

[LYSELE ASSARAPIN, INNER WEST LIBRARIES]

Hi, everybody and welcome to our Speaker Series. My name is Lysele.

[Lysele is standing outside on a veranda]

[LYSELE]

Before we begin today, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora Nation and pay my respects to the elders past, present and emerging.

Today we'll have with us our local Greek author and historian Vasilios Vasilas who'll talk about his book Little Athens.

[The black and white cover of the book "Little Athens Volume I" has images of local shopkeepers]

[LYSELE]

So, Little Athens. What was the inspiration behind the book and why is it called Little Athens?

[VASILIOS VASILAS]

Little Athens was a title or a name that I used to hear in the '80s, OK, so, you know, people used to associate Marrickville as being a Greek suburb and Little Athens was one of the names. I could've opted for a more derogatory name or a more racist name but we went for Little Athens.

[Vasilios and Lysele are sitting on the veranda facing each other]

[LYSELE]

Can you elaborate on the reasons why you published Little Athens and the relationship that you have with Marrickville?

[VASILIOS]

Little Athens is not a new project. It is part of the Agora Series where I look at Greek businesses and Greek shops across Sydney and the focus is this diversity that the Greeks - the Greeks went to many businesses and many different types of businesses.

[The open pages of the book show black and white images of local businesses]

[VASILIOS]

I was looking at, you know, other businesses like the Greek barbers, the Greek hairdressers, the Greek tailors, the Greek cobblers, um, the Greek florists, the Greek mechanics. So Marrickville came out of that idea where I was gradually getting stories from Marrickville and it came to a point where I thought, "Is there a volume in Marrickville by itself?" And so it got to that point where I had, let's say, 15 or 20 stories and I thought to myself, "Wow. There could be a volume here." And there is a volume, OK, and that is called Little Athens.

[Vasilios holds up his book]

[LYSELE]

Can you tell us a little bit more about your creative process, that is, how you developed Little Athens?

[VASILIOS]

With Little Athens, with Little Athens, it's all word of mouth and the process, like all oral history that I've done - I've done several communities and several themes - the process is very, very different according to the project.

With Little Athens it started off with this, beyond the shop windows and counters, but morphed into a Marrickville book and a lot of it's word of mouth. So you start with one person and you ask them, "Can

you please introduce me to someone else?" And I always work like that because I think recommendations and introductions are vital, OK. So Marrickville is a very, very close-knit community and when you go to one shop owner and you say, "Well, who can you introduce me to?" I'm sure they'll introduce you to somebody else.

[LYSELE]

So it's a very time-consuming process. How did you manage your time, because I know you also teach?

[VASILIOS]

I think everything is about planning and, you know, having some kind of plan so my writing always starts at 9.30 at night. So once the kids go to sleep that is when I write. But in the meantime, in the meantime, I think, you know, I have one interview per week so a Saturday or a Sunday I'll have the interview and then I'll transcribe the interview during the week, after 9.30 during the week.

[Vasilios and John Manis stand outside "TIM Products" Greek Desserts and Pastries]

[VASILIOS]

But I think it is - you're right - it's a very, very long process but it's a very, very enjoyable process because the thing is as an oral historian you're picking up someone's story and then you are crafting it and then you're giving it back to them to edit it and they can see something being created so it's a very, very exciting process. Long but very, very exciting.

[LYSELE]

So you've talked about the businesses in Little Athens. What other themes are there in the book?

[VASILIOS]

Marrickville, before the Greeks, you know, settled here was an industrial... People came to Marrickville because there was work.

[Black and white image of a group of workers outside Olympia Marble]

[VASILIOS]

Yes, the shops were here, you know, the long strip, the shopping strip, on Marrickville Road, Illawarra Road, are there but the key drawing card for people to settle in Marrickville was work.

So this massive industrial centre that Marrickville has was the drawing card for many Greeks that came here in the late '50s under the Assisted Passage Program done by the government. It was a 20-year program. They came to Marrickville 'cause there was work.

Now, once you've built a demographic the shops came after because before the Greeks settled here in mass numbers there was only a couple of milkbars and cafes.

[Another black and white photo from the book – Pericles and Ekaterina, and their daughter, Mary, Koulmandas, and unknown worker]

[VASILIOS]

But after they settled, you know, certain entrepreneurial Greeks were able to set up business here and create a network. So, in other words, the Greeks that settled here had the luxury of having their butcher shop, of having their delis, of having...of having, you know, their cobbler, their hairdresser, their barber, all this network of businesses that they can visit.

[Image of the owners of Lamia Super Deli in their shop]

[VASILIOS]

Because don't forget they couldn't speak the language. So the language barrier is such a barrier. So they needed places to go where people could understand them. And not only understand their language but also understand their culture and their mannerisms and their temperament, you know, so a Greek visiting a Greek deli and then wanting certain bits, the person behind the counter would understand what they wanted. So that's a key theme, this...this sense of belonging in Marrickville. The other thing that comes up in the book is how hardworking these businesses were, you know, a lot of them dedicated so much time and so much effort and you'd hear stories of them not going home, you know, like the cake shop at Easter time going 48 hours straight or whatever, you know, during busy periods. So there's that strong work ethic that comes through all the stories and, you know, what makes them special is this longevity.

[Vasilis, with his sons, Louis and Nick Katsiaras stand outside Golden Top Bakery]

[VASILIOS]

A lot of these businesses have been around now for over 30 years, 40 years, they're second-generation businesses. Some are even third-generation businesses. So Marrickville and the Greeks are still connected even though the demographic has changed.

[LYSELE]

Yeah, it's changed but do you think that there's more Greek businesses in Earlwood or Belmore?

[VASILIOS]

OK, that's a contentious issue. Thank you, Lysele. But I think with Earlwood a lot of people...a lot of people moved from Marrickville to get to Earlwood, right, so I know my parents, my parents moved to Earlwood in the early '70s, you know, but my grandfather lived in Marrickville, right? So, you know, a lot of the Earlwood Greeks, yeah, everyone came through Marrickville, you know. If they didn't come through Marrickville they came through the surrounding areas so it's not just Marrickville. We're talking about Dulwich Hill, we're talking about Hurlstone Park, we're talking about Stanmore, we're talking about Tempe, Sydenham. So Marrickville, when we talk about Marrickville we should also be talking about the surrounding areas. Because why it's important is we settled in Earlwood and I grew up in Earlwood but my connection to Marrickville is very, very strong because my grandparents were here our parish is here, St Nicholas, OK, so we've always gone to St Nicholas. You know, I was part of the first crew at Marrickville McDonald's when they opened up in the mid '80s so I worked in Marrickville during university, I worked during university holidays at the Australian Confectionary/The Nut Hut which was on Edinburgh Road, it's no longer there.

So Marrickville's always been part of my life even socially, you know. We'd go to concerts in the city or clubbing and the ritual was to always pass through Marrickville and have a yeeros before we went home.

[Outside The Yeeros Shop, with Poppy Papadopoulos and Kostas Tomaras and inside Victoria Yeeros with Paul Moumoutzakis]

[VASILIOS]

So that was the ritual. No matter where we were, Marrickville was the way home, you know. Or the rotisserie, the Corinthian Rotisserie. Which other place was open at 2am where you could get a hearty meal? So you'd go out and on the way home you'd stop at one of these shops because they were still open.

So Marrickville, even though we're Earlwood we're very, very close by. And I must say that even though we settled in Earlwood, until, for example, Earlwood got its own Greek deli we did all our deli shopping in Marrickville. So we still came to Marrickville. And I'm sure a lot of the Greeks in the surrounding areas would have done the same thing because Marrickville draws people there because

they know they can get their Greek products. They know that it's there. So I suppose that's why Marrickville was so busy in the '80s and early '90s. Even though Greeks had moved out of the area or began moving out of the area they still came to Marrickville because they knew they could get that service, they knew they could get that product.

[LYSELE]

So I believe there were two people that were very influential in your life. Can you tell us why?

[VASILIOS]

My mum, my mother, Niki, is very, very important because she kept me straight and narrow, on the right path.

[Black and white photo of Vasilios as a small boy sitting on his mother's lap at the beach]

[VASILIOS]

She dedicated a lot of time for me to study so my mum's very, very important in that way. But I think the aura of history is that I was living with history in the sense of my grandfather, my paternal grandfather. And his life was fascinating because his father...his father... He never met his father because his father went to the United States to work and then on the way back the ship hit a mine in the port of Marseille during the war, it sunk and he never saw his dad again. So he never grew up with his father. And then, you know, a few years later he was at the burning of Smyrna at the Greek-Turkish War of 1922, 1919 to 1922, so as a child he was there and he was lucky his stepfather had American citizenship and they were able to get the family out before all the massacres and the burning and whatever. So then... He experiences that and then, you know, it's his generation that has to go to war.

[Black and white photo of a Company in the Greek Army. Vasilios Vasilas is standing third from the left]

[VASILIOS]

So then he finds himself in the Greek-Italian War in World War Two. So he's got another story there.

[Vasilios' grandfather, Vasilios Vasilas, in uniform]

[VASILIOS]

And then after World War Two he was in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong politics and so he gets caught up in the Greek Civil War and at one point he is interned because of his political views. And then he finds himself migrating to the other side of the world.

[Black and white family photo with Vasilios' grandfather, Vasilios holding a baby, his parents Michalis and Niki, and paternal grandmother, Eleni]

[VASILIOS]

So you've got this rich history in the one person, you know? And I've been quoted in other parts, in other areas, where I've said he epitomises the age of heroes, the ordinary hero. And that's what oral history is about. Oral history is about looking at people who never had a voice and I suppose my grandfather, who experienced so much history, he was like a walking history. So I remember when I was a child he'd talk about things but, you know, when you're eight or nine or ten years old you don't value the stories at the time but I do clearly remember him talking about certain things and I suppose that played a huge impression on me, growing up.

[LYSELE]

So you were very close to your pappous.

[VASILIOS]

Well, yes. He was in Marrickville. He was in Marrickville. And we lived with him for a while when we were between houses.

[Vasilios' grandfather, Vasilios and two friends socialising at the Greek nightclub, Pantheon, in Marrickville]

[VASILIOS]

But he left in the early '80s with my grandmother. He was out here every two years visiting us and every two years I'd say, "Look, I'll get his story, I'll get his story, I'll get his story," but we never got round to getting the story. So when he passed away I suppose that really prompted me to go into other people's stories. That was probably the inspiration, the fact that I missed out on his story that I wanted so much and then I found myself taking everybody else's stories.

[Black and white image of the pharmacist, Vicky Kritikos, and relatives in the Illawarra Road All Night Pharmacy. Minas, with his two sons, Harry and Michalis Souris outside M&J Chickens]

[LYSELE]

So some people think that Melbourne is the capital of Greek culture in Australia, so why Marrickville?

[VASILIOS]

OK, the statistics show that, you know, about half of Marrickville's population - sorry, half of Sydney's Greek population was centred around Marrickville and the surrounding areas at one point, you know, early '70s, late '60s. Half of that population of Sydney was around Marrickville and the surrounding areas. So I think that's important to note.

Now I understand that Melbourne is arguably the third- or fourth-largest Greek city in the world - you know, there's a contentious issue with Chicago. But we're not talking about Marrickville here. We're talking about Sydney and I think I must commend the Inner West Council, the Inner West Council, for taking the initiative and naming a part of Marrickville and a part of Dulwich Hill Little Athens because they're paying tribute to the legacy that's been left behind by this community, you know, just like Leichhardt.

Because if you think about it, the Greeks and the Italians were the first largest groups of post-World War Two migrations that set up business centres in Leichhardt and Marrickville respectively. You know, sure, the demographics have changed, but I think the Inner West Council is looking at the legacy that they left behind, that this was the birth of multiculturalism, you know.

[Vasilios and Inner West Council Mayor, Darcy Byrne and Councillor Sam Iskandar]

[VASILIOS]

You look at the Greek Festival of Sydney that's run by the Greek Orthodox community - their first Greek Festival was in Marrickville, right, so this is why it's so important, you know, that even today, going back to the businesses that are still remaining, these Greek businesses, their longevity has meant that they've moved from being a Greek business to an Australian business. The Greeks have integrated successfully into the broader community and we can talk about a Greek yeeros or a Greek baclava or whatever. It's really about how these foods have become part of the Australian cuisine.

[Yiannis Benetos in Marrickville Yeeros. Vasilios Vasilas stands behind a display of Greek cakes at Athena Cakes]

[VASILIOS]

And that's what you're going to have to understand about these businesses and these shops, you know. Yes, they're Greek but they are also Australian, they're part of the Australian cuisine now, you know. So I think... I think this is the Inner West Council's way of paying tribute to not only the legacy, the contribution and the presence in the area, but how it's developed and how it's evolved over a long period of time.

[LYSELE]

If you had to summarise the Greek presence in Marrickville what would it be?

[VASILIOS]

I believe that Marrickville shatters every stereotype of what the Greek contribution and Greek presence in Australia was because it epitomises their efforts, their work ethic, you know, and what they did. They got into all sorts of businesses, not only retail but also industry, you know, like lots of Greeks moved into Marrickville's industry and they are major players in the local, national and even international markets.

[Colour photos of various local business people]

[VASILIOS]

So Marrickville, I think, should be proud of that Greek contribution and the presence that it's had in the last 40, 50 years.

So, in summation, that's what the Inner West Council is trying to do by acknowledging and paying respect to that Greek contribution and that Greek presence in the area.

[The logo for Inner West Council]

[The logo for Greek Festival of Sydney]

[innerwest.nsw.gov.au/Library]