

# *The Harbour Master's Son*

by Florence Livery

My Papou<sup>1</sup>, Michael Economides/Conos.

*Mine is not a memory  
Just a vivid dream  
To see my Papou standing there The house on the hill his pedestal. A mere boy  
Clasping the wrought iron gate Head between the prongs  
Eyes wide and alert  
Watching .....  
Gazing .....  
To the future  
To a life.  
To a people  
Bustling, thriving  
Much ado about their midst  
So much to be done  
So much to look forward to.*

*Mine is not a memory  
Just a vivid dream  
To see my Papou fleeing the path His father could no longer cement. A mere lad  
The boat his only hope  
Thrust between the oars  
Muscles aching, hands scarred. Staring ....  
Gazing ....  
To the sea  
So cruel  
So harsh  
His only salvation  
His mind a blank  
Farewell to his homeland Farewell to his dream.*

*Mine is not a memory  
Just a vivid dream  
To see my Papou treading the cobblestones The harsh reality of the Fremantle streets. A young man  
Suit, hat and tie  
Alien registration  
Hawker, Fishmonger, Cook  
Preoccupied ....  
Gazing.....  
To the signs  
Cantonment Street  
South Terrace  
Queen Victoria Street  
Essex, High and Holdsworth  
What does it all mean?  
A culture lost or a new one beginning?*

*Mine is not a memory  
Just a vivid dream  
To see my Papou weighing the apples Some pay, others abscond, too poor to pay. A married man  
Apron and moneybag  
Immersed in wooden cases  
Horse and cart his only mode.  
Pondering ....  
Gazing ....  
To his wife  
To his children  
A new life  
A hard life  
All rests on his shoulders  
So much more he could have offered them If only they had left him alone.*

*Mine is not a memory  
 Just a vivid dream to see my Papou Now  
 Rocking in his chair  
 A grandfather  
 A wise old man  
 Narrating his stories  
 Of a homeland  
 Of a past life  
 To see him  
 To touch him  
 To tell him  
 About my good life  
 About my family  
 About my homeland  
 To tell him his dream came true.*

*Mine is not a memory Just a vivid dream  
 To visit one day  
 And find*

*That wrought iron gate  
 That hill  
 That pedestal  
 To feel my Papou standing there To tell him  
 I lived his dream.*



Image 1: *Economides family, Kastellorizo, c.1893. Michael is the small boy on the far left. Evangelia is the child on the lap of her father, Theodoros. Maria, Theodoros's wife, is to his right. Others are Theodoros's brother and family, his wife in traditional Kastellorizian costume.*

I was always jealous of my cousins as they had a living grandfather. I could only imagine what it would have been like to have the touch and wisdom of a grandfather in my life. In particular, it was my maternal grandfather who intrigued me. Maybe because my mother would melt whenever she spoke of him, a beautiful wistful look in her eye, her head tilted, as she went back in time. 'I'll be wearing tails to your wedding, my darling,' he always promised her. Alas, he died too soon.

### **Part 1 – Kastellorizo**

In 1911, aged 22, Michael Economides migrated to Australia from Kastellorizo, a tiny and remote Aegean Island, just south of Turkey. Always Greek in language, religion and culture, Kastellorizo only officially reunited with the Greek nation in 1948 after many centuries of occupation.

Michael Economides came from a long line of harbour masters. The Economides were originally from Constantinople.<sup>2</sup> They were members of the Phanariot Greek community, well-connected within the upper

echelons of the Ottoman Empire and well-respected, as their diplomatic and administrative skills were needed to run the various parts of this vast empire.

In the early 1800s, Komianos Economides (Michael's great-grandfather) was appointed to Mytilene as the first harbour master in the family. Komianos was succeeded by his eldest son, whilst his second son, Nicholas (Michael's grandfather), was posted to Kastellorizo as harbour master, a significant but less prestigious assignment.

Two brothers and two harbour masters in the family, eldest sons presumed to succeed their fathers in these respected positions. The succession plan came down to Michael who was destined to take over from his father Theodoros Economides. Groomed for this position from an early age, Michael was sent to Saint Jean Baptiste Christian Brothers School in Rhodes and learnt many languages including French, English, Italian, Arabic, Turkish and Greek in preparation of his future career.



Image 2: *Annual Kastellorizian Community picnic at Warrandyte, c.1928. Florou is in the middle row, 11th from left. Michael is in the middle row, 13th from left, with son Theo on his lap, and daughter Mary is the small girl in front row, fifth from right*

The local Kastellorizians respectfully referred to their harbour master as *Dionomo* which literally means Sanitation Officer. Despite the family myth that they were 'Harbour Masters', this is not an accurate title. Responsibilities included public health, customs and inspecting and certifying vessels as they arrived and departed from Kastellorizo's busy harbour. Still, it was an impressive appointment, made by the Ottoman authorities.

In its heyday this small island was a vibrant maritime hub, its economy prospering because of its accommodating harbour and location on key trade routes.<sup>3</sup> Its population reached 9000 in the early 1900s, creating a staggeringly high population density. Amongst the hustle and bustle of the quayside, the wealth of the islanders was evident through the traders and merchants unloading their wares, fishermen mending their nets and shoppers inspecting the latest goods from afar.<sup>4</sup>

Life was good for Michael Economides. His father had succeeded as harbour master in 1882. Stories passed down through the generations indicate that the Economides were wealthy, lived on the waterfront, in a house with wrought iron gates and a balcony, and had all the trimmings of an affluent lifestyle – silverware, holidays on the Black Sea and French boarding school. This good life however, was soon coming to an end. Michael had to suddenly flee Kastellorizo.

In 1910, the Ottoman Regime, now ruled by the Young Turks, abruptly introduced compulsory conscription for Christian subjects of the empire, who had previously been exempt from military service. Shockwaves reverberated around Kastellorizo's harbour as the news caused immediate panic. Emigration began in earnest and by the end of 1912 over 4000 young males had hastily departed.<sup>5</sup>

Amongst them was Michael Economides, who as the son of the harbour master, was targeted by the Ottoman overlords. In early 1911 Michael pretended to go fishing for the day in a small boat with two others and escaped. Somehow he got to Rhodes and then to Port Said before travelling to Australia. Michael already had

close contacts in Australia, his sister Evangelia, recently married to Jack Koutsoukis, who had first come to Fremantle in 1907.

Michael Economides arrived in Fremantle on 29 June 1911 in the company of several other Kastellorizian lads. This journey to Australia was never a sojourn for Michael. This was reinforced when he heard about the demise of his father following the 1913 overthrow of the Turkish administration.

## Part 2 – Fremantle

Each time I visit my sister in the west I perform a ritual as a sign of respect to Michael Economides. I visit Fremantle and literally retrace his steps from over 100 years ago. As I meander around the town I try to imagine this town as Michael would have found it – small, poor and provincial.<sup>6</sup>

Cantonment Street, South Terrace, Queen Victoria Street, Essex, High and Holdsworth, add to that William and Hay in Perth – this is what the Alien Registration documents have revealed about his life during World War I. Classified as an Alien, Michael was required to register at the police station every time he changed abode, which was frequent in his pursuit of work and the need for local accommodation. From 1916 to 1918 Michael changed abode eight times, reflecting his itinerant lifestyle.<sup>7</sup>

Accommodation included private lodgings, boarding houses, rooming with family or at the rear of the shop where he worked. Employment included hawker, fishmonger, cook, seaman, shop assistant, waiter and labourer. I can vividly picture Michael, suit, hat and tie, suitcase in-hand, trudging along the cobblestoned Fremantle streets, weary, tired, not knowing what the future holds as he constantly changed jobs.

Michael does not appear in the 1916 secret Greek census,<sup>8</sup> although his brother-in-law Jack Koutsoukis appears, listed as a Fremantle cafe-owner. Michael's 1924 Naturalisation Application documents that he lived mostly in Fremantle until late 1922 when he came to Melbourne.<sup>9</sup> Whilst in Western Australia he spent eighteen months away from Fremantle, either doing short stints in Perth, working on coastal steamers or the Kalgoorlie railway extension.

The absence of Post Office records in Michael's early Fremantle days suggests his sister became his base as he tried his luck elsewhere. Michael intermittently worked and boarded at the Koutsoukis' café and from 1916 onwards at their nearby houses,<sup>10</sup> as the family expanded both from chain migration and breeding.<sup>11</sup> The only Post Office records revealing the whereabouts of Michael Economides are in 1916-1917 and 1921, when he was registered as a Fremantle shopkeeper, fruiterer and confectioner respectively. These also indicate that Michael was an employee rather than a shopkeeper for most of his time in the west.<sup>12</sup>

By the early 1920s more Kastellorizians had emigrated and established fledgling communities in each capital city. Now aged 33, in 1922 Michael received an invitation from his good mate Spiros Fermanis to join him in Melbourne. Michael had no hesitation in deciding to head east.

## Part 3 – Melbourne

Meanwhile, Spiros heard that his cousin Emmanuel Augustes was eager for his sister Florou to marry so again he wrote, hoping Michael would agree to be her *gampro*.<sup>13</sup> Michael caught the Great Western Express to Melbourne, stayed for a few days at the Melbourne Coffee Palace and one week later married Florou in a civil service. Michael Economides now became known as Michael Conos in an effort to assimilate.

He began married life working and living for Emmanuel amidst his growing fruit shop empire in Port Melbourne, all worked by Emmanuel's siblings. In December 1922 Florou's widowed mother and younger siblings arrived, just in time for Michael and Florou's church wedding at Melbourne's first Greek Orthodox Church, The Holy Church of The Annunciation of Our Lady, East Melbourne, known endearingly by the congregation as Evangelismos. The family spread themselves between the shops, Michael managing one of them. This lasted thirteen months before Michael and Florou saved enough money and moved away from the clutter and family arguments, to restart married life on their own.

Michael and Florou bought a fruit shop in North Carlton from where they had two children, Mary born in 1924 and Theo in 1926. The business offered some security and social life amidst a growing Greek community. Very soon the extended Augustes family, (apart from Emmanuel) followed them to North Carlton, all living above the fruit shop Emmanuel's brother Peter had bought, just nine doors away from Michael and Florou's shop.

In 1930, after nearly seven years, the Conos shop went broke. The street could not sustain two fruit shops in the climate of the Great Depression. Shortly afterwards Michael purchased the Omonia Kafenion in Lonsdale Street.

The next few years were a battle for Michael, constantly moving house for a range of reasons – a nephew coming over from Perth to study Medicine, assuming Michael would house and support him, more family coming over from Perth to join in the glory of having a doctor in the family, hastily evacuating the 'diphtheria' house, and the Omonia Kafenion<sup>14</sup> going broke after Michael was pimped on by a competitor.

In 1933, luck finally came his way when George Karpouzis sold Michael his Lygon Street fruit shop. This was the start of a new era for the Conos family, the start of many years of stability, based around the fruit shop and a small Kastellorizian community in Carlton.

It may have been the Depression years economically but the emotional advantages spoke for themselves. Imagine a good half of a large brood of cousins living close by, within a block of the fruit shop and the other half a short cable tram ride way. Males and females of all ages just around every corner. Confidantes, mentors, friends and companions for all members of the Conos family. Just up the road in Lonsdale Street, Michael would also enjoy his Monday visits to the *kafenion*, where he would take part in a game of cards whilst arguing his communist leanings.

This came to an unfortunate end in 1944. Michael had been ill and weakened for several years and young Theo had been doing the markets since the age of fifteen. It was imperative for Michael to survive and for the family to continue to make an income, as he insisted that Mary and Theo keep up their studies, Mary at Emily MacPherson College of Domestic Economy and Theo at Melbourne Junior Technical School, studying architecture. Before long, it all became too much, and both children abandoned their studies. After Michael heard this news, Mary heard a whimpering and found her father collapsed in the back lane, distressed that his aspirations for his children in this new land were falling apart. Michael died soon after in September 1944.



*The icon that Michael brought to Australia*

#### **Part 4 – Melbourne 1960s**

When *Papou* first emigrated to Australia he brought with him a huge icon. This icon stayed with him as he traversed the country as a single man, followed him into married life and remained with *Yiayia*<sup>15</sup> when he passed away. As *Yiayia* lived with her daughter, the icon became part of our daily life.

I always sensed the icon was valuable because I was told countless times that it originally came from Constantinople. Even though I had no idea where Constantinople was, I presumed that it was a long way from Kastellorizo and that Kastellorizo was a long way from Australia. I also guessed the icon was treasured because every night we had to pray before it. *Yiayia* would assemble her grandchildren and there, precariously perched on top of the freestanding, wobbly wardrobe, was the icon, leaning on an angle almost touching the ceiling. Our eyes glued to it, daunted and overawed both by *Yiayia*'s stern hand and fear that the icon would fall down on top of us, we would mimic *Yiayia*'s *stavro*<sup>16</sup> and utter the same Greek prayers every night.

As the family's needs changed, as *Yiayia* passed away and her grandchildren grew up and left home, my parents up-sized and down-sized houses and furnishings. The icon however was a constant. The only consolation was that it had come down from the top of the wardrobe and appeared on a series of dressing tables. The *kandili*<sup>17</sup> was lit in sad times and in bad times.

More than photographs, documents, anecdotes and family folklore could ever do, this icon continues to bring life to the living grandfather I always wished I had.

#### **References and Notes**

1. *Papou* is a Greek work meaning grandfather

2. Constantinople was capital of the Ottoman Empire. When the Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 the capital was moved to Ankara. Not long after, in 1930 Constantinople was officially renamed Istanbul. The Eastern Orthodox Church and the Economides family always refer to the city as Constantinople
3. Nicholas G Pappas & Nicholas C Bogiatzis, *An Island in Time, Castellorizo in Photographs 1890–1948*, Halstead Press, Ultimo, 2010, p4
4. John Yiannakis, *Megisti in the Antipodes*, Hesperian Press, Victoria Park, 1996, p13
5. Nick Pappas, ‘Castellorizo’s Defining Moments, 1910–1912’, *Filia* 23rd Edition (Summer South/Winter North) 2014/2015, p1
6. Yiannakis, *Megisti in the Antipodes*, p21
7. National Archives of Australia: PP 14/3, Commonwealth Military Forces, Greek/ Economides MT, Michael Theodore Economides, *Application Form for Registration as Alien, 1916-1920*
8. National Archives of Australia: Australian Security Intelligence Organisation; A385 Files containing *Returns of Aliens 1916– 1922*; 13, Particulars of Greeks in Western Australia, 1916
9. National Archives of Australia: Department of Home and Territories, A1, 1924/22521, Michael Conos, *Application for Naturalisation Certificate*
10. *Western Australian Post Office Directories 1983 – 1949*, [www.slwa.wa.gov.au/ explore-discover/wa-heritage/post- office-directories](http://www.slwa.wa.gov.au/explore-discover/wa-heritage/post-office-directories), 1914-1922
11. National Archives of Australia: Department of Home and Territories, A1, 1921/18023, J Jack Koutsoukis, Naturalisation
12. *Western Australian Post Office Directories*. 1916-1917, 1921
13. *Gampro* is a Greek word meaning groom
14. *Akafenion* was a Greek coffee house, a place to eat, meet and more often than not, gamble
15. *Yiayia* is a Greek word meaning grandmother
16. *Stavro* is a Greek word meaning making the sign of the Cross, a ritual blessing. Orthodox Christians use the right-to-left movement
17. *Kandili* is a Greek word meaning candle

## Surnames:

Augustes, Conos, Economides, Fermanis, Karpouzis, Koutsoukis

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*Ancestor*

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