

A Greek Rogue of the American West

1/10/09

By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

PART THREE

After all that I have written about Peter Attias, one of the most successful Greek immigrant confidence men of the American West, many will say this man's life was simply an aberration. Why look at rogues? Clearly the vast majority of Greek sojourners who arrived in North America between 1870 and 1924 were law abiding individuals who only wanted to find an honest job. It is Dr. Attias' nearly two years in and around Salt Lake City that demands our attention. For it is between 1904 and 1905 that Peter Attias challenged Leonidas Skliris as chief labor leader for the Greeks in the American West.

Leonidas G. Skliris was a Salt Lake City-based labor agent who became known as "the Czar of the Greeks." Skliris, a native of Sparta, arrived in Salt Lake City in 1897, and set up his labor agency headquarters at 507 West 200 South, near the railroad yards in the heart

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of "Greek Town." "He established branch offices in Greek communities across the country to recruit labor for industries throughout the West. He became the labor agent for the Carbon County coalmines, Utah Copper, and the Western Pacific and Denver and Rio Grande Western railroads. In the early 1900s Skliris dispatched agents to Greece, but soon discovered that advertisements in Greek newspapers in the U.S. were equally effective. Immigrants newly arrived in America sought him out. Eventually, his network became so well established that he could supply most companies' labor needs with a few well-placed telephone calls (History Blazer, 1997)."

An Associated Press story appeared in American newspapers across the nation, "Company Will Be Organized to Furnish Contractors with Workers," that reported in California, "A scheme is on foot here to establish a labor controlling body for the purpose of supplying Greek laborers to contractors in the west. Many prominent Greeks in this city and vicinity have agreed to subscribe for shares in the new company, which will be incorporated under the laws of Missouri, with stock at the par value of \$50. It is claimed that under this plan the newly arrived immigrant can be protected and a better class of labor secured to the employer (Los Angeles Herald July 28, 1905)."

Recruiting proved extremely lucrative for Skliris. Adapting the Old World patronage system, the foreign-born North American agent was known, in this country, as a 'padrone,' from the Italian for "patron." The origins of this term itself is indicative of the fact that this form of exploitation was not initiated by the Greeks nor ever exclusive to their ranks. Between the 1880s and 1920s padrones typically charged a fee, around \$20, for finding a job for an individual. They, then, received some sort of monthly fee, around \$1 or \$2, for each man that he supplied to his clients. These fees were most often deducted from the employee's monthly paychecks. Skliris's agency also

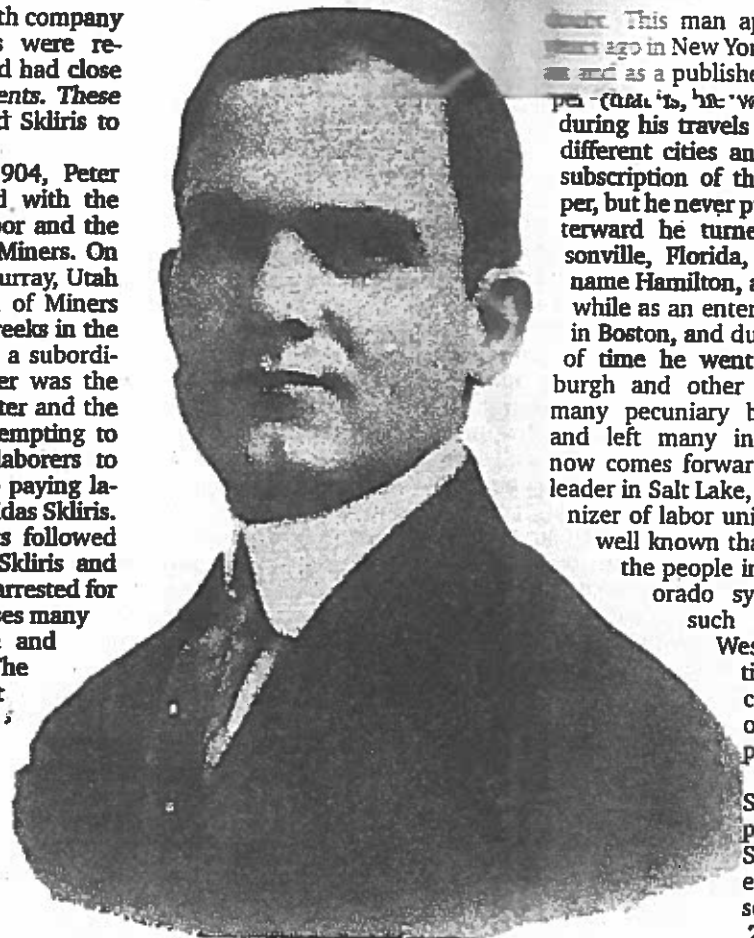
formed partnerships with company stores, which workers were required to patronize, and had close ties with steamship agents. These income sources allowed Skliris to live a lavish life style.

Sometime during 1904, Peter Attias became involved with the State Federation of Labor and the Western Federation of Miners. On October 15, 1904, in Murray, Utah the Western Federation of Miners decided to admit the Greeks in the state to membership in a subordinate union. James Soter was the first member. Attias, Soter and the WFM officials were attempting to convince local Greek laborers to join the union and stop paying labor agents such as Leonidas Skliris.

A series of law suits followed with first Attias, then Skliris and then Attias again being arrested for a host of different offenses many undoubtedly legitimate and not a few contrived. The Union backed Attias but in the end this man's previous crimes caught up with him. As Attias became discredited so did, the efforts to unionize the Greek laborers. And here is the real tragedy. Attias' unquestionable criminal past tarnished, divided, and confused the advancement of the American labor movement among the Greeks of the American West.

That Leonidas Skliris was exploiting his fellow countrymen was a daily reality for the local Greek workers. Yet the furor surrounding Attias' trials allowed Skliris to stay in power until the western coal strikes of 1912. Had not Attias been a heartless criminal, it is conceivable that the Greek laborers could have thrown off Skliris and his fellow padrones much earlier.

That Greeks so causally held their countrymen in what can only be called peonage is an aspect of our collective history that we must still reckon with. Leonidas Skliris may have been only doing 'business' and Peter Attias may have only been a confidence man posing as a labor organizer. Yet in the end, it



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is easy to understand that both of these men were rogues who robbed their fellow Greeks with absolutely no other thought than personal gain; and damn the consequences!

Peter Attias' career caught up with him in Salt Lake. The editors of the Deseret Evening News, reprinted a lengthy and literal translation from the Greek newspaper Thermopylae of New York City, Oct. 21, 1904, under the title: "Thermopylae of Attias:"

"The very much known impostor Attias, who some times appears as a pedestrian, other times as a doctor, and other times as an enterprising person, arrived in Salt Lake some time ago and started dissension among the Greek laboring men in that city. If they knew him well they would drive him out of town with a club without any

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Gods, Myths and Mortals: Discover Ancient Greece

By Eleni Kostopoulos
Special to The National Herald

was scheduled to run May 2007 through December 31, but has been extended for at least another six

offers tour guides dressed as Zeus, Poseidon and Athena who tell tales about their powers and responsibil-

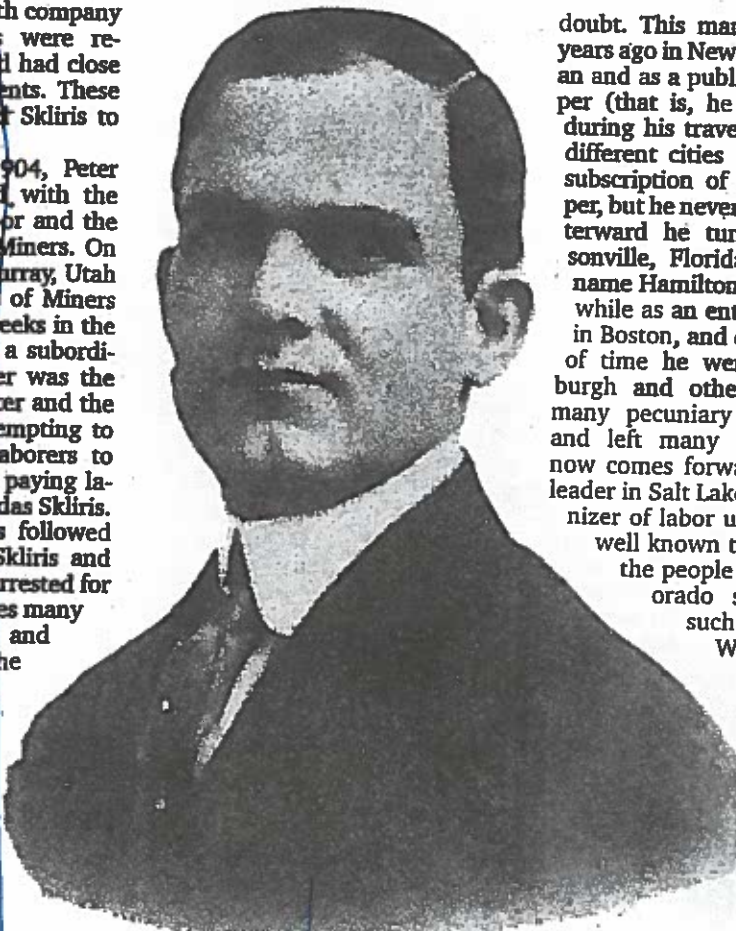
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doubt. This man appeared a few years ago in New York as a pedestrian and as a publisher of a newspaper (that is, he would publish it during his travels throughout the different cities and collected the subscription of the said newspaper, but he never published it). Afterward he turned up in Jacksonville, Florida, with the false name Hamilton, and after a little while as an enterprising director in Boston, and during this length of time he went through Pittsburgh and other cities fulfilling many pecuniary blood drawings and left many inconsolable. He now comes forward as a political leader in Salt Lake, and as an organizer of labor unions. While it is well known that in no way do the people in Utah and Colorado sympathize with such unions or the Western Federation, Attias comes out into one of the newspapers against Mr. L. Skliris, the interpreter, because Skliris annihilated Attias' schemes, and 250 Greeks working at various places, published their dec-

laration in the Deseret News denouncing Attias' plans and praising Skliris' works in behalf of them and they are satisfied with Skliris. There is enough published about the impostor Attias in the Greek newspapers in this country and consequently he is very well known. We hope that his wretched contrivances will be disgraceful among the Greek laborers (December 2, 1904)."

The Deseret Evening News ran many a story on Attias's later career with some glee as with: "DR. ATTAS HEARD FROM; Protégé of the Tribune Skips With \$10,000 from Portland:"

"Dr. Attias, the Greek grafter, who was exposed by the "News," some three years ago, has been heard from. This time he has succeeded in pulling the wool over the

eyes of the residents of Portland, Ore., to the tune of \$10,000. When last heard from Attias was in Butte for a few hours en route to the east.

This versatile son of classical Athens pursued his old tactics, only changing his name to that of Dr. Cecilia. In addition to practicing as a physician he started two confectionary stores and borrowed from all with whom he came in contact. When the time was ripe for disappearing Dr. Cecilia dropped out of sight with as much money as he could take with him.

Dr. Attias, as he was known in Utah, cut quite a wide swath in Salt Lake...posing as an author who was traveling around the world. He was vigorously championed by the Salt Lake Tribune who engaged him as a special correspondent to run down a mythical murderer in Idaho. Attias "delivered the goods" so well that the Tribune's "scoop" is numbered among the stella bad breaks of local newspaperdom.

Following his career as a newspaper correspondent Attias was arrested here for practicing medicine without a diploma. He then turned his attention to his fellow countrymen whom he tried to organize into a union.

After collecting various sums in Salt Lake and Ogden Attias was next heard from in Reno, Nev., where he was said to have married a rich widow.

When Nevada got too hot to hold him Attias went to Los Angeles and followed similar tactics. Since that time the Greek papers have from time to time contained warnings against the fellow (December 24, 1907)."

It is not that men such as Peter Attias or Leonidas Skliris emerged out of the greatest out-migration from Greece in modern times to cheat and exploit steal their fellow countrymen. But rather that out of more than a million and half individuals so few Greeks ever actually sought to devote their lives to preying upon others whether they were Greek or no.

Readers interested in contacting Mr. Frangos are welcome to e-mail him at greekwrite@yahoo.com.

Photo Openings

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to run May 2007

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mostly its the sheer brilliance of Hellenic culture," said Ackerman. "The material is so rich and so deep

um on a daily basis. "Greek American families have tremendous pride about Greek cul-