

DOROTHY ECONOMOU

"Communication is my life's work: language-image relations my latest passion"

Interview: ANNA ARSENIS

Tell me a few things about your parents and your childhood.

I was born in Athens and arrived in Australia when I was just under two years old. Times were difficult in Greece then, financially and politically. My father came from a well-to-do Athenian army family - his father and older brother were both leftist. So there were political tensions in the family, as in many families after the Greek civil war ended. My mother came from a poorer, working class family but when my parents married, they stayed with my mother's family. After I was born and after two failed attempts to set up his own business, my father decided we should migrate to Australia. Though Mum found it hard to leave, Dad wanted adventure and a new start and preferred migrating to asking for help from the right wing of his family! It was brave move as, unlike most migrants, Mum and Dad were the only members of their family to migrate.

Do you recall any stories from the time your family arrived here in Australia?

It was hard for them without relatives or neighbours from Greece for support but they made lots of friends and were hard working. My father got work as a "wharfie" and Mum as a piece worker, sewing at home. Soon, with a loan from a friend they managed to start their own business in Oxford St, Paddington, where we also lived. I did well at primary school though was a bit lonely, as our mostly Aussie working class neighbours wouldn't let their children play with me because I was Greek. I have many memories of discrimination in those years. For 5th and 6th class, I was transferred to Woollahra Opportunity school as a result of a my high IQ results in 4th class - do they still do that national IQ test I wonder? Then I got into Sydney Girls High School - again as a result of IQ scores at end of primary school. This is when we moved to Surry Hills and my parents opened a shop on Crown Street. Unlike Paddington in the fifties, Surry Hills in the early sixties was full of Greeks. My parents were active members of the Greek Community and very social and hospitable people. Our shop became a meeting place for Greeks from all over, day and night. There was always food and drink and laughter but most of all, lots of heated talk about politics. During the Greek junta we regularly went up to risk our necks on the sloping roof to get better reception of BBC radio news. So, though I didn't have siblings or an extended family, I grew up in a close, supportive Greek com-



munity and in a strongly political home environment.

Dad instilled in me from a very early age a passion for the intellectual life, an insistence on critical thought, and an awareness of political and ideological processes in all human communication, especially in the mass media. Mum was a model communicator - she was caring, understanding and interested in people of all kinds - and everyone loved her. It was because of Dad's Greek only policy at home that I maintained my mother tongue and Greek culture to the extent that I became fully bilingual. This wasn't typical - most of my Greek-Australian peers at the time could understand but not speak well, nor read or write Greek at all. Dad, however, ignored the letters sent home from school asking parents to speak only English at home (these were the White Australia days when a total assimilation policy was enforced). I had to attend Greek school 3 afternoons a week for 6 years through primary school and then Dad took on my Greek education after that. Modern Greek was not taught at high school or uni

then. A regular father-daughter activity was my reading out articles and columns in the local Greek newspaper out aloud, then discussing them with him.

I did well in the Higher School Certificate. I was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship and came in the top ten in the state in English. I also did well enough to be accepted into Medicine at Sydney University which my father really wanted me to do. I did a year but hated it and transferred to Arts the next year. My father was disappointed when I did Arts and when I ended up teaching English. However, he was pleased when I went on to postgraduate studies and got my MA in Linguistics in 1982.

Tell me a few things about your first job.

Worked in the newspaper "The Greek Herald" when Kalomiris was in charge and I was still at university. He had suggested including a column in English. I was asked to write about festivals, films, my experiences etc in a column called "Greek in English".

After that, I wrote for "The Greek Voice", a new paper begun by Takis Kaldis, amongst others. There, in a column called "Second Generation", I was encouraged to write 'juicier' columns about modern youth issues. So, I wrote about the "disappearing" Greek language, about virginity being a "non-issue" etc. I got lots of critical letters suggesting I was immoral and saying things like, 'What kind of people raised you?' Unfortunately, my photo was at the top of my column. I was having a coffee at Kings Cross (the only place in Sydney that had cafes in those days!) when a couple of older Greeks sitting at the next table very loudly told me to my face how much they disapproved of me and my ideas. Seeing me at the Cross must have confirmed my lack of morals! Luckily my parents were progressive and took it all in their stride.

What did you do after you finished University?

Went to Greece for a year. You see, I had fallen in love with the place when my parents sent me for a three-month holiday between school and uni. I got a job teaching English at an Athens 'frontistirio' (a coaching college). That's when I decided never to teach anyone under 18 again. My pupils were teenage terrors who put drawing pins on my chair and dead mice in my desk.

When I came back from Greece, I got a very good job teaching English as a second language to tertiary educated adults at the Institute of Languages, University of NSW. I was earning good money and finally teaching people who showed true interest in learning so that they could practice their professions in Australia. But the methods and materials we were using were definitely not good enough to meet the needs of these students. There was no appropriate teacher training in Australia at that time. So I decided to go to England in 1976 to complete an RSA diploma course in teaching English to non-English speakers. After completing the diploma, I went to Greece where I married an Athenian Greek and we settled for a while. However, my husband didn't want to stay in Greece. We tried London for a while but in the end went to Sydney in late 1979.

I managed to get my old job back at the University of NSW and became part of an enthusiastic group of teachers trying to find better ways to teach the English language. This led me back to University to study Linguistics. I got my Masters of Arts in Linguistics and then got a permanent position at the Adult Migrant Education Service (AMES). Back then, there was a lot of government funding for the promotion of English language teaching. I spent my first years in this job researching