

Best of both worlds

THE woman with two names has a dilemma and that dilemma is which of her two names she should be known by in this article.

“**A**ndrea’ is the name they give me when I arrive in Sydney,” she explains. “They tell me ‘you need a new name because no one in Australia knows ‘Androulla’. Someone said it sounds like Andrea so I become Andrea.”

The woman with two names lets out a giggle as her eyes dart across the table to where two younger women are listening to a story they’ve no doubt heard before. Between the three of them there will be plenty of this during the next two hours, old tales revisited for the benefit of a new audience, a lifetime of memories excavated for public consumption.

“But all the Greeks still know me as Androulla,” she continues. “If you call me Andrea in the story there will be some Greeks who won’t even know who that is. They have never even heard of Andrea Vasiliou.”

The 68-year-old grandmother of four is laughing loudly now, clearly amused by the thought of her friends scratching their heads as they try to work out who this ‘Andrea’ woman is with the same surname as ‘Androulla’. What the woman with two names doesn’t realise, however, is there’s really no question which of her two names we should use.

This is, after all, a story about Greek-Australians and Androulla Vasiliou is one of the proudest. That’s her at the end of the table, the bright-eyed woman about to relive that day in 1949 when her father waved goodbye to his pregnant wife and four children on the island of Cyprus. Nine years old at the time, she wouldn’t see him for eight years.

Also sitting at the table are Angela and Andriana Demetre, a mother and daughter who also owe the lives they lead on the Gold Coast to the man who made that journey six decades ago. As Androulla’s daughter and granddaughter, they have welcomed paradise into their Benowa Waters home to talk about growing up Greek a long way from Greece.

So here we are — a boiled kettle, three generations of Greek-Australians, enough food to feed a small army and countless memories that crystallised when Angeli Costi read an advertisement that said Australia was opening its doors to migrants willing to work hard.

“When my father heard that, he said ‘I’m going,’” recalls Androulla in an accent that has survived more than 50 years Down Under. “Three men from the same village, they decide to come together ... he only come to work for a few years and go back, just to earn some money and go back, but it didn’t turn out that way.

“As soon as he collect a bit of money he bring one son first and then he bring the other son and eight years (after first leaving) he bring the mother with the three girls.”

In May 1957, Androulla boarded a plane bound for a new life in Sydney.



Gold Coaster Androulla Vasiliou with daughter Angela Demetre and granddaughter Andriana Demetre

At 17 years of age she wouldn’t return to her home country for 25 years but at that very moment she couldn’t have been happier.

“I was ready to leave the small village,” she says. “I used to hate the village. I had an aunty up in the mountains where people go for holidays. It was lovely because you go and sit and have your coffee or drink or sweet. For me it was like a paradise and I thought when I got to Australia it might be the same.”

All three women laugh at Androulla’s naivety but her own smile is soon replaced by a grimace as she recalls that plane ride to Sydney. “It took us five days,” she says, repeating herself to reinforce the horror of the trip. “Five days. Stop, stop, up and down, up and down. Me, my mum and two sisters.

“It was so hard because we couldn’t speak a word of English and when they used to put us down to go to the restaurants, we couldn’t order because we couldn’t read and they didn’t bring us any food. Five days we had nothing to eat except for the biscuits and juice in the plane.”

Androulla starts to giggle at the memory, the passing of time making it easier to appreciate the absurdity of the situation. “We lived on the biscuits and ... “ She battles valiantly to continue but laughter eventually overwhelms her.

Watching on, her 19-year-old granddaughter isn’t laughing. “Compared to now, it’s crazy,” says Andriana with disbelief. “It’s like ‘did that really happen?’”

Even her grandmother agrees it’s hard to believe such a scenario was allowed to unfold but stresses that touching down in Australia made the hunger all worth it. “I saw Sydney and loved it. I thought ‘ooooooh, it’s lovely.’”

Like her older brothers, Androulla was soon working in a Greek cafe and doing her best to expand on her extremely limited English vocabulary.

“I used to ask all the time ‘what’s this?’ and ‘what’s that?’. I used to mix it all up,” she says as a doorbell sounds elsewhere in the house. “It was really hard and I said to myself ‘I’m never going to learn’.

“I used to like to mix with some Australian girls to learn the language. I had a friend, very nice girl, and my brother said to her ‘take her to the shops and tell her what the things are, talk to her’

... I could understand a lot but I couldn’t speak and ... “

Androulla stops mid-sentence before pointing in the direction of an older man who has entered the room and is already extending his hand in greeting. “That’s my husband,” she says.

I COME out 14-year-old on my own. Straight after the Second World War, Europe was very poor. It was wrecked from the wars and Australia was advertising for man to come to Australia and 14-year-old I thought I was a man.”

Peter Vasiliou (or Paraskevas as he was known before his name was given its own Anglo makeover) has called by to see how his wife, daughter and granddaughter’s interview is going but it hasn’t taken him long to take centre stage. A confident storyteller, he is explaining how he left his parents and five sisters behind in Cyprus in 1950 to follow an elder brother who had migrated to the lucky country. Within four years, boasts Peter, he had bought his first shop.

“I was a mazer,” he says, his heavy accent swapping an ‘a-z’ for an ‘i-s’ in the word ‘miser’. “I wouldn’t spend any money but that’s why we come here. If we had money we wouldn’t come here.”

The more pertinent subject though is his union with Androulla. How did that introduction work?

“It worked very good. We’ve been together 51 years,” he says, somewhat bemused by the smiles Angela and Andriana struggle to suppress.

Knowing the true nature of the question, his daughter acts as a facilitator. “You met at a party or something, didn’t you?” says Angela.

“Now look,” interrupts Androulla. “Peter’s story is different to mine. Mine is different because they didn’t told me what we were going there for.”

She then reveals how several months after arriving in Australia her parents took her to a friend’s house for ‘coffee’ and it wasn’t until later she realised it was all part of a plan to introduce her to a potential suitor.

“They introduced people — ‘this is so-and-so and so-and-so’ — and then somebody said ‘oh, you know why you’re here’ and I thought ‘why are we here?’. Peter says he knew different.”

At the opposite end of the table, her husband greets her glance with a nod.

“I knew what was going on.”
“He knew but I didn’t, honest,” says

Androulla. “I didn’t know and I got a shock of my life when they said ‘what do you think?’ ... everybody said ‘shake hands’ and he had a present to give me. He give me a present, we went home and I said to my brother ‘what was his name?’”

Androulla tilts her head back, opens her mouth and releases a beautiful sound, a glorious laugh filled with the kind of joy that comes from having an arranged introduction and still being able to joke about it with the same man half a century later. The pair was engaged three months after meeting and in August, 1958, Androulla became Mrs Vasiliou. Within a couple of years they had two children, Bill and Angela, and life in Sydney was good. They had their shop, lived in a lovely home and enjoyed strong ties with the Greek community.

“We used to mix with a lot of Australians but still we loved to keep the traditions and the language,” says Androulla. “It was important to still have that, to be what you are.”

Which is why their decision to sell everything and move to the Gold Coast in the early 1970s almost defies belief.

“When we arrived it was two days before Christmas,” says Androulla. “And for me Christmas is a big day and I said to myself ‘oh my God, what have I done to my children? Why I bring them here?’. No church. No Greeks.

“I thought we risked losing our culture. I thought ‘what have I done to my family?’ because I was the one who wanted to move up here. He didn’t want to move.”

She motions towards her husband who is once again nodding his head. Their daughter, who was 12 at the time of the move, hasn’t forgotten how emotional it was to leave Sydney’s Greek community for the great unknown.

“We were all crying when we left Sydney,” says Angela, now 48. “It was a culture shock going from somewhere where there was a lot happening to somewhere really quiet where you didn’t see anyone ... we grew up with cousins everywhere and they were our best friends.

“You had your Aussie best friends but you had your cousins. Being born in Australia but of Greek heritage, you sort of didn’t quite fit in with the Aussies but you didn’t quite fit in with the real Greek-Greeks who were born overseas. You were sort of on the fringe. You were in-between the two so you always tended to hang out with people who were in your same situation — being brought up Greek in Australia.”

Despite growing up in a modern Australia, Andriana knows what her mother is talking about.

“That’s even like me. You always feel a bit closer to your Greek friends than you do with your Australian friends. You have more stuff in common with them.”

While the Gold Coast may not have had an active Greek community in 1973, Androulla and Peter met a few Greek families and heard whispers about a parcel of land at Bundall that had been donated for the construction of a Greek-Orthodox church. All that