



Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey - Greek Oral Histories 1983/146

Oral interview of
Presbytera Eleutheria Dogias

June 4, 1985

Conducted by Diane Holt

Transcribed by Lee Ann McMeans

Center for Sacramento History
551 Sequoia Pacific Blvd
Sacramento, CA 95811-0229
(916) 264-7072

cs@cityofsacramento.org
www.centerforsacramentohistory.org

© Center for Sacramento History, 1985

This is Diane Holt interviewing Presbytera Eleutheria Dogias in the library of the Greek Orthodox Church on the corner of Alhambra Boulevard and F Street. This is June 4, 1985.

Presbytera is the wife of the Greek Orthodox Priest in Sacramento, of Father Demetrius Dogias, and as such she has played an almost revolutionary role in helping many of the organizations within the Church to flourish and to succeed. She is a real roll up the sleeves, get in there and work hard gal and gets many of the youth groups especially to grow in numbers which have not been seen in many years past.

Diane: Presbytera, tell us a little bit about first of all about what the term Presbytera means?

Presbytera Dogias: Starting with the term presbytera, very simply means the wife of a priest. The word presbyter which is of course more familiar to people in the term of Presbyterian with the church, presbyter just means first among elders. It is the formal term of an Orthodox Clergy man. You add the “a” to presbyter and you find presbytera which means the wife of the presbyter. As far as the wife, the role of the wife of a priest in the Orthodox Church up until about ten years ago, has always been a low-keyed one. They, many of us in the past ten years are college graduates. There were a few before, but not as many as well I guess I should say 20 years, because that’s when a lot of this generation was going to school, graduated from college, you have a lot of teachers, you have nurses, you have quite a few professional women in the role of the wife of the priest. Before that, she was a very simple person who used to have to wear black, could not dance, or have a good time, or really play an active role.

Diane: Yes.

Presbytera Dogias: So this is a new thing for us, and we were officially recognized by the Archbishop of the Church back in 1980 when we asked to start our own official organization, the Presbytera Sisterhood. The basic idea was as a support sister -- system -- to our fellow sister presbyteras. Life is sometimes difficult as other ministers' wives shall we say know, and it's a unique type of situation that can only really be fully understood and related to by other presbyteras.

Diane: So a support group?

Presbytera Dogias: Right, and before that where we were kind of told "don't cause problems" or you know --

Diane: Stay in your kitchen and make the baklava!

Presbytera Dogias: Right, stay in your kitchen because if the parishioner wants to get to the priest, if he doesn't get to the priest directly, he's going to go through the wife. The Archbishop, finally in 1980 looked at us as another potential strength within the Church, and women are now slowly taking on the role of leadership, the Orthodox Church is kind of male chauvinistic, but we won't tell Father that. [chuckles]

Diane: Not only the church!

Presbytera Dogias: He won't agree with that. Not only in the Church, no! [They laugh]

Diane: Greeks as a whole.

Presbytera Dogias: The Greeks as a whole, right.

Diane: I would think traditionally.

Presbytera Dogias: So he did recognize us. He, as a matter of fact, he told us that he was very proud of the crop of presbyteras. The younger ones coming in, those of us that have been around 20, 22 years in my case, and the older gals who have guided the way and who had to take a lot of the lumps and the bruises. We feel a little more independent and not as subservient as, let's say 20 years ahead of us. It's exciting, some of the Orthodox parishioners accept it readily. Others resent it. But this is true in any case.

Diane: This must be the older group that would resent it. In this day and age do you find the younger members who are used to feminism –

Presbytera Dogias: Well, you find a cross-section of people in any age group. You know we talked about our youth and our dance groups for instance, to me it is very exciting. We look for tools to bring young people into the church. Dancing isn't 100%, let's say, spiritually oriented, although there is a lot of spiritualism, there's dance, you'll find it in the bible many a times. We want to use it, and have used it, and it has been a very successful tool here in Sacramento. We

started out in September of 1981, with a reorganization. There was an existing dance group of about 20 kids. We wanted to make it a little more fairer for everybody, because not everybody is as talented. It was more of an ability oriented group. We changed it into age groups. We started out the first year with a total of 40 kids, and right now, four years later, we have 140 in the dance program.

Diane: Oh my goodness!

Presbytera Dogias: From two groups we know have six and possibility of a seventh one. [hard to hear, counter 48]

Diane: From what ages?

Presbytera Dogias: From four years of age, on up until, well, until you can't dance, 35, when you are out of breath you stop.

Diane: I think the four year olds with the costumes were, took everybody's heart at the last competition.

[Counter 50]

Presbytera Dogias: Aren't they adorable? And they try so hard, and they are so cute!

Diane: So this is also a social thing as well as a competitive thing, now for the kids? It breaks them down –

Presbytera Dogias: Yes, we try not to emphasize competition, you try hard, but, unfortunately as in Little League, Soccer, whatever, the parents become very competitive, and they instill this competition in their kids.

Diane: How did this evolve into a competition, into a dance competition?

Presbytera Dogias: It was an incentive to keep them going. To help them learn. The basic, the whole essence of the dance program is to teach them the dances of their culture, and some of the culture, and costumes. In a roundabout way a young person might not know what the costume is that he is wearing until he is asked, or as his mother is making it, or having it made, and “that costume is from Macedonia and don’t forget it.”

Diane: Yeah.

Presbytera Dogias: Or you know, this dance etc. –

Diane: So the enumerable coins on the costume or –

Presbytera Dogias: Right, and the coins on the costume, if you have ever seen, which I’m sure you have, Greek costumes here, just as a real quickie, when you see them dance, next time you

see them dance, picture a young person in Greece about a hundred years ago. The young lady, that was her dowry.

Diane: Oh my!

Presbytera Dogias: When they got all dolled up and whatnot and they were looking for a groom, they put on all of their prika as we say in Greek or dowry in English. So that the young man would know what he was getting.

Diane: Yeah, uh huh.

Presbytera Dogias: And if there was little, then there was little in the till. But that, from the dance program, we have tried to expand. We have some very good people involved now. We started with a junior choir, we have –

Diane: Well before we get away from the dance organization, I would like you to tell us a little bit about the big convention. It was a national convention here, two years ago.

Presbytera Dogias: We hosted a folk dance festival.

Diane: Yeah.

Presbytera Dogias: February of 1984. It was the eighth diocesan and the first national convention. We had competition from outside.

Diane: And how many young people did you have here? It was an incredible

Presbytera Dogias: We had 1533 participants.

Diane: Participants? [laughs]

Presbytera Dogias: Registered participants in the dance programs.

Diane: Plus everybody's families, aunts and uncles, and komboda.

Presbytera Dogias: Right. It was a beautiful, it was just a beautiful experience. For a lot of our people in Sacramento it was a first time experience. I think it did much for helping them understand what we are trying to do. It killed a lot of the negativism, you know, that we talked about earlier.

Diane: Sure, sure, yeah.

Presbytera Dogias: When, sometimes when people don't understand something, they don't want it.

Diane: Or the criticism the “well, you should have, being Greek is more than just the dancing and the cookies.”

Presbytera Dogias: Right. And we have a lot of problems with the, some of the clergy don't quite agree with the philosophy of dancing being, well, it's not really important, but playing a large part in the youth program.

Diane: Bishop Anthony is certainly one of your staunchest supporters.

Presbytera Dogias: Oh, well if it wasn't for Bishop Anthony, the program would not have thrived like it has. He is very futuristic. He has large vision, he pursues them.

Diane: And charisma. [They laugh]

Presbytera Dogias: Yes, he loves the youth. He sees the youth as the future, and we have, being of the Greek heritage, we have very definite problems in some people understanding that it's an American Greek culture that we are dealing with. We are holding on to the hold, but we are learning new. Their emphasis has to be more “Greeky” to them. If they don't hear everything Greek or something like that, it's not truly Greek.

Diane: Of course, many of our people hold the values that they came over from Greece with 50 years ago, don't they? Whereas the people that are new immigrants are almost more liberal than we, the children of those with 50 year old values are.

Presbytera Dogias: Very interesting that you say that, because – definitely. Last Sunday they had elections in Greece and in a conversation last night, not to get political, but, just kind of touch on that,

Diane: Greeks always get political.

Presbytera Dogias: They were talking about, you know, they were watching the newsreels and all of these people marching the streets, and somebody said “you know it reminded me of South America and what’s happening down there with the young people and Nicaragua and this and that, etc. and Mexico, you know.” They never thought they would ever see that in Greece. And somebody said “20 years ago my mother was still telling me you can’t do that, the women in Greece are not allowed to, you cannot wear pants, you cannot do this, you cannot do that”

Diane: Yeah.

Presbytera Dogias: Now my mother goes to Greece every year, I don’t hear anything. They are more liberal there, than we are here.

Diane: Yeah, they are.

Presbytera Dogias: So in essence, even though the language has changed, we don’t speak Greek all the time, we have held on to the old customs and traditions. And you’ll find –

Diane: And values.

Presbytera Dogias: And the values. And, uh kind of touching between dance programs and values and whatnot, when we've had guests come to church, go to our folk dance festivals, uh, Greek ministers, government ministers, they are terribly impressed with our ethnicity, did I say that correctly?

Diane: Right.

Presbytera Dogias: Difficult word. How we cling to. How we within the church have maintained a discipline and have held on to the church, and the people that go, our dance programs. These kids know all these dances –

[Counter 100]

Diane: Yes, for the social and the fun part of it also drawing people in –

Presbytera Dogias: You don't find the young people in Greece, very important, yeah.

Diane: You do attract more with honey than you do with vinegar.

Presbytera Dogias: Well yeah, I mean, we are not, if you compare the church here and the organizations of the church to the Church of Greece, we're very different, because like it or not, you are also social directors.

Diane: Yes.

Presbytera Dogias: And you have all of these other extensions, that hopefully will bring everybody in and bring them to the church, which is the main objective.

Diane: Yes, and this parish is unique, isn't, in that even at a funeral, uh, practically the whole community turns out often. Of course, having one church, and serving such a large area, many people all know each other instead of if we were in fractions, you wouldn't. But also they have the makaria after a funeral whereas everyone gets together and has a bite to eat, which necessitates a lot of hard work on the part of the women who have to put this meal together for almost the whole parish.

Presbytera Dogias: The women are good though.

Diane: Often.

Presbytera Dogias: They are, it's amazing how they, they are very willing to work and specifically speaking of Sacramento itself, you speak of makaria or in any other situation, the

people are very good. The difficulty that we find is maybe in asking somebody to assume the role of a chairman or leader. They will always help. They come out, you don't even have to ask.

Diane: But there is something going on almost every night of the week at the church and every weekend.

Presbytera Dogias: Right. The case of the priest that was brutally murdered –

Diane: Oh yes.

Presbytera Dogias: We asked for some help for his presbytera because they have no insurance. People have been overwhelming in their response.

Diane: Yeah.

Presbytera Dogias: The Greek people are very generous people.

Diane: Is this parish unique? Now you have lived in other parishes, do they have more social activities here than you've seen other places, or?

Presbytera Dogias: What we have here in Sacramento more of that I have never had to deal with before, are regional organizations.

Diane: Oh, from the different areas of Greece, you mean, rather than –

Presbytera Dogias: Yes, and that kind of makes it difficult because it pulls away from the family oriented parish.

Diane: Oh.

Presbytera Dogias: When you have these different groups outside of the church itself –

Diane: Such as the Cretans, the Arcadians –

Presbytera Dogias: Right. I think we counted, we have about 13 regional groups within the church.

Diane: 13!

Presbytera Dogias: Yes, and if you can think of another one, I'm sure we'll start it.

Diane: Right. It amazes me they still flourish because third generation or second or third –

Presbytera Dogias: Well they flourish because you have some people that uh, in many cases, they don't have relatives. Their friends are usually from the same part of Greece. They'll get together to socialize. They are not church oriented people either, so this is a means for them to

have some kind of a relationship and it does away with the loneliness in their life. It's funny how people are, you know. We humans are funny animals.

Diane: Yes we are.

Presbytera Dogias: So these organizations in a sense have thrived, they feel more comfortable with the people of the region. One of the problems of a large parish, you can't help but have interest groups, shall we say, you know people will kind of gravitate together if they have a basic interest. And that's also true.

Diane: Yes, but you don't have feminist groups or singles groups, or any of the groups that are –

Presbytera Dogias: Don't say it too soon, we just might get there.

Diane: Are they just evolving maybe?

Presbytera Dogias: We have Orthodox singles groups.

Diane: Is that right?

Presbytera Dogias: We do have, we don't have one here in Sacramento, per se, not by that name. We have a young adult league which is basically that –

Diane: Well that's, I see what you are saying.

Presbytera Dogias: And that has been integrated with the, what they call themselves is the YAM, the young marrieds, but there are Orthodox singles clubs throughout the country.

Diane: It amazes me, that the younger generation, the children of the immigrants are continuing to belong to these sectional clubs, unless it is the new immigrants coming over who are, although most of them are from Athens aren't they, the new immigrants by and large –

Presbytera Dogias: You know, you will find the new imm – I'll tell you one thing that we have found over the years, the new immigrant that comes over is more like they were maybe back in the 30s, 40s, the educated Greek does not come over. You know, if they have gone to school to become a lawyer or a doctor, they pursue their career in Greece, because it's, the opportunities are fantastic for them.

Diane: Except for the 50s and 60s when things were so tough and they had the brain drain coming over, where many of the professionals came to this country.

Presbytera Dogias: That's true. That is very true. That was different after the guerilla war,

Diane: Yeah.

Presbytera Dogias: In Greece. I didn't even stop to think about that. But they found it very hard those people that did that, and the opportunities weren't what they are in Greece today. I mean when I went over in 79 to Greece, I walked into Athens and the first thing I saw was Esou Pappas, and I said "Gee, New York City all over again." [Diane laughs] The only thing different was the Parthenon, and that was all lit up and it was just gorgeous. Otherwise it was like going down busy crowded, bumper to bumper people.

[Counter 150]

Diane: Yeah. What do you see now as the future for the young people and these organizations, instead of dwindling, as in many other religious organizations, it seems that the youth groups in our parish, in this parish are growing due to your efforts and many other dedicated people who have put in a lot of work seem to be growing. The future looks rosy. Do you agree, or?

Presbytera Dogias: Hopefully so. It's getting there. There is a lot of work to be done. We need the help of parents, that's the big thing, because church life is not a priority as it was when I was growing up. We were immigrants, it was an immigrant family and our life centered around the church and it's activities. I remember being very active in high school and enjoying the yearbook, I was business manager, and other things that I was involved with, but the main family, we did everything that was going on within the church, and you don't have that today.

Diane: Well girls are not staying home any longer, too.

Presbytera Dogias: We have competition –

Diane: They are out in the workforce, they are as busy as the men.

Presbytera Dogias: They are working, they have other things that are offered through the school systems. You have the athletic programs that have developed beyond everything else, you know. The Little Leagues and things like that.

Diane: Yeah, so when the call goes out –

Presbytera Dogias: We try harder, we look for all kinds of little angles to pull them in and dancing has been an angle.

Diane: That has worked.

Presbytera Dogias: That has definitely worked. It is slow in coming, but I think our youth groups will hold on. We have a very intelligent young people. We do have also a very curious, curious about their religion. Curious about Christ, if nothing else. If you don't want to say Orthodoxy per se, they are asking and searching at a younger age, and that's important, and if you can deal with it correctly and show them that the church and Christ is there friend, you will never really lose them.

Diane: Yeah.

Presbytera Dogias: They go in cycles. You have them when they are young, you kind of lose them when they go into college. It is a rare college student that is really close to the church. But as long as they have been properly brought along, raised slowly, they always come back.

Diane: Yes.

Presbytera Dogias: You lose a few, when I say you lose a few, I mean from Christianity period, you know.

Diane: Yes.

Presbytera Dogias: The college years are very difficult, I should say.

Diane: Oh certainly, yes.

Presbytera Dogias: Very questioning and searching years.

Diane: Yes.

Presbytera Dogias: So, they are coming around though. I see a larger number and it is very exciting.

Diane: And bringing their friends, and those that marry outside –

Presbytera Dogias: Bringing their friends, we have quite a few converts, you know, uh, Father Tom is an excellent example of a convert within the church, and he found it on his own.

Diane: Is that right?

Presbytera Dogias: Yes.

Diane: So the organizations are thriving thanks to your efforts as I said.

Presbytera Dogias: And many others.

Diane: And continue to keep up the good work.

Presbytera Dogias: Thank you Diane.

Diane: Thank you very much Presbytera.

[Tape one, Side one, Counter 183]

[Interview ends]