

## Chapter Two

### Style and Menu

*'Australians are largely carnivorous and addicted to tea.'*

– Dr Philip Muskett, 1893 quoted in Symons 254

Early cafés consisted of small, plain dining rooms between front counters that sold bottled oysters and cigarettes and rear kitchens that served light meals. The 1910s saw significant changes. Conomos describes the shifts that occurred: the word 'Café' replaced 'Oyster Saloon', female waitresses replaced male staff, rear kitchens served a greater range of food, cafés adopted 'the classic form' that was to endure for two generations. The classic form was marked by milk bars equipped with soda fountains and modern electrical machines, front confectionery counters with showcases, boxed chocolates, and jars of sweets, and dining rooms of various sizes, often with booths, commonly known as cubicles, on mirrored side walls and counter seating as well (Conomos, History 118-9, 264). All of these elements are evident in Ipswich cafés.

Janiszewski and Alexakis note that Art Deco, an international style developed in the 20s, is the architectural and decorative form associated with Greek cafés in their lengthy 'golden age' from the mid 30s to the late 60s (2, 7).<sup>18</sup> This is clear in carefully preserved buildings like the Paragon Café in Katoomba.<sup>19</sup> Greek cafés, however, assumed a multitude of forms. While some were elaborate, elegant venues, others were more basic. In Ipswich, Londy's was a large, double-fronted café with curved windows; the Regal was dark and narrow with Italian wall tapestries and a memorable ambience (Fig. 16).

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<sup>18</sup> Conomos recalls the new standard of elegance set by the 'elite' Garden of Roses, which served expensive French and German food cooked by French and German chefs, had statues of angels along the walls, and a fountain in the foyer (125).

<sup>19</sup> See Art Deco in Australia: Sunrise over the Pacific by editors Mark Ferson and Mary Nilsson (Sydney: Craftsman House, 2001), one of the few books dealing with Art Deco in Australia – Katoomba's Paragon Café is featured on page 19.



*Fig. 16: The Regal Café was a long narrow café with tapestries on the walls.*



*Fig. 17: George and Vasiliki Kentrotis and the art deco soda fountains at the Regal Café.*

Janiszewski and Alexakis argue that despite the fact that café proprietors were familiar with the traditional Greek kafeneion as a social and catering model, that the Greek café, like the kafeneion, was a social focus of the community, and that some café names – Marathon, Parthenon, Paragon, Olympia, Ellisos – reflected their Hellenic origin, the Greek cafe is a merger between American food catering ideas and British-Australian tastes (2).<sup>20</sup> They describe the Greek café as “a ‘Trojan Horse’ for the Americanisation of Australian eating habits” (2). The United States was a major destination for Greek immigrants prior to 1924 and several of Australia’s Greek food caterers had previous experience of America’s food industry (Janiszewski and Alexakis 2). This influence is evident even before the turn of the century. According to Janiszewski and Alexakis, the nineteenth century oyster saloon or ‘parlor’ is the first evidence of the popularisation of American food catering ideas – reasonable prices, sit-down and takeaway service, women’s lounges, and provision for families all suggest an American influence (2). They claim, however, that the soda fountain, which appeared in the second decade, and the milk bar of the early 1930s, are unmistakably American, as are café names like Niagara, California, Monterey, Hollywood, Astoria, Golden Gate, and New York (2). While it is difficult to know precisely who introduced the soda fountain and the milk bar to Australia, it is clear that the innovations derived from American ideas and that it was the Greeks, through their cafés, who introduced them. Decades before McDonalds invaded Australia, Greek cafés employed American food catering ideas.

In addition, Greek cafés did not serve Greek food. Traditional Greek foods like souvlaki, moussaka, dolmades, tzatzizi, and galaktobouriko, now found in Greek restaurants and even on supermarket shelves, did not emerge from behind closed doors until the late 70s.<sup>21</sup> Food historian Michael Symons was warned that “a book on Australian food would be exceedingly short” because, as he notes, Australians ‘ate’ rather than ‘dined’, women could not cook and men knew nothing of the art of

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<sup>20</sup> See *The Greeks and Great Good Gathering Places* later in this paper for more about the kafeneion.

<sup>21</sup> See Janiszewski and Alexakis (8). Gilchrist also affirms that from the beginning the Greek café proprietor did not serve traditional dishes: “[The Greek proprietor] gave his Australian customers what they wanted and expected: fish and chips, oysters on shell, grilled steak and eggs, plain boiled vegetables, bread and butter, tea or coffee, fruit salad, and [ . . . ], unlike some Australian shop-keepers, he provided such fare at almost any hour into well into the night” (1: 192).

good eating, and even in the 1940s “[t]he gastronomic mission of Australia [seemed] to be to preserve [. . .] good old-fashioned English cooking” (255). He identifies an Australian stereotype emerging as early as the 1850s – a person with basic eating habits, who derided complementary foods arranged on a plate and wanted nothing more than a slab of meat, simply cooked (137). Valuing quantity and rapid consumption over quality and subtle combinations of flavours, this attitude ensured the popularity of the mixed grill, which Symons attributes to the Greek café (137). Although Symons records the gastronomic delights offered by European chefs in bohemian restaurants in Sydney and Melbourne at the beginning of the nineteenth century, he claims that the austerities of the First World War “killed off restaurant society” (110-124).

The Greeks catered for the British-Australian predilection for steak, chops, fried eggs, fish, chips, and meat pies. Peter Spathis recalls the meals at Ipswich’s Greek first café, which he bought from John Black about 1917 and owned until 1933:

At the City Café, I sold meals, confectionery, fruit, fish and prawns. In one window, I had fruit and in the other I had fish, crabs and other sea foods. I sold both fresh and cooked fish. Meals were ham and eggs, steak and eggs, fried fish, roasts – lamb, pork and veal. Also soup and dessert . . . three course meals . . . charged one shilling and sixpence to two shillings a meal. Tea and sandwiches was a shilling. There was a milk bar too – malted milks sixpence. I had ten tables. I had twin shops – one for meals and fish, including fresh fish, and the other for dinner and light refreshments. It was one shop with two sections. Takings were about twenty pounds per week. (As told to Denis Conomos 1980-84)

Maureen describes the food she served in the forties and fifties at Londy’s Café as “meals that you normally find on an ordinary menu. It was just straight out Australian meals” (16<sup>th</sup> April 2004). Londy’s maintained a seafood menu – fresh fish, prawns, cooked fish including whole whiting – but a wide variety of other meals were included: steak and eggs, mixed grill, pork fillet, pork chops, all served with chips and salad or ‘vegies’, and toasted sandwiches. Breakfast was mostly tinned

baked beans on toast. Londy's milk bar served ice-cream sodas and malted milks in a variety of flavours, sundaes, banana splits, waffles, parfaits, jelly and ice-cream, and fruit salad and ice-cream. A favourite dessert was the *Aeroplane Special*: a three-scoop sundae with two horizontal triangular wafers for wings and a vertical one for the tail (Jack at St Mary's Hostel). Maureen recalls that icy-cold fresh fruit drinks and soda fountain drinks were particularly popular with young people. Sodas consisted of syrup and carbonated water dispensed from a fountain hooked up to compressors and pumps underneath the shops. The addition of ice-cream produced an ice-cream soda. A photograph taken inside Londy's shows the syrup flavours available: lemonade, lime, sarsaparilla, strawberry, passion fruit, pineapple, ginger ale, ginger beer, kola (See Fig. 18).

Some differences in eating options between Greek and contemporary cafés are obvious. First, menus painted on glass suggest the fare was more permanent than that now offered on café chalkboards. Next, syrups, jellies, fruit salad, waffles, icy-cold orange and lemon drinks, and soda were made on the premises; there were no bottled drinks, tinned fruit, or pre-packaged products. Also, when customers ordered a menu item in the 40s, two slices of white bread, soup, tea or coffee, and dessert in the form of steamed puddings made in jam tins – not milk bar items – were included in the price if they wanted them. In addition, cafés did not sell cakes.



Fig. 18 Maureen and Vera inside Londy's Café in the late 1940s.

Bakeries and cake shops served cream puffs, éclairs, and the like, but Jack Stathis of the City Café explains, “If a customer really wanted cake, I suppose I would have gone to the bakery and got one for him, but no, we didn’t sell cake. The money was in toasted sandwiches” (2<sup>nd</sup> October 2005). The variety of cakes served in contemporary cafés – cheesecake, mud cake, Pavlova, orange and almond cake, tiramisu, and Danish pastries – suggests a shift in Australian eating habits and/or locale and specialisation. Another difference is the contemporary elevation of coffee to an art form.

In the 40s, coffee was a straightforward affair and certainly not the cafés’ focus. Maureen recalls that coffee made on milk was popular. It was kept hot in a big urn that had a tap and was served in pots. Narelle, whose mother worked in Mareudy’s Café when Narelle was young, remembers that coffee was made with chicory essence. Toula Comino made a similar assessment of the coffee made in Comino’s famous café in Cairns, remembering that they used the milk bar to heat the milk using steam. Maria, who worked with her husband Jim in the Regal Café, recalls the arrival of the espresso machine. A man, who had sold a machine to her brother-in-law in Mareeba, visited the Regal and procured an order for an espresso machine. The Ritz Cafe did not want to be outdone, however, so it was agreed that the two cafés would take delivery on the same day. According to Maria, the Ritz and Regal coffee machines arrived on the same day in 1958 and were the first espresso machines in Ipswich. Maria recalls not liking the ‘burnt’ taste of these first espresso coffees; she made cappuccino by putting Turkish coffee and milk in the jug and frothing it up with steam from the machine. In the 1970s, hot chocolate was offered at the Regal, black coffee and tea were served in pots and cappuccino in a cup.

Joanne was a teenager when she worked at her father’s café in the mid-70s. She recalls that the Regal’s most popular items were icy cold, freshly squeezed fruit drinks and pies with chips and gravy, the renowned gravy being made from the juices of the roasts thickened with tomato paste. Raspberry and lime were the most popular soda drinks and these were still made with syrup and carbonated water piped up from a machine in the cellar, although when Coca Cola became popular this

was supplied in cans for ice-cream sodas. Milk shakes were made in stainless steel containers, fruit salad was home-made, and the primary takeaway order was toasted sandwiches. Still no traditional Greek dishes were served.

Already popular in the United States, the hamburger was introduced to Australia through the U.S. military forces in the 1940s (Janiszewski and Alexakis 4). Sadly, this ongoing link between the Greek café in Australia and popular American food contributed to its eventual demise. In time, fast-food chains like McDonalds replaced family-run businesses, and Greek cafés like the Central Milk Bar transformed into takeaway outlets in order to survive. Maria, who worked in several Ipswich cafés and retired at the end of 2004, set up the Central Café to sell hamburgers in 1985. In comparison with her time at the Regal in the fifties, she notes that takeaways, particularly hot chips, were ‘a big seller’ at the Central.

Don Risson, a produce merchant who delivered potatoes and onions to all of the cafés, recalls that in the years after WWII, his father shipped Bismarks and Brownells from Tasmania because these were renowned as “the best ‘chippers’ in the world” (July 2005). The shipments – 1,500 bags of potatoes each weighing 150 pounds – came from Brisbane by rail because a tax per ton per mile made road haulage too expensive. The potatoes kept well for six months under the shed in Nicholas Street. Don recalls that the Greeks bought sixty bags of potatoes at a time and that this would last five weeks. He also remembers that, while most cafés had electric tumbling machines to peel the potatoes and some had mechanical chip-cutters, others did them by hand. For almost a quarter of a century, Maria cut all of the chips sold at the Central by hand. With arguably as much experience at buying, chipping, and cooking potatoes as anyone in Australia, Maria advised that “not all potatoes make good chips and not all soil make good potatoes” (5<sup>th</sup> August 2004).

## Chapter Three

### Women and the Greek Cafe

*“I will introduce you to your fiancée.’ [. . .] Vince handed her a bouquet of gladioli and said, ‘Your future husband.’ They looked at each other in silence.”*

– First meeting of Eleni Levounis and Vince Hellen quoted in Conomos, History 222

Greek women were part of Ipswich's early history. Janiszewski's database reveals that Mrs Asica Matton, born in Greece in 1855, was a widow and a storekeeper in Ipswich when she naturalised in 1903 (Janiszewski email dated 6<sup>th</sup> August 2005, 3:17 pm). Chain migration and the subsequent Greek café phenomenon, however, overwhelmingly concerned single men, "male pioneers" who came to Australia to make their fortunes before returning to Greece (Gilchrist 1: 191).<sup>22</sup>

Gilchrist claims that while "a handful of Greek women took part in shop ownership," men mostly owned and operated Greek cafés and female employees were rare (1: 191). Men initiated the 'oyster saloon', sponsored countrymen in the exodus to Australia, and found employment in saloons and cafés via the all-male institution known as the 'kafeneion'.<sup>23</sup> Men cooked, served, and washed up in cafés across Australia for the first two decades of the twentieth century. Though few originally contemplated settlement, once established in catering businesses, these 'male pioneers' did not return as planned to their homeland. Sweethearts arrived from Greece, some men married by *proxenia*, others married Australian women, and the 1920s saw a shift from a Greek community dominated by single men to one dominated by the family (Conomos, *History* 216). Thereafter, women played significant roles in the unfolding story of the Greek café.

When Greek men in Australia sought Greek wives, they often became engaged by *proxenia*. According to Conomos, this involved a family friend, called the *proxeniti*, selecting a prospective bride from among the women living in Greece, or those who had already come to Australia (216-7). If the prospective groom approved, the woman would be approached with an offer of marriage. Photographs were often sent back and forth, but much depended on the judgement of the 'proxeniti', the person charged with making a suitable match. Conomos notes that marriages

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<sup>22</sup> A census in 1871 shows only 19 females born in Greece and living in Victoria at that time compared with 127 males (Jupp, *People* 508). Gilchrist claims that in 1901, only 63 of Australia's 878 Greeks were women, and a decade later, they still accounted for only 105 of a Greek-born population of 1,798 (Gilchrist 1: 190-1). Only fourteen of 262 Greeks living in Queensland at that time were women (Gilchrist 1: 236). Even during the inter-war period, women numbered only approximately 25% of the total number of Greek immigrants (Jupp, *People* 510).

<sup>23</sup> See Appendix 2 for the history of male domination in cafés generally and the influence of the male-dominated kafeneion on the Greek café in particular.

conducted in this fashion could proceed with great speed (224). The process left little room for romance, but according to Conomos, and most respondents in this project, the marriages were “strong and happy ones” (History 216-7). Respondents claimed, however, that men often sent photographs twenty years out of date (Helen Kentos; Peter Londy; Jack Stathis).

Many older Greek women involved in this project were married by proxenia. Twenty-four-year-old Helene Marendy was the eldest in a family of seven children in Athens. In 1947, her aunt proposed a marriage between Helene and the forty-year-old brother of an acquaintance. The brother, Peter, worked in a cafe in Ipswich. Helene understood the opportunity to provide a future for her siblings and accepted the proposal. She did not see her mother again for thirty years. Helene worked with her husband in his brother’s cafe from the day after she arrived in Australia and was married within a month. She says that she was never paid for her work. Whenever she needed clothes her husband bought them for her. Helene’s face lights up as she recalls the women who came to the cafe during and after the pictures and dances. They wore beautiful dresses, hats, and gloves. Helene never shopped for these things; she never went to the dances. According to Helene, when her husband died, she did not inherit their home. None of her siblings came to Australia.

Allied with domestic responsibilities, the tendency for women to follow rather than lead the pattern of Greek migration produced several interconnected effects in the early twentieth century: Greek social and cultural occasions revolved around men (Jupp, People 518); Greek women rarely married Anglo-Australians; Greek women were less likely to work or speak English well. While ‘male pioneers’ often learned to speak English impeccably (Peter Cominos of his father; Conomos, History 90, 87), older Greek female respondents involved in this project, who were born in Greece and married cafe proprietors, have poor English or more marked accents,<sup>24</sup> The

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<sup>24</sup> Many older female respondents came from Greece in their 20s and married older men. While their English is not as good as many male respondents of the same age, it should be noted that their husbands, the original male immigrants and cafe proprietors, have been dead for twenty or thirty years and the male respondents are ‘cafe children’ – Australian-born Greek Australians. The difficulty

respondents who grew up in Greek cafés, on the other hand, spoke English noticeably better than most Anglo-Australians their age. Greek women, then, were likely to feel culturally isolated. In Ipswich, for example, John Black's wife Elpiniki led a lonely existence as one of only eight Queensland Greek women living outside Brisbane in 1916. John typically worked long hours at the café and Elpiniki pushed a stroller to the Australia Café for company and to help out and they walked home together around midnight (Conomos, History 170).

Few wives worked in Brisbane cafés, which were situated some distance from Greek homes, but in rural towns like Ipswich, women and children often worked in family cafés because they lived within walking distance (Conomos, History 139, 269).<sup>25</sup> In the 50s, Helen Kentos and her husband John ran the milk bar beside the Wintergarden picture theatre in East Street. They lived at the back. After they installed neon lights, mirrors, and a juke box, business thrived and, like most proprietors of cafés close to picture theatres, Helen and John kept particularly long hours. When asked to recall the worst thing about her association with the café, Helen remembers the endless longing for sleep and “hanging nappies out at two in the morning with a lantern” (2<sup>nd</sup> October 2005). For Helen, these hours persisted seven days a week every week except for Christmas day and Easter.

Because cafés were too busy to accommodate young children, some mothers saw little of their babies (Conomos, History 269). When Helen and John had their first child, Helen began providing baby items for friends and customers through warehouse contacts, finally opening a baby shop across the street. After a full day in the shop, she crossed to the milk bar and helped John until the theatre trade left, they had fed people returning from dances in Brisbane, and it was finally time to close. One day, when both lanes of traffic in East Street screeched to a halt, Helen glanced outside to see her eighteen-month-old daughter, at that time in the care of

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in understanding older female respondents was a significant issue in this research and accounts for the fact that many of their stories are paraphrased rather than quoted directly.

<sup>25</sup> Some residences, like those of the of the Londy and Stathis families, still stand in Limestone Streets (Stathis opposite St Stephens), Helen and John Kentos' house in Warwick Road is now a funeral parlor, and the wives of George and Jim Kentrotis of the Regal Café still live in the inner-city homes they occupied when they were first married.

her father in the milk bar, standing in the middle of the street. Helen recalls with sadness accepting her mother's offer to raise the baby in Brisbane. Until Helen's children reached school age, she saw them only on Sundays.

Like Harry Londy's wife, Theodoroula, however, many women involved in this project worked in cafés after children were old enough for school.<sup>26</sup> Conomos records the lives of Greek women who worked alongside their husbands from 5am until midnight, sometimes washing and ironing until 2am the following morning, without ever having a holiday. While waiting to prepare coffee and toast for the rush that would descend at interval and when picture theatres closed, they attended to household tasks like mending and ironing (Conomos, History 479-82). They were also likely to work until a few hours before babies were delivered. Antigone Andronicus of the Club Café in Toowoomba recalls being in labour and her husband urging her "to be patient until the pictures come out." Antigone left the café at midnight and her daughter Gloria was born at 4am (481).

Children learned to serve in the shops from an early age. They ate, played, did homework, and entertained friends there.<sup>27</sup> All of the second generation Greeks involved in this project worked in the family café, many working full time after finishing high school. In the early 70s, when her parents were getting older, Joanne helped out at the Regal from 7.30am for an hour before school and again after school. Joanne also worked during the holidays and fulltime from 16-18yrs of age. She took orders, served meals, and did the banking. Peter Londy also worked before school and, while his older brother was able to attend university, was given no option but to work at the café when he finished high school. As a young boy in the City Café before WWII, Jack Stathis recalls his father's position on sport: "If you've got energy left over, put it into the shop" (22<sup>nd</sup> October 2005). This suggests a

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<sup>26</sup> Theodoroula's children went to the shop after school and she took them home after dinner. When the children were older, they went home after dinner, while Theodoroula worked until ten or eleven o'clock at night (Conomos, History 506).

<sup>27</sup> Nine-year-old Kaliope was taken out of school to work full-time in her family's Mackay café (Conomos, History 139).

significant difference between Greek and non-Greek Australians' attitudes towards the relationships between work, sport and masculinity at that time.

When asked to recall the best thing about growing up in a café, however, Jack says, "Well, you never went hungry" (2<sup>nd</sup> October 2005).



*Fig. 19: George and Joanne Kentrotis at the Regal Café in the 1970s.*



*Fig. 20: Jack Stathis as a teenager at the Metro Café in the 40s.*

After school, George and Demetra's three sons, Minas, Manuel, and John, washed up and served behind the counter at the Ritz Café. They also worked there on school holidays and on Saturday mornings after taking Greek lessons with a teacher from Greece. Manuel recalls, "There were times when we would have liked to go and play, but we had to work in the café. We didn't know any different; that was just the way it was" (8<sup>th</sup> December, 2005). The café operated 7 days a week. Manuel recalls that this dropped back to only 6 days a week in the 60s, although Sundays were usually spent cleaning the café. In summer, however, the family sometimes went to Margate with tyres on top of the car and set up for the day under a shelter their father had had custom-made. In winter they often went to Lowood shooting ducks, pigeons and hares, from which their mother would make a traditional stew. Manuel remembers one week-long holiday at the beach in the mid sixties.

Because the family and staff at the Sydney Café lived in the rooms above the café, Christopher's son Andrew spent his early childhood at the café and often rode a tricycle around the block. "That was my backyard," says Andrew. "I used to envy kids that lived in a real house . . . but that was the only life I knew . . . there were always lots of people around . . . it was noisy " (12<sup>th</sup> February, 2006). The only occasion when Andrew was not allowed in the shop was when meetings from the Trades Hall across the road adjourned to the café for a meal. His recollection is that, with the exception of Christmas day, the Tanos family worked for eleven years without a holiday.

### Maria's story

A lesser known aspect of chain migration and the Australian Greek café phenomenon is the devastating lack of men in villages like Fratsia. Because so many of the men had gone to Australia or America, many women had no husbands or families.<sup>28</sup> According to several respondents, Greek sons were responsible for setting their sisters up in houses as a kind of dowry before they themselves could marry; the groom simply arrived with a suitcase and moved in (Jack Stathis and Peter Londy, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2005). No dowry was necessary if women were prepared to come from Greece to Australia (Conomos, History 210). Villages depleted of both sons and prospective grooms left a generation of women with little hope of marrying. In 1956, when she was 29 yrs old, Maria Pavlakis left Greece to live with her sister in Mareeba. Because relatively few Greeks lived in Mareeba at that time, and Maria could not speak English, her mother considered that Maria still had little hope of finding a husband and having her own house. Rather than falling in love, having one's own house emerges as the primary issue when talking to Maria.

From Greece, Maria's mother arranged for the Kallinicos family in Ipswich to invite Maria for a holiday and organise for her to meet Jim Kentrotis from the Regal Cafe, a man 17 years Maria's senior.

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<sup>28</sup> "Them days, no boys to marry. The girls were glad to find someone who would marry them" (James speaking of his marriage to Despina in 1939 qtd. in Alexakis and Janiszewski 128). This is a "forgotten aspect" of the Greek-Australian migration experience (111, 115). Jack Stathis also notes that women could not get husbands.

Maria refers to this tradition of arranging marriages by 'proxenia' as "going on the market" (5<sup>th</sup> August 2005). Maria went to Ipswich on holiday in 1958. She stayed with the Kallinicos family and helped out at their café, the Ritz in Bell Street. When she was introduced to Jim, Maria remembered seeing him in Fratsia just before he left for Australia in 1936 when she was nine. She agreed to the marriage. Maria says, "I come to Ipswich for a holiday and I make my roots here and I stay forever" (August 2005). Other Greek marriages in Australia were organised under similar circumstances. This demonstrates the significant fact that Greek cafés were also a site through which marriage was facilitated; they linked a community of Greeks in an adopted country via a network that stretched across state and even international boundaries.<sup>29</sup>



*Fig. 21: A photograph of Maria's wedding includes many of the Greek families living in Ipswich at the time: John and Helen Kentos, George and Vasi Kentrotis, George Kallinicos, Peter Marendy etc.*

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<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Conomos relates the story of Stella Garland, who met George Marcellos of Ipswich in her capacity as orders/accounts clerk in her brother's café in Maryborough ([History](#) 227-8).

Maria's sister-in-law Helen tells a similar story. On an annual visit to Brisbane from his café in Orange, John saw Helen at her father's business in George Street and asked to marry her. Helen, however, having set her heart on a tall, dark and handsome bridegroom, gave him a hearty refusal. When he asked again the next year, and was refused, Helen's father said, "Look, the man wants and answer" and Helen said, "Well, alright then." At the betrothal party the following week, Helen saw the four Kentrotis brothers and did not know which one was 'hers'. John returned to Orange the next day. Helen saw him during the week prior to their wedding but she remembers that being married in this way was like "getting into bed with a total stranger." When she relates John's early death, she says, "He was the love of my life."

Until her two children were born, Maria worked in her husband's café, where she was the dishwasher. At that time, the Regal also supported three cooks, four waitresses and two counter staff. Maria's brother, Jim Pavlakas, came from Mareeba to work at the Regal until he was able to buy Tony's café after the owner Tony Veneris died in 1962.

When her brother became ill, Maria found baby sitters for her children and helped out at Tony's, although the first customer to order a steak had to come behind the counter and show Maria how to cook it because she had never cooked one. Maria bought the building which housed the nearby Central Milk Bar and Café, then run by non-Greek proprietor, Bernie Smith. When Smith left, Maria took over the business with her son in 1980, about the same time her husband died. The Central's regular customers did not patronise the cafe when Maria first took over from the Australian owners. She recalls that on two occasions, however, she gave food to hungry men who had no money. The first never returned to pay for the meal, but the second encouraged his workmates to end their boycott of the café and business soon boomed.

For twenty-five years at the Central, Maria started work at 4-5am, often not leaving until 1am next day. The hours were long because many jobs could not be done while the café was open; the filter in the exhaust fan over the deep fry unit, for example, was best cleaned while it was still warm. Maria did not open until 6am, but was persuaded to do so one morning when a semi-trailer driver, who had missed the bypass and was circling the CBD trying to get out, knocked on the door. She directed him to the highway and told local politician Paul Pisasale to do something about signage, which he did. Reflecting on her life in the café trade, Maria says, “I enjoy all my life in Ipswich. I walk to the mall, everyone know me.” She then reflected, “It is different now – now people don’t talk” (16<sup>th</sup> April 2004).

Non-Greek Australian participants in this project reported a good relationship with the Greeks. They routinely commented that they liked them and frequently patronised their cafés. One gains a different impression, however, when speaking with Greek people. For Maria, Gough Whitlam coming to power in 1972 and introducing the term ‘New Australian’ marked a turning point in the life of Greek immigrants. “After 1972 I don’t know what happens; I have no complaints after that.” She notes, “Before that, forget New Australians, everybody call us wogs, everybody, we can’t walk [. . .] outside to the other shop, we can’t walk” (5<sup>th</sup> August 2005). When she says ‘wogs’, the word comes as a whisper of shame; while Anglo-Australians maintain that they meant nothing by the term, it obviously distressed Maria. When a customer, who said he was too young to address her as Maria, asked if he could call her ‘Mum’, she replied, “Until yesterday, they call me ‘dago’ so you can call me ‘Mum’ if you want.” Maria also says that Greeks were called “hungry” because they worked long hours and opened on Sundays when other businesses did not. Greeks were ahead of their time in this respect since, as Maria notes many businesses now work long hours.

Maria remembers no competition between the cafes. She recalls that they phoned each other when ‘the potato man’ arrived to see if others wanted him sent around and Jack Stathis remembers that the cafés agreed on prices. Peter Lonyd recalls that his father was also part of a café network outside of Ipswich that enabled Ipswich

cafés to access fresh fish and fruit from Maryborough, Brisbane and the south coast; even if there was no fish to be had at the Brisbane fish markets, Londy's would have fresh fish. Also, the Metro, Londy's and Regal cafés worked a Sunday roster so that each family occasionally had time home together.

Maria remembers those times as “golden days.” She says:

The Sunday we have closed we gather all in one house and we have (she laughs) ball. Oh, you never know what it was because – all the children. By then they have some more families. We gather all and the most we gather in Mrs Stathis' house – she loves entertaining. It was lovely days. Yes! (5<sup>th</sup> August 2004).

### **Maureen's story**

Cafés employed surprisingly large numbers of staff; Peter Cominos claims that their Cairns café employed an astounding 175 staff before WWII, the three storey café sometimes catering simultaneously for two weddings on the two upper levels as well as supplying a ground floor dining room that seated a hundred customers. Ipswich cafés, however, typically employed 6-8 people: cooks, washing up staff, waitresses, and those behind the counters (28<sup>th</sup> July 2015).<sup>30</sup> Labour was highly organised along lines of gender and ethnicity; cooks were mostly Greek men (Janiszewski and Alexakis 2) and waitresses were mostly local Anglo-Australian girls (Janiszewski and Alexakis 7). In Ipswich cafés, Greek proprietors often appear to have worked the cash registers and age may also have been a factor because older Australian women often did the washing up (Maureen). Pictures of Londy's and the Regal show older Anglo-Australian women washing up, although Helene Marendy and Maria Kentrotis note

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<sup>30</sup> Peter Cominos recalls that his father described their Cairns café as ‘a departmental café. Complete with ‘dumb waiter’, an upstairs lounge with a piano, toilets and free showers with fresh towels for travellers, and a three-storey atrium over the front part of the dining room hung with baskets of ferns and caged canaries, Cominos' Café was a much-loved elegant destination for travellers and locals alike. When it was renovated before the war, the café hired out crockery, supplied bakery items to most of the district, had the confectionery counter that sold more confectionery than Coles in Queen Street Brisbane, and its kitchen was so modern that Brisbane General hospital consulted Peter's father for advice.

that washing up was their job too. Maureen was a local girl who worked as a waitress in Londy's Café.



*Fig. 22: A photograph taken of staff behind the counter of the City Café when it was owned by the Cassimatis family shows the number of local girls employed in Greek Cafes.*

Maureen started work at Londy's in 1947 when she was seventeen. She remembers receiving presents from customers when she worked on the day she turned eighteen. Londy's offered a slight pay increase over her previous job, where the pay was 25 shillings a week.

Maureen cycled from North Ipswich, arriving for work at about 6am to clean the mirrors and have breakfast – always baked beans on toast. Cycling home after midnight if she worked the second shift, Maureen was occasionally followed, but remembers that a white police wagon – ‘the ghost car’ – driven by younger policemen used to “keep an eye on things.” She says, “I always felt as if someone was looking after me. I always felt safe.” A sergeant, who was an older man, walked the inner city streets and “kept an eye on the North Star” (16<sup>th</sup> April 2004).

Maureen recalls that drunks came in after the pub closed; they put salt in the sugar as a prank and drank the black sauce to sober up.<sup>31</sup> “Sometimes, they would buy a bottle of oysters and just go *glug, glug, glug* and drink them down. And if they ordered a greasy meal – a mixed grill or something like that – they’d be sick all over the table and we’d have to clean it up” (16<sup>th</sup> April 2004). On several occasions, she retrieved false teeth, which she cleaned and kept for the customers when they returned; “If they were game enough,” she adds. Maureen relates the story of an Irish customer who would leave his belongings with her before going into the North Star so that he would not lose them; he was invariably drunk when he came back for them (16<sup>th</sup> April 2004).

Londy’s had morning and afternoon shifts; four waitresses worked, two on each side of the café, with particular tables to look after. Over casual clothes, Maureen wore an apron, which she made, with *LONDY’S* embroidered across the bib and a pocket to hold her order book. She took orders at the tables, customers paid her, and she took the money to the cashier, who was usually a member of the Greek family. Mirrors lined the walls next to the booths and, because small children were deposited in the booths first to prevent them escaping, the mirrors needed cleaning daily. Tables had no cloths and were set with Worcestershire sauce and silver sugar pots and salt and pepper shakers.

Food was served on china, glassware and silver dishes, often with the name of the café painted or engraved into them (Fig. 23).



*Fig. 23: Engraved silverware from the Regal Café.*

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<sup>31</sup> Collins et al also note this problem: a Greek who spent his childhood in a Richmond café recalls that drunks staggered from the pub and ate bread and butter soaked in Worcestershire sauce to sober them up before main course (I two pages before page 1). Jack Stathis also remembers it being an issue. A resident of St Mary’s Hostel remembers that ‘we’ used to pour black sauce over the white bread and eat it while waiting for meals.

Theft of these items was such a problem for cafés that Harry Andronicus in Toowoomba engraved his café ware *Stolen from the Club Café* (Jack Stathis and Peter Londy, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2005).

Cafés were often full; respondents commonly report walking the streets looking for a vacant table on Friday and Saturday nights in the 40s (Narelle; Don).



Fig. 24: Maureen's record of Zygy's sister, Halina, and her friend.

Londy's was especially busy after the pictures when toasted sandwiches and coffee were popular and at lunchtime, when meals or takeaway sandwiches were ordered by families coming into town from the country. Hungry workers from the Queensland Times, at that time diagonally across from the North Star, added to the lunchtime rush. According to Maureen it was not a big treat to go to Londy's, but more of an everyday practice, and regular customers often ordered the same thing: "The Vermeer boys, they always had toasted cheese sandwiches and coffee made on milk"

(16<sup>th</sup> April 2004).

Maureen's photo album is a wonderful record of a slice of Ipswich life. Developing snapshots in her parents' bedroom with the aid of a red bulb, she captured images of Greeks, customers, and staff, which articulate the kinds of relationships she had with each during the years she spent at Londy's. First, a number of photographs depict 'foreign' customers – Fred and Peter Vermeer, Zygy Bar and his sister Halina, "Two English Chaps", Len Leong, and friends and relations of each of these, most of whom were also immigrants – suggesting that Greek cafés were possibly a haven for those not born in Australia. Notably, Maureen is second generation German.

This, and the fact that Greeks owned the cafés, may account for the role the café played in the lives of immigrants from other countries.

Also, since most photographs were not taken at Londy's, but at private gatherings and venues, they show that not only did customers become friends but also that Maureen may have represented a home away from home for those who felt isolated in a predominately Anglo-Celtic, often xenophobic, culture (see Fig. 22). "We had good times when we worked there," she says. "We'd hear people's stories." The Vermeer brothers, for example, talked about their family in Holland and their plans to bring them out to Australia. When their family eventually arrived, the Vermeers stopped coming because they no longer needed what Maureen and the café provided. Missing wives and girlfriends, servicemen also shared photographs of loved ones. She recalls, "Quite a few customers [from other countries] seemed to be a bit lonely and wanted to talk and when we weren't serving we were allowed to stand and talk to customers" (16<sup>th</sup> April 2004). Well beyond her role as a waitress at Londy's, Maureen helped newcomers settle into the community.



*Fig. 25: Christmas Picnic at the Gold Coast in 1953: the cooks and waitresses putting George Londy in the bin.*

Finally, the photographs depict a social life enjoyed by Greek owners and staff and non-Greek staff. Maureen recalls, “Every year the Greeks used to take all the staff to the beach for the day in their cars and they paid for everything” (March 2004).

Photographs of a picnic in 1953 communicate the group’s camaraderie.

The album also includes photographs of Maureen and other waitresses at Greek weddings (Fig. 24) and numerous signed studio portraits given to Maureen by members of the Londy family.

When asked why she was invited to family weddings and given studio portraits, she replies simply, “We were family.” This is evident too in other ways . When the Londys made themselves Greek coffee and Greek food like quail, or mince wrapped in grapevine leaves and served with lemon sauce, they often shared it with Maureen, who says she felt privileged to have it. Maureen also taught one of the Londy boys to speak English. At a café table, she would sit down with Harry and a primitive form of dictionary with Greek and English words and help him learn.<sup>32</sup>



*Fig. 26: Maureen dancing with Harry Londy at Esther Londy’s wedding*

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<sup>32</sup> Inscriptions underneath the photos also indicate the close relationships between Greek families and the number of Greeks other than the Londy family on the staff at Londy’s café. Marendy and Kentrotis family members are present at Esther Londy’s wedding and staff photos include people from the Kentrotis and Stathis families. Maureen claims that the Greeks usually married other Greeks and spoke Greek to each other and to their children.

Women's and men's stories exhibit different emphases; while men recalled achievements and events, women focused on labour and relationships. Most female respondents said they knew 'everyone' and are still well-known from their years in cafés and many recall interactions with specific customers. Maureen said she enjoyed her time at Londy's because the employers, staff, and most of the customers were good to work with. Like Maria, she made many friends and was known by all who came in. She is still remembered as the girl at Londy's. Helen spoke of knowing whole families of a broad cross-section of the Ipswich community.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to relate men's stories in detail, men never mentioned this or recalled specific customers: Peter Londy explained how his father always had fresh fish even if there was no fish to be had in Brisbane; Jack Stathis related wartime incidents; Peter Cominos described how modern machines, techniques and designs enabled his father's 'departmental café' to serve an entire region.

## Chapter Four

### Greek and Anglo-Australian Relations

*'Shop here before the day goes'*

- A sign on the front of non-Greek cafés in several Australian towns

Although immigration policy admitted Greeks to Australia, government documents betray prejudice. The Ferry Commission of 1925, for example, recorded alleged unhygienic personal habits in Greeks (qtd. in Jupp, People 511). Harry Londy's application for naturalisation (1922) is an interesting indicator of official attitudes towards Greek immigrants. In it, the police constable notes that Harry is of good character, as certified by "well-known and reputable citizens," but in the final section labelled General Remarks he writes, "He is not a coloured person." Colour mattered. Respondents seemed of the opinion that Greeks with darker complexions had more difficulty than those like Harry in becoming naturalised at first attempt (Londy and Stathis families 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2005).

Further, Jupp claims that the general populace did not welcome Greek immigrants, who were expected to speak English and behave like Australian-born citizens and were tolerated rather than respected despite the popularity of their shops and their standing as prosperous community members (People 95, 511).

Attitudes towards Greeks, however, varied considerably. Conomos notes that Greece's initial policy of wartime neutrality sparked clashes between café owners and Australian soldiers. Drunken behaviour – putting salt in the sugar, refusing to pay, causing fights, damaging cafés – displayed a normally latent hostility until Greece joined the allies in 1917 (History 86, 124). During WWII, use of the word 'dago' was revived as drunken soldiers abused Greeks, demanding, "Dago, give us a drink. We are fighting for you" (Conomos, History 548). Jupp similarly records a dramatic shift in attitude in October 1940 when Greece single-handedly repulsed Mussolini's invasion (People 511). A Greek café worker in Charleville during the first decades of the twentieth century remembers Australians being angry when he spoke Greek, saying, "Speak English, you bloody dago," but according to another, relations in Goondiwindi were good: "We got on well with Australian customers. It was like one big family" (Conomos, History 136).

An Ipswich resident who grew up in central Queensland recalls Greek cafés in Longreach, Charleville, and Blackall. She also remembers a sign over a non-Greek café in Longreach that read, “Shop here before the day goes” (St Mary’s hostel volunteer). Peter Cominos describes a similar one in Cairns. “It seemed like an innocent sign,” he says, “but everyone knew what it meant” (28<sup>th</sup> July 2005).



*Fig. 27: A sign on the bridge at Charleville urged visitors and locals to patronise the town’s Anglo-Australian café rather than one of several Greek cafes in Charleville. The photographs was taken around 1920.*

Most older Australian-born respondents still used the word ‘dago’ in reference to Greeks, but most were adamant that they liked the Greeks and the term was not intended to give offence.<sup>33</sup> It was, however, hurtful to Greek-Australian respondents, who agreed that everyone called them ‘dagos’, but says that “You had to listen for the way it was said” (Helen, Jack and Zeta Stathis, Peter and Mary Londy 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2005).

“Not that you were shunned,” Helen says, “but you were.” Phyllis, an Australian-born waitress at Londy’s Café in the late 1920s, spoke Greek fluently and was close to many Greeks living in Ipswich at that time. Her daughter, Narelle, who recalls being part of the Greek community from about ten years of age, confirmed that Greeks

<sup>33</sup> Expressions encountered included “the wog near the North star” and one, “the stinkin’ Greeks,” suggests some Anglo-Australians have still not embraced the Greek community.

were hurt by the word 'dago' but, like most Australian-born respondents in this project, claimed that there was no animosity between Greeks and Australians because Greeks were very good business people and had a welcoming attitude toward customers.

School children called Greek children 'little dagos' (Conomos, *History* 87). Arriving in Ipswich in 1922 aged nine, Mick Londy was always older than other boys in his class because of language difficulties. He recalls that being called 'dago' always made him feel inferior: "It was always there – the prejudice" (qtd. in Conomos, *History* 311-2). Jack Stathis claims that every day of his school career he had to fight someone for calling him 'dago', 'wog', or 'greaser'.<sup>34</sup> One day, a teacher told Jack, who was a dayboy, to give a boarder an instruction. The boarder said, "You can't tell me what to do; you're just a day-goer." Jack, not waiting for the final syllable, immediately launched into his daily physical protest (22<sup>nd</sup> October 2005). Helen recalls a classmate to whom she offered the shelter of her umbrella on the way home from school. He said, 'dago' and spat on her. Helen is still astounded by the fact that the boy was Russian, but in an evolving multicultural landscape, alliances between and against ethnic groups are to be expected. Jack believes that the later arrival of Asian immigrants deflected racism away from Greek and Italian families.

Constantinos Karanges, whose brother's godfather opened the Niagara Café in Newcastle in 1898, recalls that the Greeks encountered constant racism in the early days. Like Maria Kentrotis, however, he notes, "It is very different now, but before Whitlam we were all wogs. You were frightened to speak Greek because people would say, "If you can't speak English, go back to where you came from"" (Nicklin 45). He notes too that there was no feeling of belonging to their new country. Inability to speak English was a constant barrier: "When you want to express your feelings you can't, because you do not have the right words" (Nicklin 45).

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<sup>34</sup> The term 'greaser' arose from the fact that the Greeks ran fish shops. Peter Veneris remembers that when his family bought the Blue Bird café in Lockhart, his name at school changed from dago to greasy dago (Janiszewski and Alexakis 7).

Even when Greek/Australian relations were good, there were some boundaries that few transgressed. Narelle's claim that there was no animosity between Greeks and Australians came with one qualification: "Unless you wanted to marry one." According to Narelle, a romance developed between her mother and Harry Londy's nephew, Mick, who also worked at Londy's café. In 1929, when they became engaged, Mick was dispatched to a relative's café in a distant town and Phyllis to her grandmother's property in New South Wales. According to Jack Stathis, however, Harry Marendy, Jack Cassimatis and George Andrews all married Australian women. Early in the twentieth century, few Greek women lived in Australia so it is more likely that Greek men had Australian-born wives than it is that Greek women had Anglo-Australian husbands. If most first generation Greek men had Greek wives, however, second and third generations were more likely to marry Anglo-Australians; each of Jack's three brothers and his sister has an Anglo-Australian spouse.

Maureen does not convey the impression that Greek families were opposed to a member of the family marrying an Australian girl. Maria, too, saw the main obstacle to her marrying an Australian as her inability to speak English not the fact that she was Greek. Jack notes that the resistance to Greek men marrying Australian women came not from the Greeks or from Australian girls, but from Australian parents. Like most respondents, Maureen claims there was no objection to marrying Greeks on the part of girls her age, but noted that it was unthinkable for her mother and for people of her mother's generation. Maureen did not date Greek boys, but often danced with them at local dances and went out with them in groups.

The widespread practice of anglicising names is a telling aspect of the Greek experience of Australia. Some were shortened – Leondarakis became Londy, Kallikeronos became Kallos, Megaloconomos became Conomos – while others were translated to their English equivalent: Gianis Mavrokefalos means John Black, Pappagianou translates as Johnson. Like the names of Greek cafés and the food they served, this indicates a desire to avoid friction with locals who could not pronounce

long Greek names, as well as a desire to assimilate into Australian culture.<sup>35</sup>

According to Peter Kallos, officials sometimes changed names when filling in forms because they decided that Greek names were too long and difficult to spell. No respondents expressed any bitterness regarding this practice – although these were mostly second generation Greeks – but to change one’s name, particularly in a culture that places importance on the practice of naming, is an indication of the determination to succeed with which the Greeks approached life as aliens in a foreign land.

The banner of a 1927 Greek newspaper, two years after the Ferry Report, proclaimed, “A Greek Must Always Remain a Good Greek, Because You Cannot Make a Good Australian Out of a Bad Greek. Australia Has No Need to Doubt or Fear the Man Who Loves Two Countries; the Real Danger Lies in the Man who Loves None” (Nikolas Marinakis qtd. in Gilchrist 2: 344). One woman recalls that when her mother left Greece, she was given this advice by her mother: “You must treat Australians with respect because you are the stranger.” She also advised her to take food to her neighbours and give bones to their dogs (Solomos Club, 21<sup>st</sup> September 2005). When asked what he thought it was like for people to be separated from their families and have their names changed, Peter Kallos says, “Well, you’d have to know what their life was” (17<sup>th</sup> July 2005). He was referring to the terrible conditions on Kythera and what Greeks were therefore prepared to suffer in the hope of finding a better way of life.<sup>36</sup> Greek immigrants were used to hardship; they were prepared to do whatever was necessary to carve out a better life in Australia.

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<sup>35</sup> The American Milk Bar, Busy Bee Café, Blue Bird Café, City Café, The Savoy, Paris Café, Garden of Roses, Melba Café, the Britannia, Royal, Empire, and Regal Cafés, Marble Café, Australia Café, Club Café, Jim’s Popular Café, which derived its name from the anglicised version of Dimitri, deny any Greek heritage. Others, however, like the Pantheon, Ithaca, Drouzos, Olympia, and Ellisos Cafés, maintained connections with a Greek heritage via their titles.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Kallos explains that atop the descent to where emigrants departed for Australia, a stone called the ‘crying stone’ marks the place where tears were shed for loved ones leaving for the other side of the world. This is possibly the monument overlooking the sea near Potamos on Kythera to which Gilchrist refers as “a memorial to those who went down the hill to the ships, and those who would never return. The inscription (in Greek) reads: *“The Place of Tears of Joy and Grief, for those who came and went, in the year 1908”*. Erected in the memory of George and Cleopatra Khlentzos” (2: 237).

Food is so obviously part of the story of the Australian Greek café that it is easy to overlook the role it played in fitting a wave of ‘foreigners’ into a ‘white Australia’. Food is a primordial focus from the moment of birth. It is the hub around which cultural life revolves; catering is a vital part of birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, even funerals. Given the capacity of food to erode the barriers between people, the act of providing food, then, rather than the quality, price, or quantity of the food, may clarify the Greek café’s role in assimilating Greek immigrants.

Greeks appear to have been good business people.<sup>37</sup> They were often also kind.<sup>38</sup> More specifically, however, Greek proprietors appear to have created a family atmosphere over which they presided as hosts. Joanne recalls, “Dad and uncle, the two little bald brothers they were – well that’s what everyone called them – had a favourite spot at the table at the front of the shop and they’d give lollies and ice-creams to toddlers coming into the café” (16<sup>th</sup> April, 2004). Don Risson similarly remembers that when he delivered potatoes to Greek cafés, owners told him to help himself to a piece of fish and go and cook it, always pressing him to eat more. He says, “They would greet you at the door and they’d talk to you” (September 2005).

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<sup>37</sup> Produce merchant Don Risson admires the way the cafés worked together to help each other in business and notes that serving big meals was a “clever” business move. Peter Londy describes the way owners accessed the best fresh fish and fruit through café connections in other towns – even if there was no fish to be had at the Brisbane fish markets, there would be fresh fish at Londy’s in Ipswich.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Cominos notes that his father always donated 1% of his huge cafés takings to the local Ambulance Brigade and Helen Kentos believes that she would be a millionaire if she could collect on the IOUs her husband received. Also see Elpiniki Black’s recollection of Gero Black in Conomos ([History](#) 99).



*Fig. 28: “Two little bald brothers” at the front of the Regal Café.*

Certainly, Greek respondents involved in this project were warm, welcoming people and wonderful hosts; research invariably involved food – urging the researcher to partake more fully of the generous provision, one respondent remarked, “Typical Greek hospitality – making you eat more when you’re already full” (Yiota Samios, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2005). It is possible then that many customers in Greek cafés felt that Greek proprietors were sharing their table rather than making a living.

This homely family atmosphere was enhanced by the fact that Greeks served familiar, everyday food; café menus boasted no delicacies or gourmet delights, unlike the Chinese café, which emphasised difference between Australian and Chinese food and culture. Also, there was nothing special about going to Ipswich’s Greek cafés. According to Maureen, going to Londy’s was an everyday practice not a treat, unlike going to the memorable Anglo-Australian café Whitehouse’s Café where sophistication and upmarket elegance made dining a special occasion.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Whitehouse’s is remembered as a different type of venue from Greek cafés. One Ipswich resident said she never went to Whitehouse’s Café because it was “too posh.” It catered for weddings and had

In their role as hosts offering familiar food in everyday surrounding, therefore, many Greek proprietors enhanced the perception that customers shared their table.

Most Anglo-Australian respondents report an acceptance of Greeks. Greek respondents, despite being called 'dagos', acknowledge that acceptance on the part of many Australians. If customers had a sense of the everyday breaking of bread with the Greeks, the fact that the interaction between Anglo-Australians and Greek immigrants took place around food is a significant factor in the assimilation of the Greek population into Australian culture. That the cafés were the interface between an anglophile Australia and waves of Greek immigrants, and that the encounter took place around food, gives additional insight into the role the Greek café played in the developing relationship between Greek and Anglo-Australians.

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tablecloths, gleaming silverware, more expensive food than Greek cafés served, upstairs dining, and waitresses in uniforms and caps.



## Chapter Five

### The Greeks and Gathering Places

*Men come together in cities in order to live; they remain together in order to live the good life.*

- Aristotle (qtd. in Mumford 2)

The café is peculiar to cities. Like Lewis Mumford, who explores the city as a social institution rather than limiting it to a physical fact, Ray Oldenburg describes the essence and function of cafés and other informal public gathering places that define the soul of a city.<sup>40</sup> Oldenburg names them ‘third places’, home being first and work second. Citing German beer gardens and English pubs, Oldenburg claims that every great culture evolves an indigenous version of ‘third place’ (2).<sup>41</sup> Journalist Luke Slattery claims the café was born in 17<sup>th</sup> century London as a unique kind of civic space; in the ‘Age of Enlightenment’, the café was a men-only establishment where political parties met and people found out about city events (18). President of the Solomos Greek Australian Cultural Society Con Castan claims, however, that the Greek kafeneion, which is the equivalent of the 17<sup>th</sup> century coffee house, existed in Greece from the beginning of European coffee-drinking.

Men dominated the Greek community in Australia in the early days of migration and, as a contact point through which new immigrants found other Greeks and accessed jobs, the all-male kafeneion firmly established its importance in Australia in the early twentieth century (Conomos 77). Both a privately-run commercial enterprise and a place for social gathering; the kafeneion is “at the same time a place of assembly, a communication centre, and a place to transact business and satisfy one’s thirst” (Conomos 27). Alexakis and Janiszewski describe kafeneia as men-only establishments that provide entertainment and companionship; here men eat, drink, meet, gamble, and talk politics (218). Conomos explains that they offer the “usual occupations of coffee and card and board games” and the opportunity to engage in the traditional Greek pastime of *kouvenda* or ‘lively conversation’ (157-8).

Although it would appear that the kafeneion is the ancestor of the Australian Greek café, most historians do not make this connection, locating the genesis of the café in

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<sup>40</sup> See Mumford, Lewis. The Culture of Cities, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970 – first published in 1938; Gruen, Victor. The Heart of Our Cities: the Urban Crisis: Diagnosis and Cure. London: Thames and Hudson, 1965; Lofland, Lyn. A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space. New York: Basic, 1973; Rudofsky, Bernard. Streets for People: A Primer for Americans. New York: Doubleday, 1969.

<sup>41</sup> Oldenburg, Ray. The Great Good Place: cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of the community. New York: Marlowe, 1999.

the 'oyster saloon' and connecting the kafeneion instead with the movement towards organised Greek community (Conomos 157).<sup>42</sup> The relationships and sense of community that formed in Ipswich's Greek cafés during the first seventy years of the twentieth century, however, indicate that these were clearly examples of Oldenburg's 'great good places' and this is likely the result of their male proprietors' social background in the kafeneion.

Jupp reports that Greek immigrants listed Australians' home-centredness as a social behavior that seemed unnatural. While Italian immigrants placed food high on the list of things they most disliked about Australia, Greeks claimed: "All Australians do is to go home from work, eat, watch television and go to bed. What sort of life is that? It would drive you mad" (Greek immigrants qtd. in Jupp, *Arrivals* 105 & 125).<sup>43</sup> Picnics, therefore, feature prominently both in historical accounts and respondents' recollections: Conomos (171, 173, 260); Maureen recalls picnics with employers; Peter Kallos, Peter Londy, and Jack Stathis relate stories of picnics at Kholo and meeting with Toowoomba Greeks at Murphy's Creek or Helidon. Perhaps, therefore, something of the Greek penchant for making food the centre of informal public gathering brought new meaning to the Australian café.

Journalist Sally McInerney affirms that the most important aspect of the Greek café was that it was a meeting place (36) and Conomos notes the role it played in Australia's social life during the period between 1910 and 1960:

It became a popular gathering place for people. From 7am to midnight, seven days a week, it was a refuge, where a person could always find something to eat or drink, talk to friends, and rest his weary legs. The Greek café was where you had your morning tea when shopping, or had a meal if you were a visitor to town, or supper if you had been to the pictures at night. Whether you were

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<sup>42</sup> One exception is Gilchrist, who observes that Meimarakis' Brisbane café "became a favourite rendezvous as a *kafeneion* for local Greeks" (1: 236).

<sup>43</sup> Unlike Greek children, who had 'Australian' food, Councillor Charlie Pisasale, the son of Italian immigrants, recalls being ostracized at school because of his 'frog sandwiches', which were the result of his insistence that his mother put his char-grilled capsicum between two slices of bread like "the other kids had."

on your way to work at 7am in the morning, or wandering through town at 11pm, you could be assured that the Greek café would be open, and the Greek proprietor would be there to talk to you, and serve your needs. (“Eating” Conomos 88)

Being open whenever people needed food and being closely associated with picture theatres helped to make Greek cafés part of Ipswich’s history, identity and social fabric, and Ipswich residents generally emphasize that Londy’s was a meeting place. Despite this, Ipswich’s Greek cafés closed down; the Central Milk Bar is the last. Oldenburg finds American urban growth hostile to the creation of gathering places; while a sidewalk café in Paris is about culture, a fast food eatery is about commerce (42). In Australia, similar growth has brought the ‘phenomenal’ story of the Greek café to an end.

**Chapter Six**  
**Reasons for the Demise of the Greek Café**

When Greek cafés in the centre of Ipswich were so much a part of the city's social tapestry, it is difficult to comprehend why few survived into the 1970s. When asked why the cafés closed down, respondents offered a variety of reasons, each of which is listed below. Even though some reasons were cited repeatedly, multiple factors caused the demise of the Greek café and in the case of each café the combination of factors is different.

### **1. Fast -Food Chains:**

The Australian Greek café's link to America, evident in the first decade of the twentieth century, also contributed to its demise in the century's closing decades. American-led corporatisation of the fast food industry sent the café/milk bar, a cultural icon of the 50s and 60s, into rapid decline. 'Fast Food' chains began to replace family-based food catering concerns and sit down meal outlets gave way to takeaway outlets. Janiszewski and Alexakis note that many Greek cafes were "forced to transform into takeaways or be relegated to memory or oblivion" (5). This is the case with the Central, the only Greek café to survive in Ipswich, and Collins et al, note that Greek takeaways are the "modern reincarnation" of the classic Greek café (83). Some respondents suggested that the sixties saw a shift to 'the instant society', with people no longer wanting to sit and wait for meals on a daily basis (Jack Stathis). Perhaps this has come full circle with the European-style cafés now dotted throughout most Australian towns and cities, including Ipswich.

### **2. Professional Second-Generation Migrants:**

For first generation Greek migrants, cafés were a means to an end. Proprietors endured hardship so that their children could have tertiary educations and not have to continue in the café life. Collins et al. note that post-WWII Greeks in particular viewed small business as a way to gain education and upward mobility. He claims that children of post-war Greek immigrants sought careers as doctors, lawyers, and teachers rather than shopkeepers (63). Jupp notes that Australians of Greek parentage began to enter professions by the 1920s (People 511). Constantinos Karanges, of the Niagara Café in Newcastle, explains that all of his children have

fulfilled the dreams he once had for himself of going to university and becoming a teacher; no third generation Karanges has a café (Nicklin 45).

Respondents in this project, who include pharmacists, accountants, and doctors, affirm these claims. Peter Kallos recalls that he was shown a pile of dirty café dishes if he displayed any reluctance to do his homework. Peter Cominos similarly explains that as a child he experienced the hard work and long hours involved in running the café and, like many others, had no desire to perpetuate family businesses.

### **3. Hotels, Clubs and Restaurants:**

Maureen suggested that the counter lunches served in hotels and clubs drew customers away from Greek cafés. It is difficult to establish when hotels began to serve meals to non-resident patrons, but most Ipswich hotels now offer simple, reasonably-priced counter meals. In addition to hotels, Ipswich now has a number of clubs like the Golf Club, RSL, Football clubs, and taverns, all of which also have the allure of poker machines.

It should be remembered too that until relatively recently restaurants were not widespread, although, as Symons points out, “Every generation of Australians has believed it has enjoyed the country’s first decent dining out” (112). Symons discovers French-style restaurants with French chefs, good wines, and elegant dishes in Australia at the end of the eighteenth century (112-4). Except for Chinese restaurants, however, there were few restaurants in regional twentieth century Australia prior to the 70s. Ipswich had a Chinese restaurant, but when people ate out it was mostly at cafés. The number of restaurants increased dramatically from the 70s and this affected café trade. Ironically, the popularity of these is a result of the ‘non-Australian’ food they offer: French, Italian, Mexican, Indian, Thai, Japanese, Moroccan. The recently emerged café culture, which will be discussed at the end of this appendix, has in turn had a detrimental effect on restaurants.

#### **4. Television and Picture Theatres:**

A symbiotic relationship existed between cafés and picture theatres; cafés were patronised before the 'pictures', at intermission, and for hot after-show suppers. Conomos describes the benefit cafés derived from the growth of the movie industry (121, 133). Ipswich had number of picture theatres, but with the advent of television, drive-ins, and videos, most went out of business. This had a serious impact on cafés. Helen Kentos claims that people went to the pictures twice a week in the 1950s and her husband John, foretelling the end of picture theatres with the introduction of television, sold their milk bar beside the Wintergarden in 1958. Jack Stathis notes that cafés depended on the night trade, which was lost to television.

#### **5. Rural Families:**

Maureen, Maria, and other respondents mentioned families from outlying rural areas coming to Ipswich for the traditional 'day in town', especially when cattle sales were held. Such families often had three 'sessions' in the city's food outlets. As sale yards closed, as fewer families lived in rural areas, as improved cars meant that a trip to town was no longer such a big day out, and as large shopping facilities were built in surrounding rural areas, cafés lost business.

#### **6. Ipswich Bypass:**

Historians note the impact on regional café businesses of highways bypassing New South Wales towns (Janiszewski and Alexakis 5). The Ipswich bypass and highway roadhouses that supply both food and fuel had a similar affect on Greek cafés in Ipswich. Several respondents mentioned this and those who were teenagers in the 1970s reported that service stations like the Blue Star and the Caltex at Blacksoil, were their 'great, good gathering places'. Jack Stathis notes that cafés depended on the through-tourist trade, observing that Ipswich hotels suffered a similar fate as a result of the bypass.

### **7. Escalating Car Culture:**

When Greek cafés flourished, few people had cars or used them routinely. Originally, according to Conomos, people used buses or walked to shops and picture theatres and this was more conducive to a café trade (134). Families going for an evening walk often called at a café. As car travel became the norm, cafés had less 'passing traffic'. Cars also promoted the use of service stations as gathering places.

### **8. Youth and Recreation:**

Maria notes that nowadays there is much more for young people to do than 'hang out' together at cafés and picture theatres. As technology advanced, fewer young people gathered to eat and talk. Also, multiplex cinemas, a common form of leisure for contemporary youth, have their own 'candy bars'.

### **9. Economic Downturn:**

Relocation and employment changes in the coal and railway industries during the 1970s and the economic downturn of the late 1980s had a negative impact on small business in the Ipswich CBD. Andrew Blythe records the results of this (43-51) and Maria notes the effect of the loss of jobs in staple industries on her business.

(Blythe, Andrew. Contemporary Studies Dissertation: [A Retailing History of the Ipswich Central Business district \(CBD\) from the Mid-1970s to 2003](#). Ipswich: Andrew Blythe, 2003)

### **10. Pre-packaged Goods:**

Pre-packaged soft drink, ice cream, chocolates, flavoured milk, etc all of which are sold at supermarkets and convenience stores, were once the province of Greek cafés.

### **11. The Popularity of Fish and the Declining Influence of Catholicism:**

Even the Catholic practice of not eating meat on Fridays, which declined as the century wore on, had an effect on Greek cafés. While fewer Catholics maintain this practice today, Stan Garland explains that in Maryborough in the second decade of the twentieth century, he cooked hundreds of pieces of fish on Fridays (Conomos,

History 131). Peter Londy cooked so much fish that, while he is a keen fisherman, he cannot face eating fish today. Harry Tanos from the Sydney feels the same way. Together, these men cooked over a thousand pieces of fish on Fridays during the 50s. Also, like confectionery and drinks, supermarkets supply fish. Peter Londy also notes that meat was rationed during the war and so fish was a big 'seller'.

## **12. Unsophisticated Establishments:**

McInerney notes that, while they were relatively rare prior to the 70s, restaurants were reserved for celebrations; cafés, on the other hand, were more everyday family places (36). This is consistent with Ipswich residents' views of local Greek cafés and their recollections that the Anglo-Australian venue, Whitehouse's Café in Nicholas Street, was a 'special' place. McInerney attributes the demise of Greek cafés partly to this: "not being sophisticated in social or architectural terms, they have never had staunch defenders, so that they undergo constant metamorphosis with different owners who feel that the place needs modernizing, otherwise the customers will disappear" (36). While many cafés were in fact classic examples of modern sophistication, as noted by the architect McInerney quotes, renovation occurred in most Ipswich cafés. Many descendants of Ipswich café owners reported that their family café had undergone renovation at some time (City, Central, Londy's, Ritz, Sydney).

**Chapter Seven**  
**The Rise of a Contemporary Café Culture**

Prior to the evolution of the Greek café/milk bar, Coffee Houses, Tea Houses, Refreshment Rooms, bakeries and other cafés served the needs of Australian consumers. As can be seen on the 1918 Block Plans, Ipswich had its share of such establishments. Later, cafeterias were common in department stores throughout the nation and could be found in Ipswich at Coles and Cribb and Foote. In the years since the demise of the Greek café, and prior to the ubiquitous food court, the Coffee Shoppe, the Coffee Lounge, and the Snack Bar were the main food outlets in shopping centres. A small number of these – Granny May’s and Stockman’s – survived in the Ipswich CBD. In keeping with other major cities in the last two decades, however, Ipswich now boasts a growing number of contemporary cafés. While this project tracks the evolution of the Greek café from the oyster saloon of the late nineteenth century to its demise in the 1970s, a brief discussion of the recent emergence of a café culture as a means of comparison with Greek cafés is appropriate, particularly since, as journalist Lenore Nicklin notes, Greek cafés were “Our Original Café Culture” (44).

Serving coffee at Cactus Espresso, Avenue 5, Java Bean, and Picasso’s is an art form; coffee has its own menu: cappuccino, macchiato, long black, flat white, latté, Vienna, affogato, skinnychino, babychino, decaf cappuccino, Edith Piaf, iced coffee, frapee, coffee with syrup. In addition, café-quality coffee and variety is available from less sophisticated eateries like Fed Up (Brisbane Street) and Hoe Inn (Limestone Street). Even McDonalds has the McCafé. More recently still, Café Bars, like Fig Jam and Darcy’s on Doyle, have evolved as the latest manifestation of the coffee outlet. Serving alcohol as well as coffee, the Café Bar blurs distinctions between café, ‘pub’, and restaurant and extends the café’s market base. Like the café bars in James Street, Brisbane, the room on the western side of Ipswich’s Hotel Metropole in Brisbane Street represents this latest version of Australian café culture.

The décor is contemporary, but the boundary between ‘pub’ and café, so clearly defined in Londy’s and the North Star, is completely blurred: eggplant and tangerine walls meet at the corners; a music video plays on the flat screen television above the painted Victorian fireplace; bits of rocket and char-grilled vegetables litter empty

plates on tables that spill out, 'al fresco', into a courtyard shaded by umbrella trees; baristas wear the mandatory café black; a bar runs along one side of the room and customers sip chardonnays as well as lattés. The Hotel Metropole is owned by a Greek-Australian and represents the continuing saga of Greek shopkeepers in the Ipswich CBD.<sup>44</sup> It is worth noting in this discussion of contemporary café society that the popular Coffee Club chain is the brainchild of three Greek men and that its slogan is 'Where will I meet you?'

Like Janiszewski and Alexakis and Conomos in their analyses of Greek cafés, journalist Luke Slattery discusses the recent café culture in terms of a "phenomenon" that "exploded" in inner urban cities and extended to country areas (18). Slattery explains, however, that the contemporary café is an "emblem of European-style sophistication," a taste for which was acquired by Australians travelling in Europe (18). Dating the appearance of the street café from about 1985, Slattery observes, "The café craze is about a sense of sophistication, it's about the allure of the European city, the romance of the café based artist and intellectual" (18). Evoking images of Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir reworking their ideas and manuscripts in smoky cafés, he attributes the 1990s café to the allure of Parisian café culture, although he observes that Australian cafés are more a catwalk than a place for ideas and writing, more about French sophistication than political agendas and civic events (18). In contrast, the Greek café was not an attempt to import a foreign culture and many were not renowned for their sophistication.

Publisher of the *Melbourne Café Guide* Michael Sabey defines cafés in terms of the provision of outstanding coffee, value for money food, and hours that extend from breakfast until late (qtd in Ripe 15). This foundation, however, was laid down over a century ago by Greek immigrants. Based on research carried out in 1989, Sabey claims that in their reshaping of the restaurant market, cafés are a force to be reckoned with: "Cafés have fundamentally changed the whole eating patterns of

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<sup>44</sup> Michael Samios recently arrived in Ipswich from Sydney and renovated the Hotel Metropole in 2004. He is distantly related to the Samios family who owned Londy's in the 60s and to the Samios who owned the renowned Paragon Café in Katoomba.

discerning foodies” (qtd in Ripe 15). Again, this echoes the reception of the Greek café in Australia.

Journalist and food critic Cherry Ripe, however, observes that cafés have been blamed for driving restaurants out of business and “diluting the nation’s gastronomic standards” (qtd in Slattery 18). Others accuse cafés of taking over whole streets, invading bookshops, driving up the price of inner-city real estate, and driving out other kinds of businesses (Slattery 18). According to Slattery, a whole way of life now adheres to the café culture and cafés are “breeding like cockroaches along the fashionable streets of our cities” (18). Greek cafés had a similar significant impact on the way Australians lived. Although it is possible that their competitors also suffered because the Greeks opened for very long hours seven days a week, on the whole, the Greek café was a welcome addition to Australian society and had a positive effect on Australian culture.

## Conclusion

Greek cafés provided economic security and independence, maintenance of the family unit, and social mobility for a large number of unskilled migrants. They also acted as conduits, through which Greek immigrants spread throughout Australia and became part of the social fabric of their adopted country. Conomos notes that they also avoided “the ghetto effect” because Greek migrants did not accumulate where they first disembarked, in Sydney, with few prospects of advancement in a new land (History 112). For Janiszewski and Alexakis, the cafés provide evidence of “cross-cultural transmissions and transformations” upon the development of mainstream Australian culture and history and offer a means of reinterpreting Australia’s past so that ‘ethnic’ history is elevated to the larger national stage (“Future” 11).

Most Greek café proprietors came to Australia with little money, a rudimentary education, and no English. This project demonstrates, however, that they had the courage and a capacity for hard work, the determination to succeed in a foreign and often hostile environment, and the wisdom to accommodate Australian values in order to give their children a better way of life in a new land. The project also highlights the part women played in the success of Greek cafés in Ipswich. Greek cafés were involved in the arrangement of marriage within the Greek community, were implicated in the acceptance of the Greeks in an Anglophile Australia, and, for almost a century, were an important part of the way Ipswich people lived their lives.

The Central Milk Bar is all that remains of the extraordinary story of Greek cafés in Ipswich, a story that began over a century ago. The front wall, opened up to create maximum shopfront impact in a fast food world, admits the din from the main street. Cardboard milkshake containers replace coloured aluminium vessels. The glass shelves are bare and the owners did not replace the nutmeg shaker last time it was stolen from the counter. All that remains of the ‘golden days’ Maria so fondly recalls are the cubicles on the left hand side of the shop, which she added in 1983 long after all of the Ipswich cafés in the classic form had gone. Occasionally, customers perch at the end of a cubicle watching the television and waiting for takeaway orders, but few

eat here. Making a milkshake before she retired in December, 2004, leaving her son Bill to carry on the tradition of Greek shopkeepers in Ipswich, Maria indicated the five-gallon metal bucket under the refrigerated counter. “Once upon a time, I have four of those in here,” she said. “Once upon a time.”

### “Yiasas”



*Fig. 29: Joanne with a milkshake maker from the Regal Café and the Regal’s soda fountains in the background.*

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## List of Interviewees

Castan, Con. President of the Solomos Greek Australian Cultural Society. Notes from conversation at Greek Club, West End, Brisbane 21.9.05.

Cominos, Peter George. Notes from interview with Peter George Cominos, Emanuel George Cominos, and Stamatoula Cominos conducted at the Brisbane home of Judy Cominos, 28.7.05.

Cominos, Stamatoula. Notes from interview with Peter George Cominos, Emanuel George Cominos, and Stamatoula Cominos conducted at the Brisbane home of Judy Cominos, 28.7.05.

Freeman, Narelle. Notes from interviews conducted at her Ipswich home, 9.8.05 and 18.8.05.

Girdis, Marina. Notes from interview with Marina and Peter and Mary Londy, conducted at Marina's Brisbane home, 3.2.06.

Green, Pearl and Jim. Notes from a telephone conversation, 29.1.06.

Hicks, Merrilyn. Notes from interview conducted at her Ipswich home, 3.2.06.

Kallinicos, Manuel. Notes from interview conducted at his office in Woolloongabba, 8.12.05.

Kallos, Peter. Notes from telephone interviews 27.8.05 and 17.9.05.

Kentos, Helen. Audiotape interview with Jack and Zeta Stathis, Peter and Mary Londy, and Helen Kentos at the Brisbane home of Jack and Zeta Stathis, 2.10.05 and notes from telephone interview 22.9.05 and interview at her Brisbane home 22.10.05.

Kentrotis, Maria. Videotape interview at the Central Milk Bar 16.4.04 and audiotape interview at her Ipswich home 5.8.05.

Kentrotis, Vasiliki. Notes from interview at her Ipswich home 15.12.05.

Londy, Peter. Notes from telephone interview, 1.9.05, audiotape interview with Jack and Zeta Stathis, Peter and Mary Londy, and Helen Kentos 2.10.05 and notes from interview with the same group 22.10.05, both of which were conducted at the Brisbane home of Jack and Zeta Stathis. Also notes from an interview with Marina Girdis and Peter and Mary Londy, conducted at Marina's Brisbane home, 3.2.06.

Marendy, Helene and Yiota Samios. Notes from interview conducted at the home of an Ipswich resident 2.11.05.

Pisasale, Charlie. Notes from conversation at Ipswich Council Chambers May, 2005.

Risson, Don. Notes from conversations in Ipswich in September 2004 and July and October 2005.

Rossiter, John. Local Historian. Notes from telephone interview 26.9.05.

Samios, Michael. Notes from interview at Hotel Metropole 29.9.05.

Sheppard, Maureen. Videotape interview 16.4.04 and notes from interviews in March, 2004 and March, June and September, 2005, all of which were conducted in the kitchen of her Ipswich home.

Stathis, Jack. Notes from telephone interviews on 18.9.05 and 21.9.05, audiotape interview with Jack and Zeta Stathis, Peter and Mary Londy, and Helen Kentos 2.10.05 and notes from interview with the same group 22.10.05, both of which were conducted at Stathis' Brisbane home.

Stewart, Joanne. Videotape interview 16.4.04 and notes from interview at her Ipswich home 22.9.05.

Tanos, Harry and Maroula. Notes from interview conducted at their Brisbane home, 31.1.06.

Veneris, Doris and Theo. Notes from conversation conducted at her shop, 2.206.

Wagner, Anne. Notes from conversation at Whitehead Photographic Studio, Ipswich August 2005.

Wilson, Ian. President of Ipswich Historical Society. Notes from telephone interview 26.9.05.

Other general discussions took place at St Mary's Hostel, Ipswich in August, 2005 and at a meeting of the Solomos Greek Australian Cultural Society at the Greek Club, West End, Brisbane in September, 2005. References to specific people are not given in the text.