

# THE 31st GREEK FESTIVAL OF SYDNEY PRESENTS



## “SELLING AN AMERICAN DREAM: AUSTRALIA’S GREEK CAFÉ”

for stories. For example, a few years ago we went to Fiji and we saw a milk bar! And when we started investigating it, we found out that a Greek had owned this in the 50s. The term “milk bar” didn’t come in America, but was started in Australia. It was in fact developed by Mick Addams, the Greek that had the “Black & White Milk Bar” in the 1930s.

*Do you find a repetition in the stories you cover?*

E.A. Not really. I think everyone has their own, unique story. You might find they have a similar pattern but every story is very different. The similarities have to do with things like most of them came here for a better life and only for a few years, some of the widows were stuck with the cafes after their husbands died, the rural towns have been emptied, the train lines have stopped coming through... You heard stories like “my husband brought me here and it was only going to be for a few years”. Now when they look back, 50 years have gone past and they are stuck with these cafes.

### EMBRACEMENT OR EMBARRASSMENT?

*As Australians, have we started embracing our past, or are we still embarrassed by it?*

E.A. I still think that Australian history is Anglo focused. When are not embarrassed by it now; I think people are proud of their history no matter white. White Australians are even proud of having convict ancestry. But you don’t see many Greek, Italian, Maltese etc stories unless they are done by an ethnic organization. I think they are still very hard to find in the mainstream. And I think actors complain about this all the time. On mainstream TV you rarely see someone of non-English speaking background, do you? Les Marinos has often said that roles are very, very limited for him.

*What have learned through your research?*

E.A. That the more you know, the less you feel like you know. We need to spend a lot more time doing it and it would be great to have this sort of work promoted at universities, so other people can follow it on. I feel like we are only touching the tip.

L.J. I approach it from the point of view that for years, Australian history has been taught as nationalist history, which emphasizes differences. In reality, in any area that a human activity has taken place, it has been affected by a flood of ideas from outside. And once that idea goes into a particular area – and this area is of course Australia – it then hybridizes. What we have here is the Greek diaspora being used as a vehicle to change nations, to change the popular culture. It goes from one nation to another: they bring their ideas from where they have been, they transform them and those that live and go to other nations take those transformed ideas with them.

*How has Australia as a whole reacted to your work and exhibitions?*

E.A. From the very beginning we made a conscious effort to show the exhibition at mainstream venues. It’s not just for the Greeks and we find that the audience is 80% Anglo-Australians.

L.J. We are dealing with human stories. It’s just that: human stories that are particular to



ABOVE: Helen and Peter Faros, Olympia Café, Bigga, NSW, 2009, Photo by Effy Alexakis, from the ‘In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians’ National Project Archives. BELLOW: Peter (Beneto) and Jack (Ioannis) Veneris, Blue Bird Café Lockhart, NSW, 2002, Photo by Effy Alexakis, from the ‘In their Own Image: Greek-Australians’ National Project Archives



Greeks. And in the exhibitions we have not only had Greeks talking about themselves, we also had non-Greeks talking about their relationship with Greeks. They were bringing people together in that way. Because they are human stories, it doesn’t matter what age you are, there’s some aspects in these stories that

people pick up on in their own lives. We go beyond the cultural difference and we take a look at the thing that binds us together. Which is the human condition, the human experience. At the National Museum the café exhibition was their best out of house exhibition in terms of attendances they had up to that stage which

### ABOUT THE CURATORS

Historian, Leonard Janiszewski, and documentary photographer, Effy Alexakis, have been researching the Greek-Australian historical and contemporary presence in both Australia and Greece since 1982. Their project and archives, *In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians*, encompasses visual, oral and literary material and is based at Macquarie University, Sydney, in association with the Department of Modern History and the Australian History Museum. Their archive is one of the most significant collections in the country on Greek-Australians. Various national and international touring exhibitions, books, articles and a film documentary have been produced. Of their exhibitions, the most pronounced has been ‘In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians’, which was created in partnership with the State Library of NSW and toured throughout Australia as well as Athens and Thessaloniki in Greece; in Athens it was part of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Cultural Festival, ‘Reaching the World’ and in Thessaloniki it was invited as the Australian component of the City’s ‘Cultural Capital of Europe 1997’ program.

Alexakis’ photographs are held in both public and private collections in Australia – most significantly in the Australian National Gallery, Canberra, and the NSW State Library, Sydney. She currently works as a freelance photographer, following 25 years as a photographer at Macquarie University. Alexakis is an honorary associate with the University’s Department of Modern History. In 2001 Janiszewski was awarded the New South Wales History Fellowship to research a history of the ‘Greek café’ in New South Wales – two major books and nationally touring exhibition will result. He is a Research Fellow with the Department of Modern History, Macquarie University, and was a member of the NSW Ministry for the Arts Literature and History Committee.

was 2008. When it went to Adelaide, when it went to Darwin, same thing happened. There was a flood of people coming in, and it’s all word of mouth. There are stories that are not simply about how people learn cafes, but also stories about where they came from.

*Are we running out of time in preserving these stories?*

L.J. In terms of the earlier generations, yes we are. The oldest person we interviewed was 101. But that early generation is now passing on, although we have recorded thousands of stories.

*Can we expect a new installment of the “In their own image” book?*

E.A. It’s getting very hard to get anything published. We have been trying to get this café book published but it’s not possible at the moment.

L.J. It’s got to do with finance. The type of book we want to publish needs to be of a particular quality, of coffee table appeal. Anyone can publish a book with just text. But we envision a book that has very high class images with it and quite a large number of them, a book with a hard cover and have it bound, that is difficult. We don’t want to fall into the trap of self-publishing, because what happens if you don’t get the distribution? And distribution to us doesn’t just concern Greeks, but all Australians as well as internationally. It has to be a high quality product.