The Greek element in the Riverland: history and culture

Michael Tsianikas

My paper will focus on the presence of the Greek element in the Riverland area. Firstly I examine the historical development of the Greek community and the main areas of Riverland: Paringa, Renmark, Berri, Barmera, Loxton and Waikerie. A chronological account of the Greek born population will be shown following some important dates of census like 1911, 1933, 1961, 1976 and so on. Through this chronological analysis we can see that the Greek population of Riverland started with 1 male in 1911 and can count approx 1,000 persons today. Through the numbers we can also see that the male/female rates are becoming balanced after the time of migration in the 1960’s. A very important issue that is related to the historical development of the Greek communities in the Riverland is the examination of the development of important cultural institutions, in particular, Greek Orthodox churches, community function centres and schools.

Through general research it becomes clear that the first institution that Greeks tried to establish abroad is a church and this also applied to the Riverland area. As the numbers were very low before the 1960’s they had to wait until after the 1960’s and 70’s when more migrants arrived from Greece before the first church could be established. From historical sources and interviews we know for instance that in Renmark the foundation of the first church was laid in 1970 by the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Australia Izekiel. The church was completed before the end of the same year and the cost was $57,000.00.

For the purpose of the establishment of the Church a committee was working very successfully from May 1966 to establish the first church in Renmark. The success was proven because the project was fulfilled and the church was established in a little over 4 years. The church was named St Constantine and Helen. It is believed this name was chosen because an important donation was made by Mr Charalambos Eleftheriades to honour the name of his son Constantinos who drowned in the River Murray. An oral testimony states that on the day the official donation was made publicly, nobody else offered money in order to allow Mr Eleftheriades to be the only beneficiary and therefore make sure the name of his son was honoured. Similar accounts for establishment of new Orthodox churches will be given in the paper for communities in Berri, Loxton etc.

Before the establishment of the first Orthodox church in Renmark the Greeks used to organize religious services in the local Anglican church. This is again another example of the close collaboration between Greek Orthodox and Anglican churches in Australia. An interview oral testimony states, “The priest of the Anglican Church in Renmark enthusiastically approved for the Greek population to conduct their services in the Anglican Church.”
The interviewee recalls that the Anglican priest, in giving his permission, expressed the following opinion:
“You Greeks, in every part of the globe where you are living, are creating churches because you have a deep belief, and for that reason I allow you to use our church but I feel that deserve something better”.

The establishment of Greek schools is of course another major issue for Greek communities abroad. In the Greek community of Berri for example, we know from an interview that from 1966-1971, the Greek Orthodox priest was in charge of the Greek lessons and approximately 70 children were attending the school. Mr Tsakonas states “Regarding Greek language, when Father Demetrios was here, I was helping out and we were doing good things. Later he left and I was in charge of the school for 10 years. Lessons were given twice per week in the afternoons at the Berri Primary School. One year there were 72 children enrolled. I was alone in the classroom and I used the old Greek system ‘ti verga’ [the stick]. I also had the permission from the parents if the children were not behaving. By only seeing the ‘verga’, the students were well behaved. After 1980 other teachers continued. We started schools in Loxton and Barmera but there were small numbers. I was traveling to Barmera and Loxton for 2 years. Athena, Roula and Peter were my students and now they are teachers for the Greek language in the Australian schools and at the they also teach the Greek language and the afternoon school at Glossop every Thursday.”

Another important chapter of the historical establishment of the Greek community in the Riverland area is related to the development of agricultural activities in the context of the development of wider irrigation system in the area. By using some official data and maps, one can realize that the small number of farms belonging to Greeks in the 1950’s have become spectacularly multiplied in numbers in the late 1970’s. For example, one can count in the Renmark irrigation district 9 blocks belonging to Greeks in 1950; in 1960 there were approx 18; in 1970 there were more than 70 and around 100 in 1979. This underlines the steady progress and success for the Greek settlement in the Riverland area. This is not surprising because that the massive wave of Greek migration to Australia started in the 1960’s and 70’s and the majority of “unskilled” Greek migrants mainly came from rural areas in Greece.

Another area of interest in this study will focus on the cultural interaction between Greek migrants and the established local community, in particular the Anglo-Saxon descendents. This relationship followed the classical pattern known from elsewhere from racism to acceptance. There are oral accounts from people who wish to remain anonymous, recalling very aggressive racism towards the Greek population before the 1960’s. This attitude progressively changed after the 60’s and in particular after the development of multicultural policies in Australia in the late 70’s. To illustrate the above statement I will now mention a particularly strange oral account of George Nikou, born in Australia in 1939. His father arrived in Australia in 1926 from Florina, northern Greece, and recalls “We [George, his sister Georgia and brother Christos] started school in Renmark North in 1944 during the War. We were 60 youngsters at the school. The big teacher took us by the hand and took us to the front of the school to introduce us to the others. He said ‘These children are enemies’. They all cheered. – they are like that. Even if we came down from the moon we would not have been looked at like that. People were like that back then. We were frightened and embarrassed. It was the worst experience. Stones were thrown at us
and we were kicked in the head. They used to chase us away, follow us with aggression in the streets, steal our bikes and could not stand us at all. My heart was full of bitterness. Nobody was better that us, we were not the worst, we were the best. Our parents came here as free people and not from jails like the British. We didn’t take a housing trust home, nor government funding. Our bread was earnt through hard labour.” I regard this as a particularly strange event because from the beginning of the second World War, Greece decided to fight with the allies against the Germans. We can’t understand why the incident mentioned above with the teacher, decided to introduce the young children as ‘enemies’ to the other children. It is also historically well established that publicly, Greeks in Australia were open supportive of the Australian efforts during the War and organized rallies and financial support for the cause. I decided to look at the local newspaper *The Murray Pioneer* and found some interesting information which confirms the support of the Greek population in the Riverland supporting the War agains Germany. The following article from *The Murray Pioneer* is quoted from page six of the publication in Renmark, Thurs., Aug. 15, 1940.

LOYALTY OF “GREEK COMMUNITY” STRESSED
Over 200 in Upper Murray
Mr. Pergam of Barmera Interviewed
The loyalty of the “Greek Community” throughout Australia to the Empire’s cause was stressed by Mr. N. Pergam, of the Minerva Pharmacy when interviewed this week. A deep student of international affairs, Mr. Pergam, as a member of the Greek Community in Adelaide, keeps in close touch with the doings of his people, the majority of whom are naturalized or natural born Australians.
All told, said Mr. Pergam, the “community” in Australia numbers some 25,000 persons, and he considered that there were as many as 200 to 300 living in the Upper Murray areas. These folk, he asserted, were unquestionably loyal to the country of their adoption, and their willingness to contribute towards Australia’s war effort was demonstrated in a contribution of _17/4/0 to the Red Cross, recently reported in “The Pioneer”.
It was with pride said the Barmera chemist, that they looked upon not only he local effort but that of their people throughout Australia as a whole – efforts such as he felt sure would inspire them to even greater support for the nation in the future.
Community’s _2,500 Cheque
Attention was drawn to an article in a recent issue of the “Hellenic Herald” – one of two Greek newspapers published in Australia – quoting a letter of thanks received from the Treasury for a cheque for _2,500 which was presented “as a gift to the Commonwealth Government to assist in the air defence of Australia and to express the loyalty of the Greek Community to the British Empire and to Australia.” The cheque had been handed to the Commonwealth Treasurer by Archbishopoopy Timotheus of the Greek Orthodox Church in Sydney, and the letter expressed the Treasurer’s “deep appreciation of the patriotic gesture by the Greek Community of New South Wales in this time of national emergency.”
We found similar comments and more appraisal in the same newspaper on Thursday August 29 1940, Thursday November 21 1940, December 1940 and Thursday January 16, 1941. I will continue to further research in this newspaper more information about the War years after 1941.

Researching this topic also focuses on heritage and cultural maintenance of Greeks in Renmark. Through interviews we have conducted, it is becoming obvious that the maintenance of Greek cultural traditions and customs is well preserved in the rural community at Riverland. For example in the interview with George Nikou (previously mentioned), states “One of my oldest grandfathers [ancestor] was a little bit religious. He left from Velio [village of Florina, northern Greece] and went to Constantinople to study to become a priest. He studied it. He returned to the village and he started building the first church there. With three stones and without a door. From Constantinople he brought with him a cross. He gave the cross to the first daughter-in-law to be kept within the family. Do not loose it. This was a tradition to give the cross to the first daughter-in-law of the family. It was never given to a male hand. This gold cross is now with my wife. We have promised this cross to our first daughter-in-law. This tradition goes back over 600 years. It may be nothing but for us it’s very important that we hang on to our roots. From where have we come from and where are we going? Because nobody asked me what language are you speaking and where are you going.”

Flicking through “The Murray Pioneer” I discovered that one of the local journalists, Dionysia Maniatis, publishes articles fortnightly with the interesting column “A Greek Australian View”. She addresses some important areas of cultural understanding and cultural differences. Obviously this constitutes particularly important information because The Murray Pioneer is a “mainstream” local newspaper. I will mention two examples here. One describes a traditional custom in Northern Greece and Dionysia Maniatis informs the general public in the Riverland about this very interesting custom. The information is given following some calendar related customs in Greece which occur at the beginning of January.

The Murray Pioneer
Tuesday, January 17, 2006.

Culturally yours
With Dionysia Maniatis

…. 
Gynaikokratia (January 8)
The custom of female dominion or “Gynaikodraita” is observed in the villages of Monoklissia and N. Petra in the region of Seres.
This tradition is dedicated more to “Babo” the old midwife of the village that has helped most of the women with the births of their children. Taking precautions so “No man” can see them, and wanting to show their appreciation to “Babo” the women sprinkle her with basil immersed in water, wash her hands in soapy water and give her presents such as soap, ouzo, a handkerchief and depending on their financial situation a few coins etc. wishing her “many happy returns” and “many male/female children to help us deliver”.

4
In return the “Babo” offers them sweets and ouzo and all begin dancing until the afternoon when they sit her on an appropriately decorated two-wheel cart that is drawn by two women, and take her to the river/lake/sea for “baptizing” her in the waters so that she continues her “enlightening” work with pregnant women. If a man ventures out on the street and tries to join the women in their dance he gets drenched by them and quickly retreats home! At nightfall the group of women relocates to the building of “amazons” and continues with dancing and humorous vulgar singing and jokes until the early hours of the morning. At nightfall, men are allowed to join the women in celebration. The custom takes place in the villages of Strimi and Xilagani in the Komotini region and at Nea Kassani near Xanthi.

Another example addresses a cultural issue about eating habits. According to Ms Maniatis, the Greek way of appreciating a meal is to extend the time around the table and enjoy the company in slow motion sharing drinks and discussion. In her view there is often a more aggressive cultural attitude in the cultural environment when plates and glasses are removed from the table immediately in a sometimes harsh way as soon as the meal or drink has been finished. We cite here another journalist’s comments on Mrs Maniatis’ article quoting:

_The Murray Pioneer_
Friday, June 20, 2003
Tim Jackson

The Pioneer’s Dionysia Maniatis has hit a nerve with her segment this week about table service while dining out. In her column, Greek Australian View, on Tuesday, Mrs Maniatis, pictured right, was bemoaning the fact that too many times when dining out waitresses spoil an otherwise memorable meal by whisking away half-eaten meals and half-empty glasses. "I can't believe how many people have telephoned me since the paper came out. I said it might open a can of worms, but I didn't realise by just how much. "The interesting part was that it was not only Greeks and not only isolated to eateries in the Riverland. "It seems to be a common problem all over." It is always difficult for waitresses striking a balance between being over-zealous and seeming to ignore diners, but given the strength of response to Mrs Maniatis's column it certainly is food for thought for those in the hospitality industry.

_Main Bibliography_

Menzies, 1980  
Menzies, B. J., _Agricultural Extension Among Greek Horticulturalists in the South Australian Riverland_, Department of Agriculture South Australia, Feb 1980.

_Newspaper_
The Murray Pioneer
*The Murray Pioneer*, a regional newspaper.

**Interviews**

Approximately 50 interviews from residents of the Riverland transcribed from audio tapes in a document of around 150,000 words.