

Growing Up Greek



Helen Lucas

L'auteure évoque son enfance dans une petite communauté grecque à Saskatoon, une communauté qui lutte pour survivre lors de la dépression, tout en subvenant aux besoins de parents plus pauvres restés en Grèce. Elle a grandi moitié Grecque moitié Canadienne socialisée dans les deux cultures. Bien qu'elle rêvait d'être comme ses voisins anglais, elle savait qu'elle était différente. Son penchant solitaire l'a tout naturellement amenée à l'art. Elle a pris ses expériences d'adolescente comme thème pour ses tableaux. Bien que sa mère ne comprenne pas bien qu'elle ait choisi une carrière artistique elle appuie la décision de sa fille.

One of my earliest recollections, when I was about three, is of standing outside our home and wondering what I had done that was so wrong. Why would I go to hell? I wondered if God would take into consideration the fact that I was so little. This sense of having done something wrong — of being wrong — is an impression that has remained with me over the years.

My parents emigrated from a village in Greece, forced by poverty to come to Canada. My two sisters and I grew up in Saskatoon, then a city of 50,000, but our lives revolved around the Greek community of sixty people. Since families from the same village banded together, out of the sixty we were about twenty. Another ten relatives lived in Regina, so these thirty people were the ones that mattered in our lives.

We were raised to respect and slightly fear our elders — fear in the

sense that we were taught never give them a reason to talk about us. Of course we were model children — submissive, scholastic, music-lessoned, clean-scrubbed, quiet, with our thick, centre-parted hair in long, lush braids. During national Greek holidays we would don Greek costumes and recite patriotic poetry about a war with the Turks which, of course, we had won.

Everyone was struggling. The effects of the Depression were still around. I wore my cousin Jack's hand-me-downs. I remember wondering what the front slit in the underwear was for. Mother would spend a day washing and drying the clothes. Then she'd spend a day mending. New mending went patiently over previous mending. Yet



Drawing: Helen Lucas 1969

as little as we had, we'd periodically fill a flour sack with clothing to send to our even poorer relatives in Greece. Supposedly when you are young you are not aware of being poor, but because of our strong ties with impoverished relatives "over there," we were constantly reminded that our roots were poverty.

Letters arrived regularly, addressed in awkward English handwriting, and inside were the onion-thin pages filled with the complicated Greek scribbles only my mother could decipher. Once in a while came the envelope edged in black, preparing us for the news inside. I hated looking at the photographs of everyone grouped around the open coffin of the dead relative. Why did they send such photographs? "So you can see how good he looked when he died," I was told. Black was the colour of death, old women, and priests.

I was caught in the drama I made of the world in which I lived, the world from which I came, and the world in which I wanted to be.

To this day, if you ask me where I come from, I cannot answer precisely. Part of me is from the Canadian prairies where I was born and raised, and part is from Greece, where I have never been. At home I spoke Greek and lived a Greek life. At school I was Canadian but even there the Greek values kept interfering. I could work with my Canadian friends but I could not play with them or behave like them. I kept mostly to myself.

Now I can look back and understand my parents' need to cling to the values of the country they had left behind. Change is frightening and slow. They could not manage to accept, in those early years, even a part of the new without fearing it would be at the expense of what they already believed in.

What was the world I wanted to be in? Next door lived the Evans family. Mrs. Evans was elegant, refined, glamorous, gracious, and soft-spoken. Sunday mornings she put on a riding habit and went off to her horses. She even had a maid. I absolutely worshipped her and wanted to be a lady like her.

But she was English, I was Greek. I came to the conclusion, probably again around three, that anyone not English was second-best. Then and there began my bountiful inferiority complex.

(continued)

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My parents must have felt this too. They came to someone else's country. Did they feel second-best? The message we children got was that we would have a better station in life than they did. Their dream was that we would definitely be first-class citizens. Our entrance to this better world would be through an education. "No one can ever take an education away from you," my father frequently said. It never mattered that we were girls; we were expected to go to university. Marriage would come later. Besides, the education guaranteed a better husband.

After a year of university I ended up in Toronto studying at an art college. It was a natural progression. Being by myself much of the time had given me a chance to develop my imagination. I found enjoyment in making images on paper. This child who felt so insignificant could actually receive attention, even admiration, by bringing a drawing to her teacher.

There were many reasons I became an artist. As a loner I could still work alone; no one else need be involved. I was timid with people.

Alone I could do exactly what I wanted with no one to judge me. I was no longer caught between two sets of values; in fact, the conflicts of my youth became subject matter for my studio. The past was working for me. It didn't matter that I had no role models, for this way I had no predetermined boundaries to maintain. Boundaries had been a way of life. I also enjoyed my exclusiveness. I was in unexplored territory; it was exciting, it was freedom.

How has my mother responded? She is pleased and proud of what I do, although she doesn't completely understand it. If I'm a painter, why won't I paint like Leonardo da Vinci? While I was teaching painting it was more comfortable for her to think of me as a teacher. I keep sending home newspaper clippings about me or my work but I don't get the "bravo" I seek. If I were to call and say, "Mother, I'm off to Oslo to accept the Nobel Prize," she'd probably say, "Careful, don't speak to any strangers while you're away."

My values confuse her just as her values once confused me. We will never totally understand each other because we have lived such different lives. That is why the total approval I seek can never come. It could only happen if both of us had similar experiences in related lifestyles. Yet she is unbelievably supportive and whole-heartedly respects my need to paint. More than anyone she has been there to help me with problems that have prevented me from painting.

A friend of mind, on meeting Mother, felt we were not one but two generations apart. That may be so. Yet when I get angry about Greek women kept in black, or the archaic values of the church, or about passivity being death, I remember that my widowed mother wears blue, that she has some of the same lack of tolerance for the church that I have, and that she leads an exceptionally active life.

When I telephone and we talk about something we both understand — a recipe, or how to plant a lily, or whatever — we are again mother and daughter, and there is for a little while no distance between us.