

Text of Char Daston's Immigration Story for Stories Connect
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My great grandmother was born Ourania Nicholades. She was born into a well-off Greek family in Smyrna, Turkey. Her father was an engineer who may have brought electricity to Smyrna, and her family owned a prosperous store.

Her childhood was cosmopolitan. She went to school with the children of businessmen, and the daughter of the Russian consul. Her family also vacationed each summer on the Greek island of Mytilene. She dressed in the height of fashion; this was always a point of pride for her.

The Greeks living in Turkey were a minority. In the early 1920's there was a territorial dispute between the Ottoman Empire and the newly independent nation of Greece. The Greek and Ottoman governments agreed on a deal to resettle Greeks living on Turkish land, and Turks living in Greece. This resettlement ended up being violent on both sides.

In September of 1922, the Turkish army marched through Smyrna. They burned Greek homes and businesses, killed men, and raped women. My great-grandmother was 15 at the time. Her father was captured and killed and her home and family's store was burned. She hid at the Russian consulate on the night of September 13th – she says she and several other affluent girls hid under the floorboards.

She left the consulate a couple hours later to look for her mother and father, sister and brother since she'd been separated from them and ended up hiding in a local cemetery four more days. She didn't say much about hiding in Smyrna, but we're pretty sure that they attacked the Russian consulate, possibly while she was there. We're pretty sure that she had a run-in with a soldier while she was searching for her family.

After four days of hiding, she was taken, on her own, to a refugee camp on the island of Mytilene. In 1923, her future husband, Leonidas Arhondy, came to the camp looking for a new wife. His previous wife had died after giving birth to my grandmother. Ourania agreed to marry him and come to America, in what was essentially a business deal, and he went against custom and agreed to take her with no dowry from her family. She was 15, he was 28.

The fact that they made it to America at all is remarkable. In 1921, the U.S. government had passed strict national quotas on immigrants, especially those from southern and eastern Europe. They got held up in France for 30 days while they waited for Ourania to get documentation in this new quota system.

Interestingly, the American consul in Smyrna, George Horton, wrote to Congress urging them to grant asylum for the refugees, and he used an argument similar to

pro-immigration arguments of today. Greek refugees were primarily farmers, so they would be willing to take jobs no one else wanted, like picking grapes.

My great grandparents arrived in Massachusetts and made a life for themselves. My great grandmother learned English; she raised my grandmother as her own child, and she and Leonidas ended up having a respectful, loving relationship. Her Greek roots stayed important to her – she cooked elaborate Greek meals for her grandchildren well into her old age. She also stayed conscious of fashion; she couldn't afford to buy that many colorful dresses anymore, so she was constantly making them for herself and for her daughter, my grandmother.

Eventually, some Red Cross workers helped her find her mother, sister and brother, and that's part of the reason she volunteered for the Red Cross for the remainder of her life.

My family's story is interesting in that it's so similar to the refugee crisis today. Syrian and Afghan refugees are fleeing violence in their homes, and finding themselves at refugee camps in the same places as Greece. And we're still having debates in America about what quantity of them to let in.

Another interesting part of this story is how Greeks assimilated into American culture and essentially, over time, stopped being foreigners and became white. Part of that assimilation, came from generation after generation living in American society – my dad and his sisters went to public schools and spoke English at home. And part of the assimilation was intentional – my aunt was given an anglicized version of Ourania's name – she was named Lorraine.

It's important to explain the easy and the hard parts of my family's story. Part of that is how my dad worked really hard and became a scientist at Proctor and Gamble – that's what's paying my way through school. Part of that is kind strangers like those Red Cross volunteers who helped my great grandmother find her family. Part of that is harmful and helpful government policies – the national quotas that nearly kept Ourania out, but also later on the GI bill that would help her son-in-law, my grandfather, become the first in our family to go to college. And part of it was the pain and violence that forced Ourania out of her life in Smyrna and into her new one.