

THE FIRST WAVE BEYOND A WHITE AUSTRALIA

On April 20, 1947, the Egyptian-registered SS *Misir* docked in Melbourne with its multi-cultural human cargo: 624 men, women and children from 26 different countries, plucked from ports in the Mediterranean, Middle East and East Africa. It was a voyage that began amid scenes of almost unimaginable chaos, as hundreds of thousands of migrants, refugees and displaced persons

scrambled for berths on ships heading out of an area ravaged by war and now being painfully redrawn along new boundary lines. At the same time, thousands of pre-war European migrants, especially from Greece and Italy, were trying to reunite families separated by war. It was a voyage that ended in unprecedented controversy as the SS *Misir* sparked a bitter wrangle over dire on-board

conditions, and allegedly "animal-like" behaviour by steerage-class migrants. And a voyage that sailed deep into the national psyche, exposing widespread fears that the very future of White Australia was suddenly threatened by the arrival of so many Jews, of so many swarthy dark-skinned southern Mediterraneans. Un-British, un-Australian, "unsuitable" aliens.

Maria Papanastasiou, Greece

Maria Hatzikyriacos, born Maria Papanastasiou on the Greek island of Castellorizo in 1924, has a clear recollection of the events which led to her arrival in Australia on the *Misir*. As was the case with most of those who migrated to Australia on what was - although they did not realise it at the time - an historic voyage, it began with the war.

In 1943, British forces successfully wrested control of Castellorizo from the occupying Italian forces. The British occupation was short-lived, however. German forces, stationed on the Greek island of Rhodes, about 70 nautical miles to the west of Castellorizo, attacked from the air. Maria recalls seeing, from the family's harbourside home, the first German plane arrive, sweeping over the monastery of Prophet Hlias. She initially thought it was an English plane. When she saw the first of many bombs fall on the township, she knew the island was under attack from the Germans. The family had previously made plans as to where they would seek shelter if such an event occurred. Maria ran to the shelter of a below-ground cellar in a second home her family owned, some distance away from the harbour.

In the meantime, small fishing and sponge boats from the island of Symi, whose owners had thought they would find shelter in the harbour of Castellorizo, began to hurriedly depart. Maria, her three sisters, two brothers and her mother boarded one of these small boats, carrying belongings which, as a precaution, had been sewn sometime beforehand in pillow cases. They were taken to the town of Antifilo (now called Kas) directly opposite Castellorizo on the coast of Turkey, not knowing where their future lay.

While they sought refuge in Antifilo, most of the remaining Castellorizians were, unbeknown to Maria and her family, evacuated by the British and taken to Cyprus and Gaza.

Shortly after their arrival in Antifilo another Symian boat, which had also taken to sea to escape the Germans, arrived. The owner had been told by those Kastellorizians who had been evacuated from the island that Maria and her family had sailed for Turkey. He collected them and set sail for Cyprus.

This trip could have been a disaster. The owner, evacuating hurriedly himself, had a small supply of fuel on board. He had no sails. The boat had been undergoing repairs when the Germans attacked Castellorizo. On the way to Cyprus he ran out of fuel. To compound their problems, violent storms tossed the boat off course. They were at the mercy of the elements.

They drifted for eight days, unaware of their exact location. Despite the fact that they had imposed severe rations on themselves, they ran out of food. Maria's mother fell ill, and developed a high fever. In desperation, Maria and her siblings tied together the three icons they had taken from their home on Castellorizo when they hurriedly departed, and dipped them into the sea. A series of extraordinary events followed. The storm subsided. As if there had been divine intervention, they drifted into the Cypriot port of Limassol.

(An interesting postscript to their embarkation on Cyprus occurred 49 years later. Maria was travelling in Greece and spent a short while in Ouranoupolis, a small town which serves as the entry port into Mount Athos. There she met a fellow who, when informed that Maria was originally from Castellorizo, recounted for her an event many years before when he had helped a Kastellorizian family disembark from a boat onto a Cypriot wharf. He could recall the names of some of the family: Evdokia, Maria, George... This man, recounting this story to Maria, was the same man who had assisted the Papanastasiou family in 1943.)

The family was taken to English barracks near Lefkosia where, after a four year separation, they were reunited with their husband and father, Nikolaos Papanastasiou. He took his wife and six children to Paphos. As Nikolaos had been working in espionage with the British, he had made many professional and personal contacts on the island. Thus began a four year period which Maria remembers with much fondness.

By 1947 family members in Australia had organised to sponsor the family in

their endeavours to migrate to Australia. There was no future on Castellorizo -- most of the island's homes had been destroyed by the German bombing which Maria and her family fled in 1943. During that period, there was no assisted passage for migrants of a Greek background. The family had to raise 220 pounds for each of the family members, a huge amount of money.

The first three to leave were Maria, her older sister Evdokia and their younger brother George. They travelled to Haifa then to Port Said in Egypt, searching for the means to travel to Australia. They spent 22 days in Port Said, going to the Cooks Tour office every day enquiring about the availability of passage to Australia. The office was expecting a boat but did not know when it would arrive. The *Misir* arrived after this three week period to the great joy of those in the port who were waiting for a passage to South Africa and Australia.

While others have referred to the *Misir* as a misery, and others described the conditions as 'revolting' (notably Robert Menzies), Maria has positive memories of the voyage to Australia. From the time she and her family were evacuated from Castellorizo, she had the chance to see the world beyond the small island of her birth. She was young, seeing the world for the first time and was voyaging to Australia, where a new life awaited her.

One of her clearest memories is that of Paul Boyatzis. Maria remembers his distress whenever the ship's foghorn was sounded. This reminded the then ten year old of the sinking of the *Empire Patrol*. Paul survived that voyage; many did not. Maria remembers comforting him on more than one occasion when Paul thought that the sounding of the *Misir's* horn signalled its sinking.

The boat stopped at Mombassa in Kenya and Durban in South Africa. (She recalls the decorations in Durban, which King George had visited two days before: Maria and others, not knowing of the English King's visit, thought that the town had been decorated for them). She has vivid recollections of their entertaining themselves during the long voyage with the company of other Greek migrants. She remembers celebrating Greek Independence Day on the ship: it was 25th March, 1947, the deck of the *Misir* was festooned with flags and banners, the captain and his officers were present in their white uniforms, music was played and a march was conducted around the perimeter of the deck, with many Greeks displaying their family ancestral icons. After the



march, hymns were chanted. Maria's general reminiscences are that any discomforts relating to cramped accommodation and the poor and repetitive nature of the food were minor: the dominant feelings, as she recalls them, were of excitement of the new life which awaited them.

This was reinforced with their arrival in Perth on Easter Saturday, where they were greeted with overwhelming joy and hospitality by those fellow Kastellorizians whom they had not seen for many years. Some of these were relatives. Some were friends with whom they had grown up. Maria, Evdokia and George were feted at many homes. Their optimism of a new and wonderful life was reinforced by this warm welcome.

The voyage to Melbourne was very rough. The passage through the Great Australian Bite was particularly violent. Their final destination was close, however, with their arrival in Melbourne being just as moving as that in Fremantle. Many relatives and friends had travelled from various parts of Victoria and New South Wales to meet Maria and her family.

Maria recalls life on Castellorizo in the war years leading up to their evacuation in 1943 as one of hardship and deprivation. She remembers her own mother selling off her inheritance, gold coin by gold coin, so that the family could survive. She recalls her mother cutting slices of bread then weighing them, to ensure her children received the same amount of food. She recalls being given two spoons (and no more) of yoghurt for breakfast, and one thin slice of bread. For her, Australia was the promised land.

Maria, her sister Evdokia and their brother George were reunited with their parents and three other siblings in 1950. The final sibling arrived in 1960 with her own family.

Submitted by Nicholas Kyriacos
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