



I would like to thank Mrs Haskas for providing all this information and photos which are priceless for generations to come. She has moved every Greek - Australian with her dedication to the Greek Heritage. Her work all these years has been IMPRESSIVE!

Anna Arsenis

Sophia Haska: My life, my story



I was born in Rhodes in 1941. My parents' names are Mihalīs and Eleni Vardavas. I have three brothers, Iakovos and Ilias. I spent my childhood in Rhodes and I attended the Girls' High School completing four years before we emigrated to Australia. I was seven years old when I sang for the very first time in front of an audience. At the age of twelve, at the first Dodecanesian Festival held in Rhodes, they made me dance and sing in front of the king.

My grandmother taught me how to sing. One of them, on my father's side was from Simi and she taught me Simian songs. The other one was from Kastelorizo and from her I learned to sing all the Kastelorizian songs. And as I was born and raised in Rhodes, I learned the Rhodian songs from my mother.

When I attended high school, I took a great interest in dancing because my teacher Mrs Mania helped me especially. I remember, she used to take me to her house and teach me other dances from different parts of Greece, in addition to those we learned at school.

I also learned the different customs and the way they were celebrated at different festivities. In Rhodes we used to celebrate the theros (harvest). In Simi they celebrated koukoumas (Saint John the Baptist) or Klidonas as they call it elsewhere. Every year in May I put this on for the Simians. The Kastelorizians celebrated the Kastelorizian wedding they sang the songs of santaklidas (otherwise known as songs of the cradle) and wedding songs. The Kalimnians also performed the departure of the sponge divers.

During my childhood, life was very hard in Greece. My father was a shoemaker and he also worked as a bus

driver for the vacation camps so that he could support his family of four children. I remember that during and after the war there was a lot of poverty in Greece. That's why my parents went as refugees to Marmaras, which is located opposite Rhodes. When they came back to Rhodes a year later they didn't have any property and at that time it was difficult to pay rent and feed your family. For that reason my father decided to emigrate to Australia. He had a koumbaros here who sponsored him. He left in 1955 and in

1957 we joined him. My mother and the four children sailed in the Italian ship Toscana.

In Sydney, my father worked as a shoemaker. He worked for some Greeks in Oxford Street making women's shoes. Those years were really hard for us in Australia. My father earned only sixteen pounds from which he had to pay eleven for rent. This left us with only five pounds to get us through the whole week. My mother was forced to go out and work as well.

My three brothers attended school, but I wasn't accepted into fourth form because my English wasn't good enough. They wanted me to start from the beginning. So I enrolled at the Technical College.

Australians didn't like Greeks or any other newly-arrived migrants. The first job I went for they refused me outright without even bothering to test me to see if I was suitable or not. At the sec-



ond job they went through the motions of testing me but they didn't employ me, even though I passed the test as I was told later by the headmistress of the College. Finally, I got my first job in Australia, working in an office in Broadway where I stayed for three years.

In October 1957, almost a month after my arrival in Australia, I met lots of my compatriots from Rhodes. I remember asking them why we shouldn't start an association or a brotherhood, like so many others had done. So, after a lot of discussions, we decided to establish the Pan-Rhodian Society "Colossus" and we held our very first dance in March 1958, the day we celebrated the anniversary of the Union of the Dodecanese. During that anniversary I introduced my very first dance group and we re-enacted the Union of the Dodecanese.

In 1959 and 1960 my dance groups performed at the 25th March Anniversary at the Trocadero. In those days we Greeks celebrated our anniversaries united. We'd present dance songs and poetry and a lot of people would gather. We had no trouble providing live music because in those days a lot of musicians had migrated to Australia, at least from our island. Amongst them was my uncle Yannis Koutsoukos who played the violin. They were all eager and they liked to come and rehearse