version, Corcoleotes, to the real family name of Kourkouliotis. My dad and brother thought I was crazy. Sometime after that with the advent of the internet, my wife got an email from a lady named Lisa Kourkouliotis in Detroit who just for the fun of it, had typed in her last name and came up with Vikki's name as being the Program Manager for the NREL photo library. She asked Vikki how they might be related so Vikki forwarded the message to me and the connections to Mantoudiou were once again taking place. She was the granddaughter of Dimitri the butcher, born in the States after Dimitri's son Nikos moved to Detroit in the late 60s or early 70s. She was on the family tree I had created while in Greece back in 1977! We were not alone! This chance encounter has resulted in over 20 years of communications between me and a number of the Kourkouliotis clan both here in the States and throughout Europe and beyond. I had discovered my roots, and the family tree is indeed alive and growing.



Papou's spiti (house) where I believe he grew up. He may have later lived in of all places, Kourkouli, about 25 kilometers away.



Left to right- My brother Jim, me with Alexandra (Vasso's daughter) on my lap, Panayote's daughter Vasso, Panayote, Kristo (Vasso's son), some kid, and Yani the Chicago lawyer.