

The Lost History of New York City

By Steve Frangos

S ometime in the late 1930s, Theodore Gianakoulis (1886-1964) had completed enough essays and reports for the Federal Writers Project (FWP) to produce a book-length manuscript on the Greeks of New York City. This volume has never seen print. Two public locations hold this unpublished volume: the Municipal Archives of New York City and the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. By combing through the daily press, attending an array of performances and civic events, and by interviewing a wide cross-section of individuals, Gianakoulis gathered the necessary information to write his unfortunately forgotten book.

Gianakoulis wanted to write about everything "Greek" in New York City. A true Helene, his FWP reports all begin with the places and performances of classical era art found in New York City. Gradually, in the course of his reports, Gianakoulis goes on to record the presence and activities of Greeks throughout the city. This approach did not meet with official approval.

In the FWP reports found at the Library of Congress, Gianakoulis's assignment editor, Emanuel Kantor, crossed out more than 90% of the classical references. Given the haphazard manner in which FWP materials were initially kept, until recently, most researchers have not had the opportunity to see the his-



Greek Independence Day Parade on New York City's Fifth Avenue

Chicago's Greektown area during Easter celebrations for Matsoukos's volume.

Building on the earlier FWP reports and studies of Greeks around the country, Dr. Carl Blegen drew upon the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) documentation to complete his historical study, *The Greek Community in the United States* (circa. 1943). Professor Blegen was an internationally recognized classical archaeologist. It is especially disappointing, given his considerable academic

shared his historical view. As a consequence, his reports are heavily edited; Gianakoulis and his editors differed on what was admissible as "Greek culture." Gianakoulis, along with many of the other Greek FWP writers and field collectors, saw all forms of Greek expression, from classical times to the present, as a fitting subject for their reports. The editors did not.

For the moment, Gianakoulis's unpublished volume exists in the following sections:

College. This all-inclusive approach on what constituted things Greek in North America, again, met with official disfavor. All such sections are struck out in the edited reports.

Theodore Gianakoulis, especially in these omitted sections, is a perfect example of how the majority of Greek American intellectuals during the interwar period viewed the contributions and influence of Greek culture on the wider American society. Gianakoulis was absolutely correct in his observations. All the classical plays and the long traditions of Greek fraternal organizations on American college campuses -- are without question -- part of the total social and symbolic realm of things Greek in North America.

Simply because the FWP editors and scholars since the 1930s have not recognized this undeniable linkage, it does not mean it doesn't exist. The problem for the editors, as well as many contemporary scholars, does not rest solely on the issue of cultural or historical continuity. Rather, what remains unexamined is the American expression of Greek culture in classical art in American museums, or in its renditions of classical theater, or, even, in Anglo-Saxon college students in togas. That their collective view does not include modern Greeks is beside the point. It is more important to realize that these expressions of Greekness cannot be brought up for sustained examination.

Lost World

tory contained in Gianakoulis's many hundreds of pages. We will first take a background look at the circumstances under which Gianakoulis initially worked and wrote, and then we can touch on something of what he recorded on the Greek arts of New York City.

The Big Picture

Gianakoulis's *Greeks in New York City* manuscript clearly followed the highly detailed FWP ten-page guide, *The Greeks in America: Instructions for Socio-Ethnic Field Studies*, written in 1935 by Carl Malmberg and M.W. Royce. All across the country, Greeks were being interviewed and written about based on this guide.

Greeks in New York City, is only one of several unpublished FWP volumes on the Greeks of North America. *The Greek Americans of Florida*, for example, is based on reports collected by FWP state supervisor, Carita Doggett Corse and a number of other field workers. While the Florida volume was never published in a single volume, it appeared in an extremely popular serialized form in *Athene Magazine* from 1941 until 1943.

Other examples are two Illinois Greek American volumes that were planned. What seems to be a long-running manuscript does exist at the Illinois State Historian Library, yet it is still too early to identify this fragmented collection of papers as Nick John Matsoukas's proposed FWP volume *Children of Ulysses*. Other evidence suggests that the internationally noted photographer Wallace Kirkland (1891-1979) twice documented

stature, that this manuscript never saw print.

Academic Memory

Only three studies have surveyed these FWP documents and related OSS Foreign Nationality Group (FNG) studies. It is surprising to note that only the review article, *Greek Immigrants and the Federal Writers Project: A Comprehensive Bibliography of State Holdings* by Elias P. Vlantou and Evangelina V. Newton, focuses on the Greek material (*Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, 1994, Vol. 20).

The other two sources deal primarily with the later OSS Foreign Nationality Group studies. First we have Elias P. Vlantou's three-part study of the Office of Strategic Services, with information gathered on Greek Americans during World War II (*Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, 1982 Vol. XIV (1-3)). OSS domestic spying was not limited to Greeks but included 34 other ethnic groups. As Vlantou correctly predicted, these reports, letters, and scattered memoranda are a rich source of historical documentation. In point of fact, Alexandros K. Kyrou's dissertation, *Greek Nationalism and Diaspora Politics in America, 1940-1945: Background and Analysis of Ethnic Responses to Wartime Crisis* (Indiana University, 1993), is a history based largely on these OSS reports.

New York City Arts

Gianakoulis presented his reports in a consistent manner. The main problem, as noted above, was that none of his editors ever

"Original Greek Settlements," "Greek Immigration," "Greek Writers," "Greek Press," "Folk Dances," "Amusements" (in several parts), "Appreciation of Greek Art," "Greeks in Business," "Greek Societies in the Metropolis," "Intellectual Life," and quite a number of other pieces, including biographies labeled simply "General Essays." As with many other FWP writers, a number of Gianakoulis's essays were published later in the Greek American press. Regrettably, the New York City sections have never seen publication.

In terms of the Greek American arts, Gianakoulis's book is very important because he packs every report with an amazing array of names, dates and events. No area of the arts has been omitted. We see extensive discussions of Greek museum collections, theatrical productions, dancers, movie actors, folk dancers, singers, painters, poets, traditional folk musicians at summer picnics, Greek school productions, church actors' troupes, visiting performers from Greece and fraternal organization sponsored events. Gianakoulis took great pains to gather his data. Extensive quotes from interviews and newspaper accounts are interwoven throughout his reports.

Aside from his Hellenistic perspective, Gianakoulis also believed that anyone who was performing a Greek-derived artform must be included in his reports. Any professional theatrical troupe, be it American, British or Greek, presenting a Greek classical drama, was included in his survey on Greek arts. Gianakoulis went so far as to describe the Greek festivals and games at New York's Barnard

For the moment there is no concrete explanation for why Gianakoulis's book never saw print. But given the general conditions of the times, we can be fairly certain as why this is the case. After the government closed down the Federal Writer's Project, everything came to a complete halt. No provisions were made to preserve the reports. Many documents, including photographs and original materials, were lost forever. As we know from the recollections of a number of senior Greek American writers, in the Great Depression, because of the severity of the economic crisis, there simply was no press, Greek or American, that was willing to take the chance of publishing any strictly Greek American historical or cultural material.

From our perspective in history, we know that unpublished manuscripts such as Gianakoulis's are critical to see in print. They are the lost historical studies of Greeks in the United States. These Federal Writer Project volumes fill the gap between the earlier histories of the 1920s and those written after the Second World War, such as Bobbis Malafouris's *Greeks in America 1528-1948* (New York, 1948).

Still, the expression of Greek identity is not limited to some abstract historical timeline. Many senior generation Greek Americans, alive today, were an active part of the Greek community in New York City during the late 1930s. These individuals collectively experienced the world that Gianakoulis described in such detail. The Greek communities of Florida, Illinois and New York City have waited far too long to see again that lost world of their youth; and we who follow them deserve to know more about their lives.