

Entering through the Port of Providence: the Story of Mary Condaras Milonas

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On November 1, 1923, a fourteen year-old girl and her family arrive at the Port of Providence, Rhode Island two weeks after having set sail from from Athens, Greece. Their final destination is Greenwich, Connecticut, where cousins, aunts, and uncles are ready to help them begin their new lives in this foreign land.

Flash forward to March of 1986, and Mary Condaras Milonas, that fourteen year-old girl, now an elderly woman, is telling her story to an interviewer with the Greenwich Library Oral History Project.

Flash forward again, this time to November, 2012, after Mary Milonas' death, when Ms. Milonas' extended family has lost touch with one another, and an office keeper at the Oral History Project receives a request for the 1986 interview whose existence has been unearthed by a long-lost family member searching for information. The request comes from Ms. Milonas' goddaughter whose father, Ms. Milonas' first cousin who, having learned of Ms. Milonas' death, wants to put an obituary for his cousin in the newspaper.

What transpires next is a heartfelt exchange of emails, culminating in a thank you note from the goddaughter who is overwhelmed by all she has learned from reading the interview. A final grace note to this story of loss and retrieval: the goddaughter's office at work overlooks the Port in Rhode Island, the Port of Providence, where young Mary Condaras and her family first arrived so many years ago. The story of how the interview made its way finally to family members eager to have it has a lovely symmetry, but Mary Condaras Milonas' interview is worthy of interest to a much wider audience.

She begins by telling of her family's hardships during World War I. Turkey had become an ally of Germany, and Smyrna (today Izmir), where the family had been living, was blockaded by the Turks, forcing the family to relocate. After the war, the family returned to Smyrna, but there was more trouble ahead. Mary's father had the foresight to send the family away in 1922 – before the destruction of Smyrna at the hands of the returning Turkish invaders.

Mary's father stayed behind and was taken prisoner. Luckily, after being interrogated, he was released and sent to Lesbos, where his family anxiously awaited word of his fate. After several more separations, the family once again reunited in Athens, took passage to Rhode Island, and ultimately, traveled to Greenwich where Mary's uncle, Harris Pappas, owned the Olympia Restaurant on Greenwich Avenue.

In many ways, the move to Greenwich marked the beginning of Mary's adventures. When she and her family arrived, there was a thriving Greek community in town, which must have been a godsend for children who did not speak a word of English. But Mary was industrious, a quick learner, and soon she distinguished herself as an excellent student. By 1925 she had already mastered the language enough to win second prize in an essay contest.

After graduating from Greenwich High School in 1930 and having worked at a number of different jobs, Mary's love of literature brought her to the Greenwich Library in 1932 and from there five years later to the Pratt's school of library science. She describes her year at Pratt – the independence and camaraderie with the other students, her free time filled with museums, plays, and opera – as one of the happiest of her life. The next years were filled with library work and more opportunities for advancement for this motivated self-starter.

Then, in 1942, in order to help with the war effort, she joined The Women's Army Corps and was sent to Camp Lee, Virginia where she provided training material for future officers in the Officer Candidates School.

After the war and after returning to school in New York, she received her Bachelor of Science degree from New York University in 1948 and became a cataloger at the Scranton Public Library. She worked there until 1951 when Miss Mary Condaras became Mrs. Milonas, having met her future husband, John, through friends. He, coincidentally, was also from Smyrna. "It's a small world," she says of this coincidence.

Mary continued her library career for many years. She worked at the Darien Library for fifteen years, retiring in 1969. But that was not the end of her library career. She returned to her alma mater, Greenwich High School, and worked in the library there as a substitute as well as in other libraries in the area until 1974 when she gave up working to care for her ailing mother – who lived to be ninety-six. Mary and her husband John lived and worked and traveled until his death after thirty-five years of marriage.

Mary Condaras Milonas died twenty-six years after giving her interview to the Oral History Project. She was 103 years old at the time of her death. And her first cousin and her goddaughter saw to it that she had a proper obituary for the newspaper.