

# The 'big house' on Selemeta Road

By Peter Klose

**T**ransported through time, away from the bustle of my law practice, I awake in the home of my wife's grandmother, Eleni Selemeta, on Odos Selemeta, in Oxilithos on the island of Evia, Greece.

The two-and-a-half hour drive northeast from Athens to this quaint village the previous afternoon took us over narrow, switchback roads cut through parched hillsides colored orange by erosion of volcanic mountain soil. The landscape is speckled with olive trees, grape arbors, and fig trees. Figs, the lotus of the gods, known to the villagers as *syca*, have an indescribable taste when ripe. For those who have never tasted this summer delicacy, a fig can be enjoyed in two ways. The novice opens the fruit like a banana from the top, exposing the seeded pink, almost red, flesh and savors the sweet fruit inside to out. The local washes the dust from the oblong fruit and eats skin and all. Either way, assuming the bottom has not popped open in the heat of the Mediterranean sun, the fruit from the tree with cloven leaves is much like the village of Oxilithos—sweet on the inside.

Located on one of the largest of Greece's many islands, Oxilithos perches below the remnants of a volcanic cone which offers a clue to the origin of the steeply-sloped hillsides plunging to the pebbly beaches.

My host, Eleni Selemeta, is my wife's grandmother. Eleni Selemeta was born in Colorado in 1918, and, in a reversal of the traditional migration patterns, her father, Aristotelis Antonopoulos, sent his wife and four young children (including Eleni, then aged three) back to Greece and though he planned to return, died in 1945.

To support his family, Aristotelis Antonopoulos sent the money he earned from his grocery businesses in Colorado and, later, Birmingham, Alabama, to Eleni's mother, Maria

Antonopoulos. The income allowed the family to purchase the small property in Oxilithos; build a second, larger house (1922); and to live in relative comfort, until any savings were lost in the Greek bank collapse surrounding World War II.

Odos Selemeta (Selemeta Road) was named for my host's husband, Demetrios Selemetas, who is a mythic figure to me because stories about him, and this village, have been morphed by the powers of time, strife, and the barriers of language. Upon the urging of the Selemeta family (also from Oxilithos), Eleni's mother, Maria Antonopoulos, pledged her twelve-year-old daughter's hand in marriage, but was forced to leave Oxilithos to avoid the wrath of her father, who did not want his family married into the Selemeta family. Before leaving a year-long hiatus in the Peloponnesus, Eleni's mother was also obliged to sign official documents to "approve" of the marriage of a twelve-year-old and to promise that Eleni would not be "harmful." From the age of twelve to the age of fourteen, Eleni lived with her husband's older sister.

By the time of his death ten years later (1944), Demetrios Selemetas had returned from service in the army, Greece had been wracked by World War II, and he had fathered four children, Maria (aged ten), Aristeia (aged five), and Thanasis (aged two). His fourth child, Demetra, was born after his death in 1944 in Oxilithos, never to be known by him.

Aristea, my wife's mother, "remembers only the shadow of a tall man holding her above her arms and being told that "Germans killed her father." Though reluctant to recall "those years," she allowed that a jealous distant cousin of her father's, a communist sympathizer, was responsible for inciting her father's assassination. "Those years" were very difficult, especially



All my children: Eleni with her family (above) and Selemeta Road in Oxilithos.

for the Selemeta family. Even today, Eleni will not eat squash products because it reminds her of the family's main staple, aside from olive oil, during her personal struggle to survive with four small children in war-time Greece.

The house where I awake was built around 1922 on a piece of property purchased by Eleni's parents from another member of the Antonopoulos family, a wealthy and prominent family who owned several homes in the neighborhood. It was built on the same property as a smaller house (built probably 300 years before), and owned by the Antonopoulos family to accommodate guests. Both houses remain on the property today, with minor renovation, and some frugal additions in the years since 1944. In the chaos of the war and the civil war that gripped Greece afterwards, Eleni and her mother managed to stay together and hold onto the house, living together in the village until Eleni moved her four children to America. The United States offered better opportunities for the American citizen: from 1957 through her retirement, Eleni worked in the furrier business as a seamstress and raised her four children fatherless in the shadow of the George Washington Bridge in Washington Heights, New York City.

The "big house," as the family calls it, is a large downstairs with a tiny kitchen, which consists of a conglomeration of cooking and warming implements, a sink, a cabinet, and about a meter of counter space. The main cooking was done outside, where there is a stone oven, out-house, and some other gas cook tops that look more military issue than conventional home appliance. The refrigerator is from General Electric, and crammed with local figs, olives, wine, beans, cheese, yogurt, and other produce that the neighbors have bestowed upon Eleni in honor of her relatives descending upon her from Ameri-



ca. Each neighbor it seems has a different specialty—stews made from beef or beans, figs, almonds, preserves made from cherries or apricots, wine, and cheese, all home-made—the food saturated with olive oil. Simple summer pleasures of small town living.

The decor is decidedly 1950s, with dark furniture, black and white photographs, and hand-stitched lace and crocheted tablecloths protecting tabletops and windowsills, various religious icons prominently protecting the inhabitants. The dining room table in the main room is bordered on either side by two long couches (each capable of sleeping one person) and another daybed where Eleni sleeps.

Eleni returns to Oxilithos yearly, and at the age of 87, now has eight great-grandchildren for whom she cooks various home-style, olive-oil-based Greek specialties. In an apparent effort to prepare for the unlikely event that all of her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren might descend upon her home at once, Eleni has added modern "amenities" to the "big house," especially beds and toilets. There is a front-loading washing machine in a room with a shower, sink and toilet, the door leading outside so that the laundry can be line-dried on one of ten different clotheslines that criss-cross the small back yard.

Between the laundry room and the main room, there is a small toilet and sink tucked away a few short steps up and between the main room and laundry room. Oddly, the ceiling in this passageway is only five feet high. When asked why there was no full ceiling, the answer is "there was earth in the way." A simple response for a proud woman who managed to raise four young children stitching mink coats in America.

Up a narrow and steep staircase, one enters another apartment, complete with a small kitchen, bathroom with a tub, bed in the hallway,

master bedroom, guest bedroom, and two outdoor patios. Having two full apartments in one house is typical in Greece where homes get passed down from parents to children to grandchildren and land is scarce. Necessity dictates living accommodations.

This is my third visit to this tiny village unspoiled by the blight of a headlong rush toward tourism that has consumed Greece since it joined the European Union. Each trip has been more enchanting than the last. Perhaps it is that I am enjoying this trip with my inquisitive, free-spirited five-and-half-year-old son, Eleni's great-grand son. Perhaps it is that Eleni, *yiayia* to her ten great-grandchildren, is at home in her kitchen overlooking tall mountains, steep slopes, and green trees. Perhaps it is my own agrarian upbringing and recent loss of my father that calls to me from the narrow shepherd's paths and donkey trails that were converted to roads more because they were located in the only passable areas than because any municipality planned, designed and built roads to *yiayia's* house. Whatever the reason for my enchantment, the spectacular vistas from every open window are accentuated by the hot dry air which breathes scents of mother earth—rosemary, oregano, fermenting figs, but no hint of air conditioning.

Vacations are many things to many people, but a visit to hometown Greece, where the goats roam wild, the food is prepared with olive oil rather than water, and the *syca* are fresh is something that every city dweller should experience. As the pace slows, the senses empower you to enjoy simple pleasures—a tiny lizard on a white washed lemon tree, a night-time sky illuminated by stars, gawking villagers sitting in a tiny café. Whatever touches you, hometown Europe is simple, yet invigorating.



Generation gap: Pictured top, Eleni Selemeta and her sister Evangelia Kalafati with their children in 1947. Bottom, Maria Antonopoulou in 1921 with her children; Eleni is standing on the chair.

Peter Klose, 39, lives with his wife, Jean Voutsinas, and two small children about twenty-five miles north of New York City in Nyack, New York. Peter and Jean—whose father, Spiros Voutsinas, is from Kefallonia—met at Cornell University, and were married in 1991 in St. Demetrios Church in Bellmore, New York.