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a Journal of Greek Literature and Culture



**DOUBLE ISSUE**

**Helen Papanikolas**  
Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

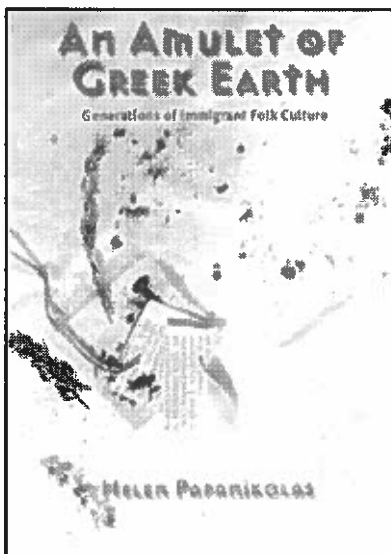
The Hellenic Literature Society's Literary Review

# A Bouquet of Praise for Helen Papanikolas

by Alexander Karanikas

The noted author Helen Papanikolas our First Lady of Letters has written a brilliant new book entitled *An Amulet of Greek Earth*. I cannot find enough superlatives to do justice to its beauty of language, its variety of forms, the many revelations of truth, the author's scope of research, her choice of emphasis, and her passion in recording the essentials of the Greek experience in America, from beginning to the present.

Long overdue also, it seems to me, is our collective expression of gratitude to her publisher, the Swallow Press and the Ohio Uni-



**An Amulet of Greek Earth**  
**Generations of Immigrant**  
**Folk Culture**  
by Helen Papanikolas  
302 pgs, 180x1255  
S.C. list \$24.95 GIP \$  
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versity Press for their loyalty to Helen Papanikolas as a writer, and for the high quality of titles on their list. Every one of her previous books has the same technical excellence. *An Amulet of Greek Earth* is a wondrous book to look at, to hold, and to read.

In contrast to other historians, Papanikolas stresses the folklorist aspects of the Greek American experience. The necessary statistics of immigration are there, but far more dramatic are the folk customs she depicts and what happens to them under the pressures of Americanization. The Greeks and other immigrants indeed felt the traumas of being souls suspended between two

cultures. Her sense of Romiosini, of a Greek identity to be cherished and preserved, is as strong in her writing as it is in the poems of Ritsos and the songs of Theodorakis. *An Amulet of Greek Earth* will re-energize the study of Greek Americana that began in 1911 with Henry Pratt Fairchild in his *Greek Immigration to the United States*, followed by works from Burgess, Kopen, Saloutos, Scourby, Kourvetaris, Moskos, among others. Papanikolas notes that scholars in Greece, such as Yiorgos Kalogeras of Aristotle University, have intensified their own research into the Greek American phenomenon. One welcomes such bonding between the *patridha* and the *diaspora* at the highest intellectual level.

*An Amulet of Greek Earth* is a labor of love that enriches all of us. Helen Papanikolas is careful to include most of America in addi-

tion to the Greeks of Utah and the Intermountain West, the main locale of previous books. She has chronicled the history of the Greek Americans with her own solid knowledge of the facts, with reproductions of memorabilia, with representative photographs, with quotations from interviews, with folk songs and poetry, and a balanced rendering of the class forces that shaped not only Greek Town but the nation as a whole.

Many Greek immigrants were lured here to break strikes and ended up leading them, with some becoming martyrs for labor justice. Was this not the same spirit that motivated the Spartans at the gates of Thermopylae, the ragged revolutionaries of Kolokotronis, the andartes of the Resistance to German Occupation, that delayed Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union and saved American lives?

One such Martyr was Louis Tikas, killed in the famous Ludlow massacre. To remember and honor him we can read *Buried Unsung*, the excellent biography written by Zeese Papanikolas.

In our ethnic admiration for high and mighty moguls and CEOs we must not forget the early workingclass struggles of our forebears, of fathers and grandfathers who mined the coal and made the shoes. And the tough little boys who shined the shoes, exploited by heartless padrones. Papanikolas tells the story of one such

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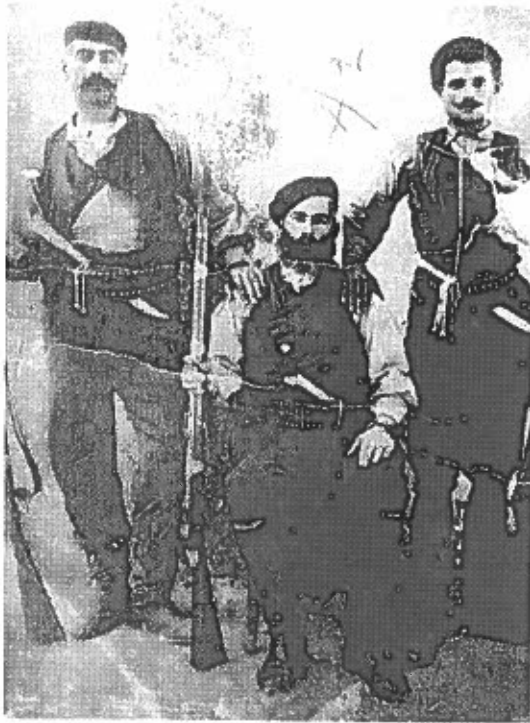
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padrone, Leonidas Skliris, whom the Cretan miners of the West eventually had to banish from their midst.

We would have to be blind not to see our own lives reflected in the pages of *An Amulet of Greek Earth*. On a personal note, I wish to thank Helen Papanikolas not only for her kind words about my book *Hellenes and Hellions* but also for including the photograph depicting my father Stephen preparing the lamb for the spit and coals. My brother Costas is the tallest of the boys. My mother Vaia stands next to Stephen holding my brother Bill who died last year. I am the boy in breeches nearby, no doubt hungry for the imminent feast.

In reading the book we realize again that as an ethnic group we have gone from being the often maligned "strangers in a strange



**Pavli Miloghianni, center, of Hania, Crete, emigrated from the battlefield directly to the United States after the Turks defeated the Greeks in 1897.**

land" to becoming prominent in every field of enterprise - as proudly depicted in the recent PBS documentary in the Greeks in America. Needless to say, as well, that the old Greek Towns in many cities have moved over to the Greek Sections of many cemeteries. My wife Helen's family members lie in Elmwood Cemetery not far from our home in Oak Park; and mine in the Pine Grove in Manchester, New Hampshire, among the immigrant heroes and heroines of my youth.

Papanikolas writes about the *SS Thessaloniki* that nearly sank in a hurricane in December, 1915, bringing immigrants to America. I am quite certain that my mother Vaia was among the passengers. She came with other wives and women from villages in the environs of Mount Olympus. I remember her describing the waves "higher than the smokestacks" of the ship, how they feared drowning in the ocean, and how they prayed to the Panaghia to save them. We are searching the Internet in the hope of finding the manifest for the voyage.

The reading of *An Amulet of Greek Earth* inevitably becomes a very personal matter for those of us old enough to relate to the words written and the pictures seen. For the younger generation, the book so beautifully recalls the past, the way we were, that it

should powerfully explain the way we are - both as individuals and as a vital ethnic community.

The past as prologue to the present applies to every current Greek American institution. A good example is the origin of AHEPA, given in the book, and its subsequent growth as our premier fraternal order. Papanikolas relates how the Ku Klux Klan and the American Legion detested all "aliens," including the Greeks, and succeeded in having Congress choke off nearly all immigration in the 1920's. To counteract their hatred, the AHEPA was organized in Atlanta in 1923 to promote assimilation and use of the English language. Soon after, in 1924, GAPA was formed to oppose Americanization, to retain the Greek language, and to keep the "old country" customs. The basic issues still resonate. Reading *An Amulet of Greek Earth* helps us answer such questions as "Do we still have a Greek identity?" If we do, "Where are we going as an ethnic community?"

However, the real value of the book, at least to me, is not its sociology. For that we can go to the masterful studies of Charles Moskos and to his mentor, the great historian Theodore Saloutos. One reads *An Amulet of Greek Earth* for the way its detailed folklore humanizes the epic odyssey of immigration. The voyager to the "ksenitia" speaks of her terror. The photograph bride awaits the husband she has never seen. The mother bakes a delicious "pita" made of feta and leek. The child in Greek school feels the pain of the teacher's belt. The sounds of "rebetika" come from the tavern. The newborn cries from being plunged into the baptismal font. And a new generation of Greeks prepares to walk the streets of America. ■

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