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The Deans of Greek American Literature



Nicholas Gage

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A Son's Growing Love for his Father

By Aphrodite Matsakis
Special to The National Herald

"Eleni' and 'A Place for Us' are verbal paintings of a particular time, place and people, all of which are faded now," explains author Nicholas Gage. And like any painting of enduring worth, his written photograph of his family's immigrant experiences touches upon and explores several eternal themes - the search for one's father, the meaning of family and of home, and the exhilarating but often turbulent and painful adventure of coming to live in a new land.

The books are a testament to the enduring strength of the Gatzoyiannis family as they face difficulties in Greece and the United States, as well as a memorial to the author's parents. In his internationally acclaimed and prize-winning book, "Eleni: A Savage War, A Mother's Love, and a Son's Revenge: A Personal Story," Nicholas Gage immortalizes his mother. In "A Place for Us: A Greek Immigrant Boy's Odyssey To A New Country And An Unknown Father," he immortalizes his father.

Just as "Eleni" captivates the reader with its emotionally vivid portrayal of Eleni and her children and those who shaped the family's fate in Greece, "A Place for Us" reveals the inner struggles and complex dilemmas facing the family in the United States. Gage writes: "This story of the children of Eleni Gatzoyiannis in America is the recollection of an immigrant who arrived at mid-century, old enough to be molded by the traditions left behind but young enough to belong in the new world. The particular calamities, heartaches, and triumphs in these pages are not unique to my sisters and me, but our odyssey is as old as the nation: the arduous journey across the bridge that separates an old familiar world from a new and frightening one, to find a place for ourselves on the other side."

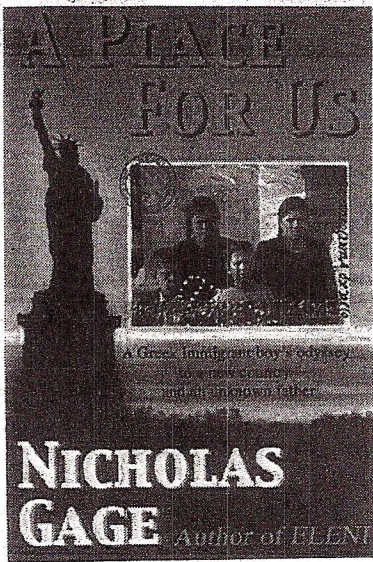
Upon school, Nicholas finds that "all the children ... seemed bigger" than both he and his sister combined. As if this didn't make him feel enough like an outsider, because he doesn't know English, he is placed in classes for the mentally retarded. His subsequent efforts to have his intelligence acknowledged and to be accepted by his peers will ring a familiar bell to many Greek American readers.

Gage's sisters face similar hurdles but their adjustment process is complicated by the fact of being female. The Old World restrictions on women did not evaporate simply because the sisters now lived on American soil. Gage's sisters, like many other Greek American women, struggle with the tensions between the strict Puritanical values of their Greek village and the more modern expectations for women in the United States. Gage's descriptions of the sometimes irresolvable conflicts between the old and the new standards for women are written with such clarity and such compassion that they would meet the approval

of even the most exacting teacher of the psychology of women.

Of all the sisters, Olga, the eldest, adheres most closely to the traditional role for women and the customs of the past. Upon coming to the United States, Olga wants to continue wearing mourning clothes for her mother for at least five years. But her sister, Kanta, can't wait to toss aside her black dresses and stockings and don more colorful and softer American apparel. Olga also balks at the idea of going to church. As she explains to her father, "No self-respecting girl beyond the age of 11 lets herself be seen in church until her wedding day. You know that!"

Olga eventually finds solace,



A Place for Us: A Greek Immigrant Boy's Odyssey to a New Country and an Unknown Father

By Nicholas Gage
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dignity and purpose in marriage and maternity. In contrast, Kanta develops a keen business sense and comes to negotiate financial transactions advantageous to her and the family. Instead of waiting to be chosen as a bride, Kanta is proactive in finding herself a Greek husband of her liking. She also skillfully avoids being strangled by the traditional obligations of a daughter-in-law to her husband's parents, prevalent in Northern Epirus at the time.

In recounting the many dramatic events of his life and the life of his family, Gage does not restrict himself to psychological truth. Just

as "Eleni" contains an astounding amount of meticulous historical and sociological research on Greece in general and on Epirus and his birth village of Lia in particular, "A Place for Us" provides a detailed explanation of how the particular twists and turns of national, international and local economic, social and political forces altered his life and the lives of his family and other Greek immigrants.

Indeed, Gage has been widely acclaimed for the thoroughness and scrupulousness of his research. He states that he never relied on just one source for information, but on several historical or other documents and on numer-



Nicholas Gage

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ous interviews. According to Gage, none of the facts in any of his books have been disproved.

His careful detailed research is evident in other of his books. For example, his account of the tempestuous love affair between Aristotle Onassis and Maria Callas in "Greek Fire" is not based on pure gossip, sensationalistic press reports or on his own personal speculations. In preparation for writing this book, Gage reviewed a multitude of newspaper and magazine articles on Onassis and Callas, and conducted numerous interviews with those who knew these outstanding individuals the best. Gage's "Greece: Land of Light" is chock full of information and insight into Greek history, art, mythology and village life and his "Hellas: A Portrait of Greece" reveals his vast knowledge of Greek culture, both past and present.

In his book, "A Place for Us," Gage describes the developing and sometimes stormy relations with his father. Like Telemachus who set sail in search of his long-lost father, Ulysses, the hero of Homer's "Odyssey," who among us has not sought to find or better know our father? And who among us has not wrestled with conflicting feelings towards that father? Hence Gage's work speaks to and has been appreciated not only by Greek Americans but also by a much wider audience.

According to Freud, love and hate, longing and contempt, and other strong contradictory emotions towards a parent are to be expected. But for the young Nicholas, any "normal" ambivalence towards his father is intensified; he believes that his mother would be alive if his father had brought the family to the United States prior to the outbreak of war. Yet when the nine-year old Nicholas arrives in the United States, it is not only anger he feels towards his father, but "love (and) longing" as well. "Like any child who has only one parent left, I longed to admire my father," he writes.

The course and ultimate resolution of the inner turmoil resulting from this cauldron of emotions towards his father is one of the central themes of the book. Gage has described "Eleni" as a love story - a mother's love for her children and their love for her. In many ways "A Place for Us" is also a love story - a father's love for his son and the son's growing love for his father. As Nicholas grows into adolescence and adulthood, he comes to see and appreciate aspects of his father of which he was unaware as a child. For example, he learns about the many people his father has helped come to the United States and the generous

checks he has been sending overseas to relatives and other Greeks still suffering from the ravages of war. Over time, Nicholas becomes increasingly aware of the self-centeredness, dishonesty, pettiness and disloyalty of some of his father's peers (fellow Greeks) and comes to see and value his father's good-natured soul more than ever. He also develops a deeper appreciation of the hurdles faced by his father, who arrived in the United States with just a few dollars in his pocket. He admires him for managing to support his family by working hard and making the most of every opportunity.

Gage states that as he entered adolescence and adulthood and found himself making foolish mistakes, he became more forgiving of his father's errors. For example, one reason his father hadn't sent for his wife and children was his assumption that since his family had survived the Nazi occupation, surely they would survive the Greek Civil War. After all, Greeks would certainly not be as merciless towards one another as the Germans had been. Christos was not alone in this assumption, for the cruelty of Greek against Greek in the Civil War was a shock to many.

Another fascinating aspect of this book is Gage's description about how he became a writer. After writing a eighth grade essay on his mother's execution and his and his sisters' escape and observing the deep impact of this essay on his teachers, classmates, and others, Nicholas began to appreciate the power of the written word. His writing skills grew as he helped his father write letters to government and other officials on behalf of impoverished Greeks in Greece and struggling Greek American immigrants.

After college, Gage went on to become an investigative reporter and foreign correspondent and in 1970 began working for the New York Times. He investigated and wrote exposes on organized crime, the international drug trade, corruption in the judicial system, Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew. After being made chief of the New York Times Athens bureau in 1977, Gage wrote articles about the turbulence in Lebanon, the leaders of Iran and Iraq, and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. He was awarded an honorary doctorate from Boston University, his alma mater, and has produced several films, including "Eleni" and a 1970's television series, "The Andros Targets." In addition to the books mentioned thus far, Gage has also written "The Mafia is Not an Equal Opportunity Employer" and "Mafia U.S.A.," both non-fiction, and two novels, "Bones of

Contention" and "The Bourliotas Fortune."

There are many unforgettable scenes in Gage's "A Place for Us" and not all of them are tragic. Who can forget Nicholas' little boy delight as he eats a "sandwich" he makes by stacking five bars of that American wonder - chocolate - one on top of another, or his family's "very Greek" reaction to his receiving the Hearst prize in 1963 straight from the hands of President John. F. Kennedy. After meeting with Kennedy, Gage describes how he rushes to his hotel room to call his family "and tell them about the president. They listened politely, but all they asked was whether he had offered me anything to eat." (My "yiyia" would have asked the same question.)

In his book and in interviews, Gage talks about how he draws strength from staying close to his Greek American community and to his sisters and their families.

When asked what he thought it means to be Greek in America today Gage mentioned several factors. "Greekness," in his view, involves not only a deep attachment to one's family, but a commitment to give back to one's community. It also involves an appreciation of the many sacrifices and struggles our Greek and Greek American forefathers had to make to preserve and pass on their culture and values, and as a result of that appreciation, assuming some responsibility for continuing their efforts. His philosophy, he states, is to take the best of both worlds.

Gage has given back not only to the Greek American community but also to the American and international community as well, through his writings. He continues to be active in the Greek Orthodox Church and community in Worcester, Massachusetts, the area where he currently resides, as well as in various Greek concerns, such as the Cyprus issue and the

status of the Greek minority in Macedonia.

When Gage is asked what he considers his most important achievement, he says that it is his three children, Christos, Eleni and Marina. He takes pride in their intelligence and creativity, but most of all, in the fact that "they are good people," for which he gives much credit to their loving mother, his wife Joan.

For more information about Gage see the website, www.nick-gage.com.

Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D., a practicing counseling psychologist, is the author of 12 books on a range of psychological topics. She is also the author of the book, "Growing-Up Greek in St. Louis," (Arcadia Publishing, 2002) a personal account of the challenges of growing up (female) in two worlds in a vibrant Greek American community. Matsakis' website is www.matsakis.com.

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