

CALLIOPI FONIAS

This is a transcript of an interview with Calliopi Fonias, at her home 78 Harold Street, Middle Park, 3206, on 25 September 2015, by Anne Miller for the Middle Park History Group. Sonya Cameron also from the Middle Park History Group, was present

Calliopi's early life in Greece and her and Michael's arrival in Australia

Calliopi was born in 1942 in the small village of approximately 800 people called Petra on the island of Lesbos (Lesvos). Her family was comprised of her parents, an older brother and herself. Calliopi's grandmother lived nearby and Calliopi has her name. This name is continued with Calliopi's granddaughter here in Australia.

The family were farmers initially growing tobacco plants. This was very hard work getting up about 4 am to collect the tobacco leaves and then going under the shade to thread the leaves using needles and string so that they could be placed in the sun to dry. When dry the leaves were packed on pallets and people from Athens would come to check the quality. If the leaves were of good quality the family would be paid but if not the leaves would be burned. This was very hard for Calliopi's parents growing the crop for the whole year but not knowing until the last minute if it would be acceptable. Later Calliopi's father became a vegetable farmer growing tomatoes, eggplants and beans. This was still a hard life but more successful. Summer time was OK growing the vegetables but wintertime, except for leeks and spinach, did not provide sufficient income. If they purchased items from the grocery they had to fill in an official piece of paper listing what they had spent so that in the summer when they were making money they could pay off these bills, but they could not pay day by day or week by week. This required trust by the shopkeeper. Calliopi's father was a very hard worker. On the farm they also had animals - goats, chickens for eggs, and one cow for milk which enabled them to make butter and cheese. On special days they would kill a chicken to cook it. They also grew olives which were taken to a factory in the village where they were paid according to the weight and the oil was pressed. Calliopi's family did not grow grapes for wine but other families in the village did so.

Calliopi's parents were keen for her brother and herself to better themselves by having a good education. So Calliopi's brother became a qualified electrician after attending the school in Mitilini, Calliopi completed primary school and then high school for 6 years and wanted to become a teacher. But because some of the villagers accused her father of being a Communist and so she was failed in her entrance examination for teaching.

Very soon after this Calliopi met her future husband.

At high school Calliopi had learned English. After she left school, from the age of 18 to 22 she joined a group in the village learning to read and write English.

Calliopi was the only one in her family to emigrate to Australia. She had met her future husband Michael who was a motor mechanic in Petra. Because they did not want the hard life of their parents Michael suggested that they go to Australia for 7 years and then return to Greece. Michael and Calliopi were engaged before they left Greece. At the time of their engagement Michael did not like Calliopi's long hair so he took her to Mitilini to a hairdresser to have it cut short.

Their decision to come to Australia and to Melbourne was influenced by Michael's brother having already

migrated to Melbourne. Michael travelled to Australia in 1962, coming to Melbourne where his brother and mother had arrived earlier. He then organised the paperwork for Calliopi to join him on 20 January 1964 travelling on the *Ellinis* by herself on its first trip to Australia. When the ship arrived at Station Pier Calliopi went to the home of her future brother and sister-in-law, living also with her future mother-in-law and her future husband. The brother-in-law's name is Alex, his house was at 369 Montague Street, Albert Park where he still lives today.

Calliopi started work at a factory off Montague Street near Ferrars Street where they made the radiators for cars. She was taught the job at the factory. There were many other Greek people working there too, and Calliopi found the work hard. Initially Michael had not been able to get work but he did get a position at General Motors.

Calliopi and Michael's marriage.

On 30 August 1964 Calliopi and Michael were married at the Greek Orthodox church of St. Constantinos in Prahran. This church subsequently burned down but was rebuilt. This was rather disappointing for both Calliopi and for her parents not to be here for her wedding but her brother-in-law was present. Calliopi's own brother came to Australia considerably later when her son was married in 1990. Calliopi's wedding was similar to what she might have had in Greece but with a smaller party after the church ceremony, held at Alex's house. Here they had spanokopita, meat balls with sauce and salads. There were other people also from the village of Petra but living in Melbourne who came to the wedding.

Calliopi and Michael continued to live with Michael's brother until 1966. He was working very hard as a motor mechanic, he also fixed people's cars. Calliopi was also working hard as she would accept any offers from her employees of overtime work. Her mother-in-law was very helpful as she did a lot of the cooking and other domestic work.

Calliopi and Michael's family

Once in Australia Calliopi continued her English lessons through the radio. She was sent the requisite books and every morning she would listen to the radio, complete the lesson and send it to the teacher. Calliopi is uncertain whether this facility was only for Greek people or for all migrants.

In the early days after her arrival Calliopi was mainly mixing with Greek speaking people whom she met through her brother-in-law and sister-in-law. Many of these people were from Petra.

In 1966 Calliopi and Michael moved to the house in which Calliopi lives today. Michael's mother moved to Harold Street with them too. She looked after the domestic chores.

Their first son, Christopher, was born in November 1965 before they moved to Harold Street. He is named after Calliopi's father. The second son was born in 1971, he is named Duke after Michael's father.

Following Christopher's birth Calliopi returned to work at the radiator factory and her mother-in-law looked after the baby. At the factory, National Radiators, the radiator making section moved to another location while the factory in Montague Street changed to making nozzles and the spring for hair spray containers. The factory also made the plastic parts. By this time Calliopi was in charge of quality control which was largely thanks to her good grasp of English. Calliopi stayed at this factory, N.C.L. Precision Products Pty Ltd, for a long time,

she did not like changing jobs. But eventually the factory moved to Mount Waverley which is a long way from Middle Park and difficult to access as at this time Calliopi did not drive. Because she was a good and consistent worker as a Supervisor of quality control her employers tried to persuade her to continue.

Eventually they organised for a man in the accounts department of the factory who lived in St. Kilda to take Calliopi to and from the factory each day in his car. Michael would drive Calliopi to St.Kilda and she would be brought back to Middle Park after work. This was a new factory making the hair spray fittings but employing mainly Australian people. Calliopi stayed here until she was pregnant with her second child in 1971.

Following Duke's birth Calliopi found a job at Swallow and Ariel, biscuit manufacturers in Port Melbourne, after hearing an advertisement on the radio. Here she was also involved in the quality control, monitoring the colour of the biscuits, checking the weight of the ingredients and making a report. Calliopi liked this job.

Calliopi's mother-in-law spoke little English, in the house the family spoke Greek.

Other family members here or in Greece.

Calliopi's father wanted to come to Melbourne when Calliopi was ready to return to Petra forever, but he became sick in 1979 and subsequently died. In 1982 Calliopi returned to Petra to bring her mother here to Melbourne permanently to live with Calliopi and her family.

Calliopi's mother came to Australia in 1982 and stayed here until 1989. At this time Calliopi's mother-in-law was living with them too which did not prove to be easy, so eventually the mother-in-law returned to living with Alex her other son in Albert Park.

Calliopi's mother returned to Greece in 1989 but was not happy again. In 1990 when Christopher was to be married Calliopi's mother and brother came to Australia. In 1993 Calliopi's mother became sick again and died. Calliopi then took her mother back to Greece to bury her in Petra. Calliopi's mother-in-law died in 1997.

Kindergarten and schooling.

Christopher attended the Middle Park kindergarten in Mills Street next to the primary school.

When Calliopi worked at Swallows Michael would take Christopher to school and her mother-in-law looked after the baby.

Christopher and Duke both attended the Middle Park Primary School. Through their contact with the school the Fonias family got to know more Australian families. Because Calliopi and Michael were keen for their children to have a good education both boys continued their secondary schooling at Wesley College on St. Kilda Road. Here there were very many fewer Greek children at the school probably, about 5 in Christopher's class. At Wesley Christopher and Duke were involved with rowing on the Yarra River. They are not involved with rowing now.

They also went to the local beach and swam with their friends.

Once the boys were at school Calliopi and Michael made the decision to stay in Australia, partly because the children were fitting in very well at the school and it did not seem like a good idea to make the upheaval and take them back to Greece.

Shopping

Calliopi and Michael did their shopping mainly at the South Melbourne market but purchased their groceries at

the supermarket in Armstrong Street.

Calliopi does most of her shopping at the market. In 1992 the owner of the Picadelli delicatessen shop at the market asked Calliopi to help her. She still helps there when needed.

Impressions of Middle Park

When Calliopi came to live in Middle Park it reminded her of her village in Greece as she was able to see the sea each day. When they were looking for a house they wanted to be near the beach. Also it was quiet and things were convenient, close to the beach, shops and the city. At the time of purchase some friends suggested to Calliopi that the house was small but she thinks that having all these attractions and facilities nearby suit her well.

The family in 2015.

Presently Duke and his family are living in Ormond. Christopher was married and divorced and now lives with Calliopi. Christopher's son, Michael, lives with his mother but comes to Harold Street every second weekend. At the time of the interview Michael, who is named after his grandfather, was staying in Middle Park for 3 weeks as his mother was in Spain on holiday.

Calliopi thinks that her sons have been more successful in their careers than they would have been had they been brought up in Petra.

Returning to Greece.

In 1976 Michael finished working at General Motors and the family travelled to Greece for 6 months. On his return a friend asked him to join him in running a petrol station and car workshop in Barkly Street St. Kilda.

This was hard work as they were open 12 hours each day for 7 days of the week.

Michael died in August 2007.

Calliopi kindly produced two photos of her family and one of the village of Petra.



Duke, Callopi, Christopher and Michael Fonias
1990



Michael and Callopi Fonias on their Wedding day
1964



Village of Petra on the island of Lesvos