



**Proud of Our Heritage**  
**Proud to be an American**



PORTRAIT OF AN AMERICAN FAMILY  
by Nicholas J. Kontras

## PROLOGUE, INTRODUCTION, PREFACE, DEDICATION, & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is a story that chronicles the Kontras family history, for our children and their children, and is written in honor of Dimitri and Maria Kontras, my father and mother. It is written from my own perspective so if I have slighted or offended anyone, I am sincerely sorry.

I dedicate this effort to my lovely wife, Marie Glitsos Kontras, who has for the past 38 years been the crown jewel of my life, and has patiently tolerated and humored my idiosyncrasies. What's more, she birthed and raised my three very special daughters, Demitra, Nicollette, and Maria, who are just as beautiful, inside and out, as their mother, and have made me proud and happy to be their father.

I would like to thank "Thia" Kiriaki Pantelas for her input and recollections of the "Olden Days," and my brother, Gus Kontras, for his help with some of the gaps between then and now.

I also owe a very special thanks to my Arizona friend, Arlene Lehto, without whose help and encouragement I would not have undertaken this project.

"TO E'MA NERO' THEN GEE'NETE"  
[BLOOD IS THICKER THAN WATER]

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## Chapter 1

### THE FAMILY TREE

The word "Contra" is defined in Websters' Dictionary as "[Kontra], n. the opposite side; in opposition; against." True, there may have been occasions when a Kontras detractor might have considered us in this light, but I personally believe that an ancient Greek saying better characterized us. "PAN METRON ARISTON" [Everything in Moderation]. Perseverance, moderation, honesty, sincerity. Sounds better, don't you think?

My father ["Patera"] was born in 1884 in the tiny village or "horio" of Kardamilla on the Island of Chios, Greece. Chios' only claims to fame are that it is Greece's brightest Island, and, according to the Chiotans, the home of Homer the legendary poet. It is also famous for farming the fragrant milk of the indigenous mastic tree for the production of "Mastiha", a delicious, aromatic gum-like delicacy so prized in that part of the world.

"Patera" was the first-born son of Kosta and Eugenia Kontras, my paternal grandparents, "Papou" and "Yia Yia", who were also born in Kardamilla. "Papou" Kosta was born in 1855 and was the second son of my great grandfather, Dimitri born in 1820, and his wife, Maria. "Yia Yia" Eugenia was also born in Kardamilla, in the year 1865, to Theodore and Eugenia Martakas, who had two other daughters, Kiriaki [Fatsis] and Calliope [Pappis].

The geographic location of the Island of Chios is such that the "Big City", called "Hora" to them, was Constantinople, Turkey and not Athens, Greece. Chios is located only 3 miles off the Turkish mainland, and Constantinople, now called Istanbul, beckoned to the hard-working and ambitious Island Greeks who felt stymied by the lack of economic opportunity in the villages. "Papou" Kosta was one of those, and in an effort to provide for his family, he emigrated to Constantinople and established a thriving charcoal distribution business there. Wood for heating and cooking was practically non-existent in both Greece and Turkey, so coal was the fuel of choice in those days.

"Papou" did well there. As soon as they became old enough to be of help, "Papou" brought "Patera" and "Patera's" younger brother, Nicola, from the "horio". The boys and their father would return to Kardamilla as often as the business would permit in order to visit their mother and their three sisters, Erini, Marigo, and Kiriaki, who still resided full-time there. The Kontras home there was in Ano [upper] Kardamilla, near Agiou Luka church where it stands until this day.

Tragically, "Papou" died in Turkey prematurely at age 45 of what could best be described as "Pono"[pain]. He is buried there in a Greek cemetery somewhere in Istanbul. Suddenly, with little preparation, "Patera" was thrust into the role of head-of-family at the ripe young age of 17!

"Patera" and Nicola remained in the family business in Turkey for some time and did quite well with it actually, having many upper class Turks [Pasha's] as friends. They would return to Kardamilla as often as possible to look in on their mother and sisters. Sometimes they went together, and sometimes, because of the press of business, one at a time. But the winds of change were blowing in Turkey; they were blowing storm clouds to say the least. After 400 years of Turkish occupation and domination, the Greeks in Turkey were being horribly oppressed and were retaliating by raising hell with their Turkish oppressors, and it marked the beginning of the end for the Greek minority there. "Patera's" Turkish friends warned him to get out in about 1912, just before the beginning of Turkey's "Final Solution" of the Armenian and Greek minorities there, more recently referred to as the "Invisible Holocaust". Untold atrocities and indignities were visited upon the Greeks by the Turks in those days, including the burning and pillaging of their homes and business'. Those who were able escaped with their lives and little more. It was certainly no climate for "Patera" and "Thio" Nicola to run a business in, and so they decided to abandon the family business in Constantinople and return to Kardamilla. This was in 1912.



"Yia Yia" Eugenia Kontras in Greece (Circa 1915)





Maria and Dimitri Kontras- 1926

## Chapter 2 GETTING MARRIED

"Patera's" return to Kardamilla was good news to "Yia Yia" Kontras because she had her Dimitri and Nicola back and her family was intact once again. From "Patera's" perspective as head-of-the-family, however, the future was scary. "Patera" pondered the economic realities of trying to provide for the family there in Kardamilla and prospects were not pleasant. "Thio" Nicola saw this, and like so many other Greeks in those days, he decided to go to America where the "streets were paved with gold." Why not? He was single. He could get work in America and send money back to his mother and sisters. "Patera" encouraged him and wished him well, but insofar as his personal situation was concerned, "Patera" was still in a quandary.

He was 27 now and cut quite an imposing figure. According to his youngest sister, Kiriaki, he was "tall and handsome, and carried himself in a most dignified and regal manner." The custom in most European countries, especially in Greece, was for friends and relatives to arrange marriages. Maidens seeking husbands would be furnished with dowries of cash or property as an inducement for a prospective groom. This arrangement was called "Proxenia," an old Greek tradition.

Accordingly, "Patera" was introduced to several of Kardamilla's finest young ladies. He was particularly taken by one, Maria Vafias, a lovely, petite maiden of 19 years, whose parents, Elias and Anna Tsarouhas Vafias, my Maternal Grandparents, lived nearby and were known to "Patera". Maria and Dimitri hit it off and were engaged immediately, and they were married in 1911. Within a year they had a daughter, Eugenia, and a year later a son, Kosta.

Though "Patera" was now happily married, he was still grappling with the question of how to support everyone. By now he had heard from "Thio" Nicola in America that jobs there were available and that there was money to be made there. His oldest sister, Erini, had also married in 1911 to a villager by the name of Steve Melissas. But "Patera" still had as dependents his wife, two children, his mother, and two unmarried sisters, and it was a lot to think about. Finally, after considerable consternation, he decided to go to America and make some money, and, as soon as possible to send for Maria, Eugenia, and Kosta. It was now 1915 and little did they all know at the time that it was to be 10 long years and many hardships later before they would see each other again!

## Chapter 3

### MARIA'S TEN YEARS WITHOUT DIMITRI

Well-intentioned and financially justifiable as "Patera's" journey to America may have been, it nevertheless placed a tremendous hardship on "Mitera". To be left there in the "horio" with two infant children after only three years of marriage must have been a frightening experience for her. The fact that she was living under her mother-in-law's supervision and was dependent upon "Patera's" letters and money for her emotional and financial sustenance was difficult enough, not to mention the absence of her husbands' help in raising Eugenia and Kosta during their very important formative years. The children were too young to remember their father so they had to rely on mothers' stories about him and, of course, his letters from America.

On our last trip to Chios with my sister Eugenia I vividly recall the story she told us of how "Mitera" took Kosta when he was a very sick little boy to the Monastery outside Vrondado where she and the monks there prayed for him for a week because she feared losing him to a mysterious and grave illness that had plagued him for some time. These are the kind of things that she endured alone in those ten years without Dimitri. Probably, as the years passed, the kids' friends and schoolmates might even have taunted them a bit about the possibility that their father had left for good and was not ever coming back. I'm sure that these kind of doubts and concerns did exist in their minds.

For the most part "Mitera" got along with "Yia Yia" well enough, however, she still was a mother-in-law, so when it was time for "Patera" to send money, he quite naturally had his mother and two unmarried sisters to consider also, and this left "Mitera" feeling somewhat beholden to others for her and her children's well-being. To be sure, under the best of circumstances, this was not a good period for "Mitera", and it is a tribute to her courage and perseverance that she endured for ten years until "Patera" could send for her and the children to join him in America. Obviously, I would not be part of this story had she not persevered!



A postcard from Chios [Circa 1922]



The blue-domed Church and Monastery in Vrondado, Chios

## Chapter 4 COMING TO AMERICA!

No one knows exactly why it took "Patera" ten years to bring "Mitera" and the children over but many other Greek husbands did the same thing back in those days, including "Thia" Erini's husband, Steve Melissas, who also came to America alone and then sent for "Thia" and their daughter, Mary, also after ten years.

We can only speculate as to the hardships these men endured in this strange new land. They came with absolutely no grasp of the language or the culture and much uncertainty.

"Thia" Kiriaki once told us a story that might explain some of it. It had to do with "Patera's" third sister, Marigo, who married a no-account villager by the name of Paradisis against everyone's wishes. "Patera" and "Thio" Nicola both knew that this guy was bad news because they knew of his reputation as a womanizer, but they could not dissuade their sister and she insisted on proceeding with the marriage. It wasn't long after the wedding that "Patera" left for America along with "Thio" Steve Melissas, and they took Paradisis along, ostensibly to keep him on the straight and narrow, and also so he could make some money and be a good provider for Marigo who had stayed in Greece. The three of them ended up in Warren, Ohio and lived and worked together there, and "Patera" and "Thio" Nicola kept an eye on Paradisis.

After laboring and scrimping to scrape together \$1000.00 which in those days took years and years, "Patera" planned to send for the family, and, trustingly [perhaps too much so], sent Paradisis with the money, to go back to the "horio" so he could bring "Mitera", Eugenia, Kosta, "Yia Yia", Marigo and Kiriaki to America. You guessed it! Almost predictably, Paradisis took off to Rumania with "Patera's" money! What a downer for "Patera"; he was back to square one and had to scrimp and save all over again, and, eventually, after several more years had elapsed, "Mitera" finally received word, and money, to bring the children and come.

According to our best information, "Mitera" left Kardamil-la by donkey with Eugenia and Kosta, now 13 and 12, respectively, sometime near the end of 1924. They went to Chios [Hora], the Capitol of the Island of Chios, first. From there they took a boat across the Aegean Sea to the port city of Pireaus, a point of departure for vessels going to America.

They submitted to the authorities there for processing, which included complete medical examinations. In a very touching message from the young Eugenia to the father she had not seen in ten years, she wrote on a post card, "Patera, hilia filia [a thousand kisses], efchomen kalin andamosin [we anticipate a safe and warm reunion], sas filo [many kisses], Eugenia".

Unexpectedly, the planned reunion with "Patera" was set back. Two times in fact. The port authorities discovered that "Mitera" had an eye condition that disqualified her for the journey, and she was not approved for emigration. "Patera's" youngest sister, "Thia" Kiriaki, had accompanied "Mitera" on the trip to this point. When she saw "Mitera's" predicament, she unselfishly volunteered to stay with them until "Mitera" was approved, or to take Eugenia and Kosta and go on to America without "Mitera". Of course this would leave "Mitera" to resolve her situation and follow at some later date. It was a difficult period for "Mitera", and she anguished over what she should do. After all, she had raised her children all by herself for the past ten years, and just did not feel good about sending them ahead to a father that they didn't even remember or recognize. What if she was rejected permanently and could not complete the journey to join her children? She could possibly end up with no husband AND no children! Finally, she decided that the only thing to do was to stay and keep her children with her, and she thanked and bid Bon Voyage to "Thia" Kiriaki as she departed, wishing her the best of luck with her new life in America.

Though she was detained in Pireaus for 6 months longer before she was approved the third time, "Mitera" had her children with her, and she was now more determined than ever to go to America and reunite with her husband. At age 12 Kosta recalls Pireaus as "a very busy port city with huge ships, bigger than anything he had ever seen before, going and coming from all parts of the world, and street cars, and high-rise buildings, etc." What an eye-opener for young Kosta. Wait until he would see Manhattan!

The voyage over was on a ship named Byron, about 15,000 tons, and was hardly what you would call a cruise. The trip to New York took 21 days and it seemed even longer. These were not first class accommodations mind you, and the vessel was loaded with Europeans talking everything but Greek. While Kosta was impressed with the dining room, I can remember my sister Eugenia relating to me how difficult the voyage was for her as a shy teenager because there was no one her own age to talk to. She said that she eventually met a young Jewish boy of her own age that could also speak Greek, and that somewhat helped her get through the ordeal.

It was no picnic for "Mitera" either because she had so much time to herself to think of her fears and trepidations about going to America in the first place. "Does Dimitri still love me? Why didn't he call for us sooner? Does he really want us there? Will things be the same between us?" Her worries understandably made a long voyage seem even longer.

The trip across the Mediterranean was not bad according to Kosta, but the Atlantic crossing was a stormy one and one that he says he will never forget. Eventually they arrived in the port city of New York. Their hearts pounded at the majestic site of the famous Statue of Liberty and the magnificent Manhattan skyline! " After all those years, are we really in America?"

They were immediately sent to the Immigration Processing Center on Ellis Island where the medical examination once again detected the same potentially infectious eye condition in "Mitera". Once again, she was detained. Only this time they quarantined her due to the possible contamination of others. This, of course, left Eugenia and Kosta on their own, and they were scared to death! They could not recognize any of the languages spoken in this huge, impersonal, building filled with immigrants from all over Europe. And few of them knew English, particularly Eugenia and Kosta.

They expected their father to come at any moment but they did not know what he looked like. For the longest time they walked up and down the hallways of Ellis Island crying and tugging on the pants legs of every tall, mustachioed man that walked by crying out "Mbamba?"[daddy?]. "Patera" was late in arriving to pick them up, and "Mitera" was detained in quarantine for several days. When "Patera" showed up he was showered with relieved hugs and kisses saved up over these many years apart. While renewing their bonds with their father they related the predicament that "Mitera" was in to him and begged him to do something. Fortunately, "Patera" had by this time acquired a reasonable working knowledge of English. He began inquiring about his wives' whereabouts and was able to locate the hospital ward where she was quarantined. He took the children with him for a reunion with their mother. In a few days "Mitera's" condition cleared up enough for her to be approved for entry and, at long last, Dimitri and Maria were together again!

## Chapter 5 GETTING REACQUAINTED

Dimitri and Maria had some catching up to do insofar as their new "togetherness" was concerned. After all they were still young, and ten years was a long time for young marrieds to be apart! Part of the result was two quick babies, Elias[1926] and Nicolaki[1927]. Both were light-haired and blue-eyed Kontras look-alikes.

When "Patera" first came to America he started in a small town, Butler, Pennsylvania. Later, before "Mitera" and the children joined him, he moved to Warren, Ohio, which was not that far away, but it provided him with a better job with the steel mill there. Also, "Thia" Kiriaki and "Thio" Kosta Pantelas had just married and settled in Warren. It was heavily populated with Greeks and many of these were from the Island of Chios ["Patriotes"].

When "Patera" brought "Mitera" from Ellis Island, it was Warren, Ohio where he brought her, and this is where she and the children started their life in America and where Elias was born in 1926. This part of Eastern Ohio, including the surrounding towns of Canton, Steubenville, Martins Ferry, as well as Wheeling West Virginia, were all steel mill towns, and attracted ethnics of all kinds with the work opportunities. My parents were comfortable in this environment for there was a natural affinity with the people who lived in these communities.

"Patera" worked hard in the mill and made a good impression on the boss with his conscientious attitude. When his boss was transferred to Granite City Steel in Granite City, Illinois, "Patera" was asked to go along with a raise in pay. While this certainly was a feather in his cap, nevertheless he went home from work that day to discuss this with his family because Warren was comfortable for them. It represented an easier first-step in being integrated into the strange, new culture called America.

Granite City on the other hand seemed a million miles away at the time, and, because it was a second move, would be doubly difficult for Eugenia and Kosta who were sensitive teenagers of 14 and 13, respectively. Kosta described how hard a time he had, being so big and being placed in the first grade because of the language barrier, and the prospect of moving again and having to go through all the embarrassment again was unsettling to both him and Eugenia.



