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A GREEK MOTHER

by

Evanthea Keriazes

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From the sunny section of the southern European Balkan Countries, some twenty years ago, the lovely [Decwcvns?] Basilike (Bessie) Zikou came to the United States. That dark-eyed girl is now my mother, Mrs. Andrew Keriazes, still young and vivacious, though she is the mother of nine children.

At night, as we sit around the living room fireplace in our six-room house on the outskirts of Manchester, we ask our mother to tell us stories of her childhood days spent in Macedonia, Greece. Our fingers are busy cracking the rich brown chestnuts, but hers, never idle, are guiding the flying knitting-needles in and out of the yards and yards of stout woolen yarn which are growing into innumerable scarves, mittens and other winter [povnegjuo's?] for the younger boys and girls.

The evenings around the open fire are very 2 jolly as we chatter and joke in the native Greek which is spoken in our household. But mother's stories are the highlights and we never tire of hearing them over and over again.

She usually begins these reminiscences of her childhood with the sad statement of her own mother's death.

"I was only twelve years old when your [feafia?] died, leaving a family of four children for me, the eldest, to help care for.

"My mother died when my youngest brother was born. She caught cold and, not having the proper care, passed away. It was a sad day for us all. With a tiny babe on our hands to bring up and no mother it was indeed very hard.

"I so well remember the funeral day," my mother continues sadly. "It came within twenty-four hours after my mother's death for we had no facilities for embalming the body. The village women came to our house to arrange for the funeral procession. They dressed my

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mother in her best clothes, put on her jewelry, and gently placed her in the homemade casket which was lined with silk.

"That night we held a wake and all the village people stayed with us. In the morning the priest came with the psaltis to follow the bier to the church.

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Four men, on foot, bore the [veupor?] , and our family and the villagers walked behind them. Then, as was the old custom, we stopped three times on the journey and at each halting-place the priest sang a hymn. When the procession met anyone on the road, that person stopped and paid his respects, for it was an unbroken rule that no one, even though he was a perfect stranger, should pass by without honoring the blessed dead.

"When we came to the church the usual Requiem was sung, and then the casket was taken to the cemetery where, as olive oil and sand were sprinkled on it, it was lowered into a shallow grave only three feet deep. Why no deeper? Because the type of soil and dampness rapidly consumed the body.

"After the last sad rites were over, the funeral party went back to my father's house and partook of a dinner, in which the main dish was fish. Three days later a large cake, made from wheat and covered with almonds, was baked, and this we presented to the church which was to be distributed among the congregation in honor of the dead. We also were very particular in continuing the custom by making a cake on the ninth day, the fortieth day, and on the anniversary of the day of the death of the person whose memory we honored.

"In our part of the country, we always exhumed the body at the end of seven years. Then nothing remained of it but the bones which were taken from the grave, 4 and washed with wine to make them shine; and then put in a bag or small box and reverently committed to the great [uvfihipios?] (mausoleum) where they were preserved forever."

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As my mother relates her sad story I think about how deeply we Greek people honor our dead. Naturally, in New Hampshire, we subscribe to all the usual regulations concerned with death, but we still cling to many of our native rituals. We continue to have our funeral feasts which I understand our Yankee neighbors also were accustomed to hold until a very recent date.

Forty-nine days after Easter, comes our [Creek?] Decoration Day when wheat cakes are brought to church in memory of the dead. Large cakes, made from sugar, and beautifully designed, are also brought to church by people who wish to honor their dead. On that Sunday a special service is held and the congregation with their priest, visit the cemeteries and decorate the graves with wreaths and flowers. The priest also reads a psalm over the graves if he is requested to do so by the family or intimate friends.

The children had become uneasy while mother was talking about death and funerals and one of them interrupted to ask about our grandfather.

"My father was a busy man and worked hard from morning until night in the vineyards and wheat fields and in looking out for his sheep," she says. "He owned his little hillside farm at the end of the village so all 5 the work he did was for himself and his family."

"What was the house like?" One of my sisters asks. She knows very well, for mother has described it many times, but we always like to have her picture the two-storied house, set behind large chestnut trees. We know all the details of the furnishings, the cushions and mattresses covered with bright-colored rugs, the home-made cupboards, and the hard clay floors, dotted with fur rugs and heavy woolen hand-woven blankets, like the bright wine blanket-my father's favorite -which my mother brought from Greece and now used as a bed covering.

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We are familiar with the kitchen in that stone house and with the [uofavaun?] , separated from the room by a curtain and containing the fireplace over which the twelve year-old girl and her father prepared food in clayware and copper dishes for the hungry children.

Always there were vegetables and plenty of milk we are told, and usually a dinner of lamb supplemented by "the grass vegetables", endive, leek, and spinach or, for variety, fish taken from the rivers in the neighborhood. Then there were the "grass pies", which we children also know well, for they are served frequently in our Manchester home. My mother has taught me how to make them and every Saturday I bake a [dnta?] according to the Greek recipe. First, I combine the ingredients for the pastry as we would for bread, then I separate line pastry into small balls usually nineteen of them. When 6 this is done, I roll each ball of dough out very thin and sprinkle each one with lard. As the others are rolled out, they are placed one on top of the other, until on one pile there are ten and the other nine. Then I roll out the group of ten pastry "leaves" and make the crust to fit into !be pan. I sprinkle in the filling, consisting of eggs, cheese, and spinach, and then continue the same process with the other nine. Finally I make a fancy upper crust and dot it with lard and bake it for one hour until it is golden brown in color.

"The flour we used in baking, the milk, the butter, the cheese, the olive oil and the wine all came from our home place, and we always were certain we had enough to last us the year around", my mother continues as she again takes up the thread of her evening story.

"But sometimes we had to go to the [ayopa?] (general store), for small sundries and a few staple articles, like sugar, and coffee. What a trip it was a one day's walk with the farm mule to bring back the things. On the journey we crossed two rivers, which the mule forded, and passed through a forest. Then we climbed a hill to the village in which the store was located. Nut trees shaded parts of the road and along the trail grew gay and lovely wild flowers. As we went over the rising knolls we could see high hills, topped by a few tall trees etched against the horizon-a beautiful picture which I never have forgotten.

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"During Christmas week we killed our pig and our relatives from the village always came to help us. Some of them skinned the creature and then cut it up-the the fat for lard and the meat in small chunks for the sausage-making. The next day the fat was boiled down until it was as clear as crystal and then strained and put away in large earthern pots. But that new lard must be tested; so made a Greek pie to see if the shortening was of the right consistency to produce the rich, flaky crust we liked."

Killing the pig at Christmas time is not a new idea to us for at our Manchester home we also kill our pig on the day preceding Christmas. We, too, make our lard and plan to try out enough to last through the year for we children do not like pastry made from "store" lard and often refuse to eat it. [Kplelovjenna?] is a great day for family reunions among us and we have much fun and merrymaking. Like the other Greek people of Manchester, we go to St. George's Church on Christmas Eve to attend the elaborate and splendid midnight mass.

This year my Uncles from Nashua were visiting us and when we came home we had a gay party. My mother says that a party followed Midnight Mass in her father's house. "When we returned home at three o'clock in the morning, we feasted on roasted pig, pickles, roasted chestnuts, Greek delicacies [Caikpbades, usvpobjiedes?] and the 8 red, sparkling wine which we made the year before," she tells us.

At Christmas my mother always makes [Zcjavilns?] (teganitis) of fancy unsweetened bread sponge fashioned into shapes of different designs and fried in boiling fat until golden-brown. Sometimes she mixes grated cheese with the dough and then we think they are more and more delicious than ordinary. We do not feel that any celebration is really a festal day unless we have these fried bread-cakes in the house.

We always have them on the Epiphany, that sacred day on the sixth of January at which the Blessing of the Waters takes place with special church services. I have been told

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that in each of the port town towns in [Creece?], Epiphany is one of the greatest of the church days and that the priest, followed by a procession of worshipers, carries a golden crucifix to the harbor, to bless the waters. He throws the crucifix among the waves and the diver who recovers it is crowned with glory. In New York City, and some of the other large United States Cities, the priest still leads his people to a stream where he performs the sacred, traditional rite. This is not done in Manchester. The Holy Water, blessed in church, is taken home in bottles. This year my brother was detailed to carry out the rite of bringing it home and sprinkling it around the rooms of the house, the trees, and other objects. This is a custom from my mothers village and we carry it out.

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At the end of the ceremony we placed the bottle behind the ikona to remain there until the next Epiphany.

A great day for all Greeks, wherever they live, is Yew Year's, or Saint Basil's Day. Like other saints' days, it is important as a nameday. My mother's name is a form of Saint Basil's, so our family is particularly festive on New Year's when relatives come to offer congratulations and rejoice until far into the night. We always sing songs about the Saint after dinner. One that I like particularly well and which we sing every New Year's, I have tried to translate, though it loses much of its rhythm and phrasing when the Greek words are changed to English: The first month, the first year, Another good year is here. Ecclesia with the Saint Throne. Christ came to earth to save, and give good will to all; St. Basil has come from Caesarea; He holds a book and paper, and carries an inkstand. He writes in the book, reads from the paper. 'Basil where do you come from, and where are you going?' 'I am coming from school and going to my mothers'. 'If you are coming from school, tell us the alpha beta.' He leaned on the crosier to say the alpha beta; The crosier which was dried, had sprouted green branches, And on the branches, patridges were singing; They were not only patridges, but also pigeons. The patridge flew down to spray her wings, And finds our Lord Christ our beloved Father.

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Now let us see how a Yew Year's Day as we Greek people celebrate it really starts off. In the morning we children arise very early and all of us start looking for money which is hidden on the floor. It is just like the game of "Hunt the Button," and if one of us is slow in getting up, he is just out of luck!

Our father takes the children to church but mother, as her mother and mother's mother did before her, stays at home to bake the toothsome and traditional basilopeta, the famous New Year's cake, first made in honor of this Bishop of Caesarea whose death-day our church honors.

She makes a dough of flour, salt, milk, baking-powder and olive oil and when it is of the right consistency to roll out, she cuts it in small pieces, each the size of an egg. Then she rolls them out very, very thin into "leaves" and browns them on the top of the clean, hot cookstove. They are piled up and left to cool. In the bottom of a round cakepan Mother fits a rich lower crust and adds the parially cooked "leaves". She sprinkles them over with nut-meats and adds a filling of cheese, eggs and milk.

Then comes the great moment of hiding the symbols within the luscious depths of the peta. Mother says the number and kind varies in different sections of Greece but always there is the coin to bring good luck to the finders.

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Mother also hides a ring, a cross and a small "nest" made of a twig of [baegiur?] just as her ancestors did. Then she fills up the pan with the rest of the "leaves" and the filling. The coin means prosperity for the person who finds it and many times I have marked the spot where it is hidden. But mother turns the peta around and around when she is baking it to its right color of golden brown and always I am deceived.

The cutting of the basilopeta follows traditional rules. Mother lays aside the first piece she cuts for the Lord Christ; then one is put aside for the house; and the others for the

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family, beginning with Father, Mother, and ending with the youngest child. I have seen the children in our house let their dinner get cold and eat the dessert first as they eagerly tried to find the objects in the depth of the piece of basilopeta.

Just as the coin is a symbol of coming riches, the ring stands for an engagement or marriage before the year is out while the cross means that the person getting it must be very pious and attend church regularly. But the "nest"! Ah! the unfortunate one who draws that must take care of the pigs, the sheep, the chickens or any other livestock about the place!

The children always are interested to hear how Mother spent Easter when she was a little girl in Macedonia, she begins by saying. 12 11 12

"We started getting ready two weeks before Easter. First, the house must be spick and span as everyone, big and little, visited back and forth from one neighbor's to another. How excited the children were during the preparations! To keep them from mischief we sent them to pick up twigs and branches for the bonfire, over which the sheep for the Easter feast was to be roasted.

"Except for minor tasks like getting the delicacies ready, dyeing the Easter eggs red, and taking the wine out of the huge wine barrels, we did not work during the Holy Week preceding Easter. On the Saturday before Easter, we killed our largest and fattest lamb and prepared it for roasting over the open fire. The men thrust a long pole through the lamb, so it could be turned and roasted evenly. Everyone wanted to turn it. Oh, the temptation to touch it with one's fingers as it roasted giving out its luscious, mouth-watering odors! We could scarcely wait for our portions, for we had eaten no meat nor any kind of food that did not grow in the ground for the forty days of the Fast! Nor could we break this period of Lent without first attending Midnight Mass."

She tells how everyone goes to Mass, each carrying a candle and with a red egg in his pocket. At midnight the church is darkened for this hour when 13 12 13 the Lord Christ

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arose from the dead. The priest lights three candles at the altar and asks the members of the congregation to light their tapers from his to glorify the Resurrection.

"We leave the church with our candles lighted and for good luck try to bear them home to light the ikona lamps. There is much rejoicing as our family comes into the house to feast upon roasted lamb and to drink wine. There is no bed for us that night, no indeed! We hurry away to the village center, kept open for dancing, weddings, and holiday feast days celebrations. We dance, we sing, we eat and drink as the new Easter Day dawns! This is the day when godmothers give their godchildren gifts. We are eager to have them as gifts are given out only at Easter time.

Everyone we know is at the village center and even relatives from far away villages come to pay their respects. Five men playing on two mandolins, a violin, a bajouki, and a clarinet make music for the dancing. Everybody is gay and happy and the merrymaking lasts for three days." 14 [?] 14

We Greeks in Manchester have no village squares to dance in, so we have our gaieties in our own homes or visit friends and attend their parties. After the late service on Easter eve, we greet [?] our friends and relatives by knocking together and exchanging the Easter eggs dyed red to symbolize joy and by crying "Christ is risen!" and "He is risen, indeed!". Breakfast is delicious with our special dish prepared from lamb's heart and liver. Our roast lamb dinner is supplemented by all kinds of sweets, among them the special cakes [ujoupes?] and [Kpeloywyor?]. This is the time when our "bread of Christ" is baked. Each loaf of the K[leoywyor?] is moulded to a round shape, and is marked in the center with a Greek cross and decorated with red Easter eggs. The top of the bread is also sprinkled with sesame seed. Often this bread or [ujoupa?] is presented by the Godchild to his Godmother and visa versa.

The Midnight Mass, beginning late on Holy Saturday, in Saint George's Church in Manchester is very elaborate and teaches us the true meaning of Easter. The choir, in

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which I sing, has a fine reputation throughout New England. At this mass the members wear black robes, but we drop them off at midnight and appear in white garments to symbolize the Lord Christ's Resurrection.

The most impressive service of the season, however, is on Holy Friday when a funeral service is held in memory of Christ's burial. The Crucifix is carried to 15 [?] 15 the church where the body of the Lord Christ is taken from it and placed in a flower-decked ' [Ewisaplos?] . How magnificent it is with this sepulchre covered with at least three thousand carnations and roses which are distributed to the people at the end of the service!

St. George's Church used to follow the customs of the churches in other American cities and carry the sepulchre through the streets. It was born on the shoulders of four men down to Elm Street and was followed by a long procession of people carrying candles and chanting. But some of our Manchester neighbors did not understand the religious symbolism of the act and made light of it, so, about seven years ago, our church dignitaries abolished the street procession.

March twenty-fifth is also a great day for Greek people all over the world. This Day of independence never will be forgotten, for it was on that day, in 1821, that the Greeks regained their freedom from the Turks. What happened to the Greeks while under the Turkish rule is a horrible story. No schools were allowed nor the observance of Greek customs of any kind, but through all this oppression our brave ancestors managed to preserve our culture and customs.

So [Avexapleia?] a great day, indeed! If the twenty-fifth does not fall on a Sunday, we celebrate on the Sunday following it. Every Greek Church holds special services and the Greek Societies give patriotic programs, including plays, dances, songs and addresses by famous men. 16 [?] 16

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When I was in Greek School we girls used to dress up in our traditional gowns of white with blue sashes and marched with a band at the head of the procession, from the church to the hall where the celebration was to be held.

It is in our Greek School that we keep up our language and native culture. The Greek School in Manchester is made up of seven grades and the classes are held for two hours and a half after the city schools close. Recently we built a fine new building which stands on Pine Street between Spruce and Lake Avenue.

Aside from the feast and name-days, we have learned from our mother's stories that during her childhood in Macedonia she had little time for play. Although the village tailor made her boleros and full long skirts, she made all the skirts, trousers and various articles worn by the other members of the family.

"Our winter nights were spent in knitting, embroidering, and weaving, for both the clotheand the blankets were made from the wool of our own sheep ;" she says. Then she adds, "We were not as fortunate about play as you children here in America. In summer I worked most of the time either in the garden or went with my youngest sister and Bashou, our faithful sheepdog, to tend the flock upon the mountain side, while my brothers helped our father in odd pieces of work like carrying stones to repair the walls or hoeing in the 17 [?] 17 vineyards. We had a village school but we were not made to go. I could not be spared often, so I only attended it in winter, for in summer there was too much work to be done. I went to school only four winters which would not add up to two months of the schooling schooling you get in Manchester.

"Sunday was our only playtime, but you children prooably probably would call it work. Then it was that we went after green branches for the sheep to be used as fodder. A group of us girls would get together, each with her own mule, and away we [could?] go, gaily singing songs. When we came to the forests we climbed the tress to cut the topmost

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tender branches which the sheep liked best. We carried our lunches and ate them beside a spring. Then, leading our mules, laden with branches, we trotted back home. "

To be continued.