

Custom-made uniforms on demand

NIKOLAOS Popas is a Serbian craftsman with a shop in central Athens who can rustle up a pair of tsarouchia faster than you can say papoutsis.

"I got into this line of work when I was 8 years old," Popas says in his charmingly accented Greek. "My parents were both craftspeople, so I started learning very young. By the time I was 22, I was gone. I came here on my own and have been alone ever since."

Capable of handcrafting traditional costumes from scratch, Popas feels compelled to outfit his clientele from head to toe, including jewellery and accessories.

"I like my job so much that I learned how to make every single item myself. I want people to find everything they want in here. I can even recreate rare garments from books or magazines."

A shop staple is the uniform worn by the renowned Evzones, Greece's elite guards who stand watch over the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the foot of the Greek parliament. It's why one of Popas' customers, a man who gave his name as Konstantinos, came to buy a s-



caled-down version of the uniform for his two-year-old son.

"It's to celebrate Greek independence and show pride in the history and accomplishments of the Greek nation," Konstantinos said. "It's the uniform used in countless battles to preserve the freedom of the Greek people."

Anything's possible

Popas' basement shop, located in Psyrri, offers tsarouchia, or Greek tradi-

tional shoes, and just about anything else that a customer can dream up.

His livelihood relies heavily on the traditionalist Greeks of the diaspora, usually from Australia, Canada or the US, whose unflinching enthusiasm for national holidays keeps him busy all year round.

His walk-in clientele consists mostly of nostalgic parents looking to recreate their own March 25 dress-up days, members of traditional dance troupes

and children cast in school plays.

"I've had this shop for 18 years. Before I bought the place, I apprenticed here a couple of times a week until the owner got really sick. He was already retired but wouldn't pack it in until he found someone to pass on the torch. He suggested I take over since I already knew the tricks of the trade, so here I am."

Challenges

Does he ever feel like throwing in the towel? "It's a tough job and I'm not sure how long I can keep it up," he says. If business were to fall away, he'd be in a bind. "I dream of starting a small workshop in England, Canada or the US, where interest in tradition is not that seasonal but I haven't got the language skills," he remarks.

Located at 5 Pittaki St (210-321-2558), the shop relies heavily on other people's national pride to survive.

But if charm is any measure, Popas will be just fine. He is, after all, the only person who's ever seen me off after an interview with a brand new pair of shoes - even if they were only miniature tsarouchia.



Easter in Olymbos

We celebrate Easter in Olymbos, the Greek village where I was born, just as they did in the time of the Byzantines. I have heard this said ever since I was a little girl. The procession that takes place on a Tuesday after Easter is one of our older traditions. To honor the dead and celebrate the Resurrection of Christ, we carry icons from the main Orthodox church to the cemetery, where the priest says a prayer over each grave.

Then we take the icons into the fields to pray at small private chapels-to ensure good crops, old people say. An auction is held when we return to the village, and the highest bidders carry the icons back into the church. After that there is a big dance.

Easter has always been the happiest season in our village. The stark mountains on the island of Karpathos turn green again, and everyone begins to feel springtime inside themselves. There are so many things to do to prepare for the holiday, and when it begins, one ceremony follows another.

Yet this Easter was to be especially happy for me, because it was my first back home since my husband and I left for the United States ten years before. A few things have changed in the village since my departure. But many old Easter customs are still followed just as they were many centuries ago by my Byzantine ancestors.

Perched on a mountain in the northern part of Karpathos, an island between Crete and Rhodes, Olymbos is still one of the most isolated villages in Greece. The dialect that we speak is so old that many of our words date back to the time of Homer. The tools used by village farmers to cultivate wheat and barley on the terraced slopes are the same as those

used in the Byzantine days.

Our instruments are time-honored-a goatskin bagpipe, lute, and three-stringed lyra-and our musical couplets are renowned on the island. Olymbos was first built down by the sea on a beautiful harbor. But pirate attacks forced the people to move up onto the mountain in the ninth century AD. Until recently there was no road connecting Olymbos to the other 11 villages on Karpathos. And there is still only one telephone for the 600 residents. Yet these are the things that make Olymbos unique, and we are very proud of our heritage.

To get ready for the festivities, some men of the village have their hair trimmed in a street outside the main coffeehouse. Homes have been whitewashed and doors freshly painted in anticipation of the holiday. The women of Olymbos bake special breads at Easter time in large outdoor ovens that are shared by several neighborhoods: road loaves, called koulouria, and fancifully shaped and more ornate ones, called poulloi. They often enclose eggs dyed in different colors, red being most common because it signifies the blood of Christ on the Cross. These old ovens are also used to roast the lambs or goats for the Easter dinner.

Most women of the village still prefer traditional dress, though the men and some young people wear the clothes of modern Greece. Our long-sleeved dresses, black scarves, and colorful aprons are everyday links to a distant past.

Grief pours forth on Good Friday as women cry for members of their families who have died during the year. Pictures of their loved ones have been placed on bier decorated with flowers, which represents the

tomb of Christ. And now, after a formal church service where they had mourned Christ's death, they show pain for their own loss. The mood of the whole village lifts on Saturday as everything is made ready for the celebration of the Resurrection. The highest moment comes late that night after all the lights in the church are put out to symbolize the darkness of the world.

At the stroke of midnight, white-bearded Father Timotheos Hatzipapas (Pic. 9) steps from the Royal Doors of the sanctuary carrying a lighted candle. Then he chants, "Come forth and receive light from the unwaning light and glorify Christ, who is risen from the dead." Parishioners come forward with a new white candle to receive this holy light, which we later take home. We consider it good luck if the candle stays lighted all the way home. Children set off firecrackers when the service is over. Once home, all sit down at the table to break the Lenten fast with a late supper of soup, salad, sour cream, cheese, and wine. We dwell in joy.

Preparing the Easter meal for her family, Iri Diakogeorgiou shows her daughter, Marina, how to stuff a baby goat. At our home my mother hands me some lace as my daughter, Arhontoula, gets help from my cousin and sister-in-law, both named Maria, with a kolaina, a necklace of gold coins passed down by the women of my family. Just before Easter dinner we tap eggs together. The person whose egg lasts longest without cracking will have good luck. As for me, I could not wish for more than to be with my family again at Easter time.

by Maria Nicolaidis-Karanikolas
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