

Astoria: 'A Little Greece' in New York
Solange Williams and Stephanie Mejia

INTRODUCTION: ASTORIA QUEENS, A GREEK COMMUNITY IN NEW YORK

Astoria, Queens is home to the largest Greek population in New York. In the 1970's when one would walk through the streets of Astoria, one would see Greek clubs, restaurants serving Greek cuisine, and many Greek-owned businesses. However, because of the decrease in Greek migration to the United States and the improved standard of living of many Greek Americans, Astoria has become more diverse. Astoria is becoming multi-cultural, housing immigrants from various countries, such as, Columbia, Mexico, Russia and Pakistan. In 2001, one can walk around Astoria and clearly see a mix of different ethnicities. However, the Greeks are clearly identified by their blue and white store fronts, Hellenic restaurant décor and travel agencies. On the streets of Astoria, Greek is evidently spoken among Greeks in businesses and restaurants. However, many Greeks are also very fluent in English. Greek Americans take pride in their language and strive to preserve Greek along generation lines. As a result, LOTE speakers maintain their Greek nationalism in Astoria, by attending Greek Orthodox schools, churches, visiting Greek doctors and supporting Greek organizations in their area.

The largest Greek migration to the United States began in 1910 and ended 1930. Greeks originally came to America to increase their financial status. Many of them had the intension to make a sufficient of money, so that they can return to their homeland well off. Greek migration gradually slowed down in the 1980's due to great improvements in the living conditions in Greece. However, Astoria was still a 'Little Greece' in New York. According to the 1980 census, Astoria was home to 22,579 people of Greek ancestry (Socioeconomic Profiles, 1990). However, according to the 1990 census, Astoria's Greek population dropped to 18,127 (Socioeconomic Profile 1990). This was the result of the drop in immigration and low birth rate of Greeks in Astoria (Moskos 1990). According to the Principal of St. Demetrios, many Greeks are currently leaving Astoria to settle in Whitestone; however, they still own many of the buildings in Astoria.

RESTAURANTS AND BUSINESSES: THE STREETS OF ASTORIA

Language is important to ethnic continuity and with the disappearance of language, may lead to the disappearance of the Ethnic group (Psomiades 1982). LOTE speakers in Astoria send their children to Greek Orthodox Churches to insure that their language is continued from generation to generation. Many Greek speakers, who still live in Astoria, speak highly to the times when it was okay not to know English.

Upon arriving to Astoria, we had different perceptions. In our group of two, one of us was totally lost and felt like a foreigner, the other was completely at home. This exclusionary feeling stemmed from the fact, that one of us was black and Astoria has no black people. The other felt comfortable, because she lived in the area and could identify as a resident; she was Columbian. Walking through the streets, everyone knew that one of us did not belong. We went through many stores, some Columbian and Greek restaurants. The Greeks welcomed us with open arms. They found it interesting that two girls from different ethnicities were interested in learning about Greek speakers in Astoria.

During numerous interviews, we met Spiro, a Greek immigrant who arrived to the United States twenty years ago. Spiro states, "When I came to Astoria, I never wanted to learn English, but because I wanted to work outside of Astoria, I had to learn English." Spiro learned English, and after a few years

in the United States he sent for his parents. He now owns a little Greek store in Astoria. Spiro gladly remembers when the little children played in the streets speaking Greek. He remembers a time when his neighbors were Greek. Spiro views the presence of other ethnic groups as an 'invasion'. Astoria now houses Spanish restaurants and Arab supermarkets. It is home to many Russian, Spanish and Pakistani speakers. He says, "It is an invasion of the Pakistanis and Mexicans." With these new groups around, Greek is not frequently spoken anymore in Astoria. Spiro states, "My parents (Spiro points to his parents) speak no English, not enough to get around. If I leave the store with them in charge, it is like the store is closed." Spiro turns to his mother and talks to her in Greek. She turns to us and smiles. Spiro continues to say, "The next generation of Greeks do not speak Greek or even know Greek. If it was not for schools like St. Demetrios, the Greek language today would not be alive." He believes it is essential as a LOTE speaker to speak the language continuously at home to prevent his culture from dying.

SCHOOLS AND CHURCHES: PRESERVING THE LANGUAGE

St. Demetrios School is the largest Greek- American School outside of Greece. It is comprised of an elementary, middle and High School. The Day School houses six hundred to seven hundred students, all of whom come from Hellenic ancestry (Cyprus and Greece). The Day School teaches all academic subjects, but spends a great deal of time on Greek language and culture. From Pre-K to eighth grade Greek classes are an hour and a half daily. However, after the eighth grade they are conducted in a forty-five minute time span. Due to the expensive cost of attending the Day School, St. Demetrios also has an After School Program that runs from 3:30- 5:30 and only teaches Greek. There are approximately two hundred and fifty students in this after school program. Learning the Greek language is important to these students because they are mostly second and third generation Greek Americans, and their Greek parents would like them to continue the Greek culture.

Ten percent of the students at St. Demetrios have Greek parents, who speak only English. However ninety percent of the students are fluent in both Greek and English. St. Demetrios encounters very few students who do not speak English in the upper grades. However, when they do encounter students, they have very little tolerance. Those students are given one year to learn English on their own. If they cannot achieve this goal they are sent to public school. St. Demetrios does not provide ESL programs. As a result, they do not accept children, who do not speak English in grades nine through twelve. St. Demetrios is very accepting of LOTE speakers, once they are also fluent in English. The principal of St. Demetrios, as a LOTE speaker is able to communicate to parents in Greek.

St. Demetrios School gets seventy- five percent of their budget form St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church. The Church takes care of the school finances, but does not interfere in their method of teaching. This Church is comprised of St. Catherine and St. George's Orthodox Church (Schumack 1977). St. Demetrios Orthodox Church has services in both Greek and English. This is done to cater to the old (Greeks who only speak), second and third generation Greek Americans. The Church also has festivals and Greek social clubs. The principal of the St. Demetrios School states, "Greeks move together, hang out together, visit Greek doctors, shop in Greek stores and marry Greeks as part of maintaining the Greek way of life." Students in the Greek Schools in Astoria, have very little exposure to cultures other than Greeks, despite the fact that Astoria is so diverse. St. Demetrios understands this problem and in response has an experienced and multi- cultural staff, who expose students to a large array of cultures and literature. The principal, however, insisted that Pre-K teachers be bilingual

GREEK ORGANIZATIONS

Astoria houses many government offices that cater to the needs of individuals, who are primarily Greek speakers. One of these organizations is HANAC (Hellenic American Action Committee). This non-profit organization founded in 1972, aids the Hellenic community in assimilating into American society. HANAC specializes in assisting in ESL, job placement, social support service referrals, and other naturalizing services. HANAC also assists individuals in getting interpreters for court cases. HANAC plays a major role in helping Hellenic-Americans find information about their city government and services available to them.

The Federation of Hellenic Societies of Greater NY, Inc is another Greek organization in Astoria. The goals of this organization includes: assisting Greek immigrants to become American citizens, highlighting the cultural, scientific and professional contributions of the Greek-Americans to the American Society and supporting the activities that perpetuate the Greek language, culture and identity. Their current activities include creating programs or career awareness for Greeks in Astoria and also raising funds to build and athletic and community center for Greeks in the community.

GREEK MEDIA IN ASTORIA

Astoria has many different cable networks, magazines and newspapers that cater to the Greek community. While some of this media is strictly in Greek, some are both in Greek and in English. Astoria has various radio networks that have Greek speaking DJs and music. Some of these radio networks include the National Greek Radio, Dimensions, Hellenic Voices, and Aktina FM radio. All of these stations are produced right in Astoria. The local neighborhood also presents a large array of Greek television channels: Queens Cable, Hellenic Broadcasting Company, National Greek TV, and the Hellenic TV Network. Astoria even has its' own Greek publishing house; Petallides Publishing form which comes a very popular local newspaper Pronini. Another popular publishing house is Greek American Publishing, located right on Crescent Street in Astoria. Many residents of Astoria are also familiar with the publications, Omegeneia (a Greek American Newspaper) and Greek American Metropolis Magazine.

CONCLUSION: WHAT HAPPENS FROM HERE?

The Greek Americans are realizing that as LOTE speakers they must assimilate into American society without losing their culture. They have done this by establishing a home away from home. This home is Astoria, however, in their efforts to preserve their language many Greek shop owners in Astoria, admit that they only work in Astoria and live some place else. Greeks in Astoria are becoming scarce. However, Greek Churches like St. Demetrios, vows never giving up in their mission to unite all Greeks with the Greek language. Many of the Hellenic residents and shopkeepers of Astoria are devoutly Greek Orthodox. The Church helps by giving services in both Greek and English. The Greek American School, St. Demetrious also helps by providing classes in Greek language and writing various local publications, such as, the International Hellenic Tribune, which is written in Greek and English. The restaurants that specialize in Greek cuisine have waiters and waitresses that speak Greek to Hellenic customers. The same goes for travel agencies, bakeries, and clinics in the area. The Greek community regardless of their slow relocation outside of Astoria will always remember 'Little Greece' as the home of the Greek language in New York.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Federation of Hellenic Societies of Greater New York <http://www.hellasweb.com/commun/fhs/hist.htm>
- Gate, Nicholas. "America Discovers Greek Is Beautiful." *New York Times* 7 Apr. 1997
- Moskos, Charles. *Greek Americans: Struggle and Success*. Transaction Publishers. London. 1990
- Psomaides, Harry J. *The Greek American Community in Transition*. Pella Publishing Company. New York 1882
- Schumack, Murray. Astoria, the largest Greek City outside Greece. *New York Times* 7 Oct. 1977
- Schumack , Murray. Astoria offers more than a little Bit of Greece in Music and Dance Festival. *New York Times* 18 June 1976
- Socioeconomic Profiles: *NY Dept. of City Planning. A Portrait of NYC*. 1990