

A Greek village in Hungary: a story of the communist refugees

It's funny how a simple request to visit friends can lead to another Hellenic adventure. With winter in London seemingly at an end, I was invited to Budapest to visit a few of my Australian friends who had moved there.

As I always do before a simple visit to a foreign country I typed in the words 'Greek' and the destination country with the hope of locating a restaurant serving souvlakia and ouzo. The results that Google search returned astounded me. I found an article published in 1993 in the US about a Greek village in Hungary. The Greek village was located 60 km south of Budapest and before I knew it I had convinced my friends to take me to the mysterious Greek village of Hungary!

Civil War

Before we get there, let us turn our attention to one of the darkest chapters in Greek history. It's a period in history that should never have occurred – the Greek Civil War (1946-1949).

Over 50 000 people died in a war between those who supported communism and those for the 'Western' backed democracy. The death of so many people, the resulting famine, the forced period of exile for tens of thousands of people and the lack of political stability that led to such catastrophes as the invasion and foreign occupation of Cyprus could have been avoided. No, it should have been avoided.

During the last, shameful weeks of the Civil War, children of parents who supported communism were sent to Eastern Europe. With most communist support-



ers expecting reprisals it seemed the best way to protect their children was to send them abroad. Families were separated for years. Some, forever.

Hungary was one of the countries who opened the doors to the fleeing Greek refugees. The Hungarian government led by dedicated volunteers commenced construction on a village, to be known as Γκρoγfαλβα (Greek Village) on May 6, 1950. In 1952, in honour of the executed Greek communist leader, the village was renamed Beloyannis (Beloianisz).

Greek Village

In the early days, Beloyannis had 1850 residents, including the children who had fled from Greece and, thankfully their parents who followed them to Hungary.

My friends Krisztian Pege and Amaury Cork drove me to the Greek village outside of Budapest. It was a quiet Friday afternoon. And on cue it began snowing. The village with over 450 dwellings seemed stunning in a sheet of snow. To keep warm, we entered the nearest cafe bar we could find. Disappointingly, everyone was speaking Hungarian. In the village of Greeks, how could this be possible?

sible?

Surprisingly, most people seemed oblivious to the strangers, until Kristian asked if there were any Greek speakers. We met a kind, warm man who did not wish to be named in the article. He began by telling me about the history of the village and that only 50% of the residents spoke Greek. After eating some non-Greek sweets, he took me to the home of the former Mayor of Beloyannis. The Mayor of the village is traditionally Greek.

Zizis Vlahopoulos, the former Mayor of the village, was clearly enjoying his afternoon before this stranger appeared on his door step. It turns out I had e-mailed his website in English a few days earlier and he had been hoping to communicate with me (writer's note for next time, use your Greek!).

As we began to talk, his seemingly tough exterior turned to a feeling of passion and pride in his community. The more we talked, the more I could I sense the living history that had been presented to me. He was one of the children brought to the village at its inception.

We moved on to the main square and into the office of the school and library.

These buildings had been built in 1950. Like many of the people I met in the village, he was born in the Greek state of Macedonia – in the town of Kastoria. In the early days, there were over 8000 refugees from Greece, most would settle in for a while and move on to places such as Budapest.

By 1954 most families had been reunited and there had been plenty of work for Greeks in a local factory. I was told that in 1956 the first group of ethnic Hungarians moved into the village. By 1980 Greek speakers still numbered 60% however, during the ensuing decade the Greek government actively repatriated Greeks from communist states. Approximately 700 residents from the village returned to Greece. Today the population numbers 1185, with the most recent census indicating that 81.4% consider themselves to be Greek in origin. There are 99 full blooded Greeks in the village, the rest are mixed Greeks or ethnic Hungarian.

Greek is taught at the school and there is always a good 'glendi' when its time to celebrate a big event such as March 25 and Easter when there is a public lamb on the spit.

Interestingly, a highlight of the village is its beautiful, Byzantine style church which was built in 1996. On the day of our visit, it looked even more spectacular with the onset of the evening and the falling snow. The church is the first building that a visitor will see, located on the main road leading into the village. With the support of people such as Mr Vlahopoulos, this predominantly atheist village acquired a Modern Greek church.

I returned to the cafe bar to find my friends and was ecstatic to see how the place had filled up with Greek speakers. Xristos, Marios, Vasilis and Nikos allowed me to join in on their table and they told me how there are few work opportunities in the area, so each Monday they go to Vienna to work and return to their homes for the weekend. It was a

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