

Pandemic, racism and the Greeks of Port Pirie in 1919

Two solitary entries occupy the marriage register of the 'Evangelismos' Greek Orthodox Church, East Melbourne in 1918, both formally recording the weddings of the Kondoulas brothers, Georgios and Dimitrios, to their promised brides. All four were residents of Port Pirie, South Australia and all born on the island of Castellorizo.

by Costas Markos
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The entries read as follows:

1. Dimitrios Lazarus Kondoulas (30) and Anastasia Alexiou (21), both from Castellorizo, married June 3, 1918
2. Georgios Lazarus Kondoulas (32) and Anastasia Berbery (24), both from Castellorizo, married September 22, 1918.

In a morbid twist the following year (1919) both brothers' names are found recorded this time in the columns of the death register of the same church. The death register reads as follows: Georgios Kondoulas date of death April 5, 1919 and Dimitrios Kondoulas date of death April 6, 1919

In a period of less than ten (10) months the Kondoulas brothers occupy the Church records however this time as entries in the death register. Unfortunately, the register does not provide details for the "cause of death".

Within this gap, between the two church records, a tragic story unfolds. An unknown story which references a lesser known Greek Community, that of Port Pirie South Australia, and the consequences of the Spanish flu in 1919. The narrative follows and illustrates the trauma, devastation and alienation that members of this Greek community were confronted with.

The year is 1919 and the Great War had just ended in November 1918. At the Port Pirie smelter approximately 80 Greek males are employed, all breadwinners. The Greek community of Port Pirie was evolving with the influx of promised brides specifically from the island of Castellorizo.

A few years prior, with the advent of First World War, a significant labour shortage emerged in Australia. This vacuum provided the opportunity for many immigrants to join the workforce. From 1914 onwards many young Greek immigrants entering Australia commenced working in a domain previously dominated by white Anglo-Celt-



Port Pirie Railway Station in the early 1900s. April 4, 1919, 50 Greeks were ready to depart Port Pirie via Rail due to the Pandemic. The authorities refused their departure due to restrictions. CREDIT: Ron Blam, Collections and Photos of the Past.

ic workers.

An estimated 200 Greek immigrants worked at the Port Pirie smelter throughout the War, making the smelter the largest single employer of Greeks at that time.

The social climate however at Port Pirie took a drastic turn, and with the return of Austra-

lian soldiers to Port Pirie after the end of the War, racist hysteria commenced to escalate.

The racist narrative contrived by the local Port Pirie newspaper together with the prevailing xenophobia amongst many citizens of Port Pirie evolved into a scaremongering campaign against the local Greek community. Judging by the

numerous derogative articles that appeared in the local newspaper the "Recorder" it emerges that the Greeks of the town were the main victims of such racist taunts.

The frequency of police raids on Greek Cafes in the town pre-occupy on many occasions the columns of the Port Pirie "Recorder" throughout that year. The fines were significant in comparison to the offences and in certain instances, the offenders were not even charged.

Titles such as "Greek Café Raided-Eighteen Persons Arrested. Gambling Charges Preferred" and "Police Raid Cafe" – Charges in Police Court to Follow" appeared in the columns of Port Pirie's daily newspaper. Subsequently we learn that in the first instance that just one defendant was fined £5 and in the latter case after a search of the Café only "nine bottles said to contain ale were discovered under the counter"

Unlawful assaults against Greeks became a common occurrence and even a demon-

stration against Greeks was held which resulted in property damage and physical injuries. The following extracts are from the Port Pirie "Recorder" that were published February 24 and April 17 1919 respectively:

"On Saturday forenoon, in Casino Lane, off Alexander Street,

a crowd of young fellows made a demonstration against some Greeks who live in the locality. They indulged, first of all in boo-hoos and jeers and then started throwing bricks and stones. Some windows were smashed. A woman was hit on the hand and her baby on the head with pieces of brick".

Αριθμ.	Όνομα	Πατρώνυμο	Ημερ. Γέννησης	Ημερ. Θανάτου
35	Αντώνιος Κονδουλός	Διονύσιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19
36	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19
37	Διονύσιος Κονδουλός	Διονύσιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19
38	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19
39	Διονύσιος Κονδουλός	Διονύσιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19
40	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19
41	Διονύσιος Κονδουλός	Διονύσιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19
42	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19

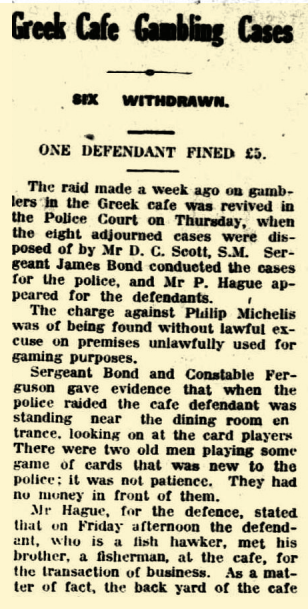
'Evangelismos' church, 1918 Marriage register.
1. Dimitrios Kontoulas 2. Georgios Kontoulas

Αριθμ.	Όνομα	Πατρώνυμο	Ημερ. Γέννησης	Ημερ. Θανάτου
49	Διονύσιος Κονδουλός	Διονύσιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19
50	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19
51	Διονύσιος Κονδουλός	Διονύσιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19
52	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19
53	Διονύσιος Κονδουλός	Διονύσιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19
54	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19
55	Διονύσιος Κονδουλός	Διονύσιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19
56	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	Γεώργιος Κονδουλός	26/11/18	21/12/19

'Evangelismos' church, 1919 Death register
1. Dimitrios Kontoulas 2. Georgios Kontoulas

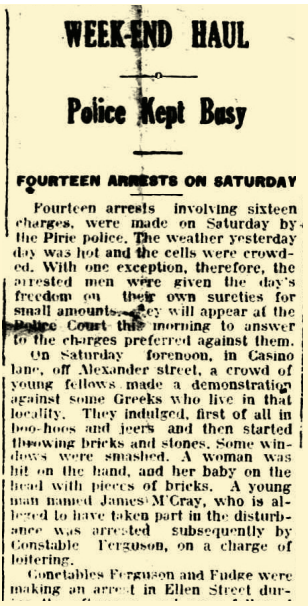
During this incident 14 arrests were made however only two of the participants were summonsed to court.

The next newspaper extract refers to the “*Grasshopper Gang*”, allegedly a group that



consisted of returned war veterans and other younger male members aligned with the veterans.

“A number of young members of the “*Grasshopper Gang*” assembled opposite the entrance to Casino lane. They attacked a well-known Greek resident and gave him a severe handling. Two arrests were subsequently



made by Constables Ferguson and Harvey”

Evidently many war veterans directly contributed to the ra-

cial discrimination and harassment of the Greek population of Port Pirie. The emergence of vigilantly groups, mass hysteria, racial and physical abuse were interconnected with the ethnic integration of the workforce in Port Pirie. These war veterans felt both socially and financially disadvantaged, as well as a sense of entitlement to employment due to their loyalty to the nation.

At the same time, those Greeks working at the Port Pirie smelter were accused for their militancy and were targeted as agitators by the media. In describing a stop work meeting at the smelter the journalist notes in their column under the heading of “*No Strike at Smelters-Stop Work Meeting Unsuccessful*” that “almost the whole of the precessionists were foreigners or single men and similar elements predominated among all who left work.” As for the march from the smelter to the Union Hall the columnist points out that “*The advance guard of the 57 were mostly Russians, Bulgarians and Greeks.*”

Clearly it was perceived by many that the leaders of such unacceptable disruptions were “foreigners” with the main core group being Greek workers.

Reports also appeared claiming that Greeks labourers were occupying jobs that should be prioritised to War veterans. In the Northern Territory, at that time, the Waterside Workers Union of Darwin “*debarred Greeks from obtaining employment wharf*” and argued that “*It is felt that while returned soldiers cannot obtain employment in Darwin Greeks should not be favored.*”

The secretary of the local AWU branch in Darwin in commenting on foreign workers noted: “*I think however that the foreign element – Greeks and Russians – would be easily enticed to revolutionary actions. The majority of the Labor men are fairly moderate.*”

There was a prevalent fear, even amongst the Union ranks, that Greeks & other foreigners were hijacking the labour movement, and by sheer force of numbers, were endeavouring to numerically dominate work meetings in order to achieve favourable outcomes.

SPANISH FLU



Panagiotis Tsolakis-circa 1918-1919. Photo credit: Courtesy of Michael Tsolakis, brother of Panagiotis, currently residing in Perth, age 98

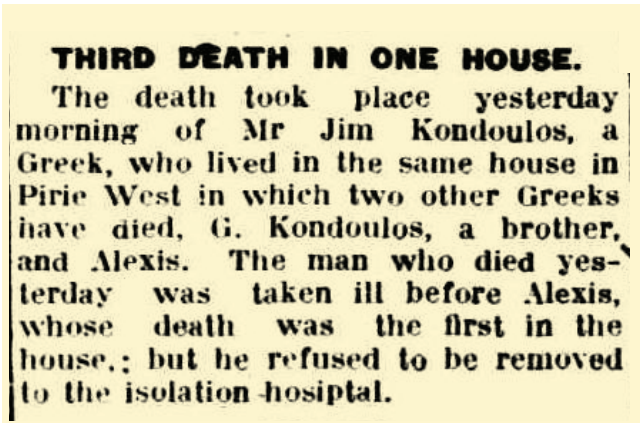
HITS PORT PIRIE

In this tense climate, the Spanish flu hits the town of Port Pirie and even more so its fledgling Greek community.

The Port Pirie “*Recorder*”, April 1 1919, under the heading “*Yesterday’s Deaths*” reported that amongst those who succumbed to the Spanish flu the previous day were two Greeks; John Hagenakis, age 35, married with his family residing in Greece and Michael Karegos, age 23 single, both smelter workers.

nearly fifty Greeks congregate at the Railway Station to hastily depart. Unfortunately, due to restrictions none of those compatriots had acquired a departure permit and they were all forced to return to their place of residency for the time being.

The tragedy continued with the following article appearing in the “*Recorder*” 7 April 1919 under the title “**Third Death in One House**” “*The death took place yesterday morning of Jim Kondoulos, a Greek, who lived in the same house in Port Pirie*



West in which two other Greeks have died, G. Kondoulos, a brother and Alexis.”

Two days prior to Jim Kondoulos’ death an opinion piece appears in the “*Recorder*” titled “**Isolation – A Farce**”. The article refers to the Greek household occupied by the Kondoulos brothers and others and comments on the “*the laxity of arrangements*”, remarking that “*these people are allowed are allowed to egress and ingress, in spite of the yellow flags.*”

The bewildered journalist continuous by remarking that “*children from isolated houses are allowed to have contact with other children. Is it any wonder, under such circumstances, that the epidemic has spread.*” In view of such breaches, the author furiously concludes “*The house occupied by the Greeks in Pirie has been a menace to the health of the community. It is still a menace*”

After the death of the last male occupant of the Kondoulos’ household all remaining occupants were admitted to Pirie’s isolation hospital. The youngest was baby [Dimitra] Kondoulos who lost her father two days prior and who according to newspaper reports “*was immediately installed as hospital pet and as her arrival coincided with the improvement in the epidemic she can claim to be the mascot of Pirie’s influenza hospital.*”

Sadly, elements of mistrust and spitefulness are interwoven throughout the article, using as a scapegoat a vulnerable community. These immigrant with limited or no English skills and certainly without any understanding of the consequences of the deadly virus became further marginalised in an already racist environment. One cannot even imagine the hardships endured by these Greek immigrants during this pandemic.

The fear of a Pandemic now also became the fear of Greeks in the town Port Pirie.

In total six (6) Greek males between the age of 23-35, all smelter workers, died within nine (9) days due to Spanish Flu. No other nationality in Port Pirie had suffered such a loss.

In an extraordinary unusual step, the then Alien registration officer for Port Pirie Mr Warnes publicly denounced the “*treatment meted out to them [foreigners]*” and further said “*under his notice that a certain*

section of youths and others of mature years are in the habit of hurling insults at the aliens more particularly at the Greek”

Although the authorities and residents had assumed that the pandemic had subsided a so termed second visitation of the Spanish flu hits Port Pirie in June of that year with another two Greeks succumbing to the deadly virus.

Victims of the second visitation are Panagiotis M. Tsolakis, age 18 and John Kominos, age 30, both smelter workers and from the island of Castellorizo. Sadly, both died within consecutive days June 17 & 18, 1919.

The tragic death of eight young Greek workers due to the Spanish flu pandemic further isolated the Greek community of Port Pirie causing a mass exodus of many of its members

As the second visitation of the Spanish flu dissipated an increasing number of Greeks were abandoning Port Pirie for other States. Judging by the movement records of Greeks at least 30 Greek males moved to Melbourne by the end of 1919. Many more Greek smelter workers also moved to other States. The number of Greeks in Port Pirie for a short period began to dwindle only to increase once again in the early 1920’s.

IN MEMORY OF THE VICTIMS OF PANDEMICS AND DISCRIMINATION

References and Resources:

- 1. Australian Newspaper Archival Collection. Trove.
- 2. Genealogy Society – South Australia.
- 3. Births, Deaths & Marriages – South Australia
- 4. Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne – Death and Marriage Register

With thanks to: Kostas A., Kostas K. and Nikos P.

The following Greek Residents of Port Pirie Died of Spanish Influenza in 1919						
Date of Death	Name & Surname	Profession/Trade	Age	Place of Birth	Marital Status	Cause of Death
29/03/1919	Dimitris/Vas Alexiou	Labourer-Smelter	25	Castellorizo, Greece	Single	Influenza Pneumonia & Lead Poisoning
30/03/1919	Jim Hagenakis	Labourer-Smelter	35	Greece	Married	Influenza Pneumonia
31/03/1919	Michael Karegos	Labourer-Smelter	23	Greece	Single	Influenza Pneumonia & Lead Poisoning
2/04/1919	Dimetrious Spaies	Labourer-Smelter	34	Greece	Married	Influenza Pneumonia
5/04/1919	George Kondoulos	Labourer-Smelter	30	Castellorizo, Greece	Married	Influenza Pneumonia
6/04/1919	James Kondoulos	Labourer-Smelter	31	Castellorizo, Greece	Married	Influenza Pneumonia
17/06/1919	Panagiotis Tsolakis	Labourer-Smelter	18	Castellorizo, Greece	Single	Influenza Pneumonia
18/06/1919	John Kominos	Labourer-Smelter	28	Castellorizo, Greece	Single	Influenza Pneumonia

Note: Transcription of the Death Certificates-provided by the South Australia Genealogy Society