

# The Origins and Myths of AHEPA

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Since the American Hellenic Educational and Progressive Association (Order of AHEPA) is a secret fraternal organization, it should come as no surprise that no authorized narrative history of the Order now exists. Much has changed within AHEPA since it was founded in the early 1920's.

Given AHEPA's dynamic role in the Greek American community

since its inception, it is extremely curious that so few historical accounts devoted to AHEPA exist. Having said that, it is still possible to outline the origins of this notable organization through a synthesis of older accounts.

## FOUNDING FATHERS

In most accounts, written by Ahepans, George A. Poulos is always credited with the sole development of his "brainchild," the Order of AHEPA. This is clearly stated in Peter N. Mantzoras' "AHEPA

and I Across the Years" (Pnyx Press, Glenview, Illinois: 1966), and largely implied in George Leiber's "The History of the Order of AHEPA" (AHEPA: Washington, DC: 1972). In both of these accounts, Poulos is portrayed as a well-to-do traveling salesman who, in the course of his daily routines, had many occasions to discuss his brainchild or ideas about a Greek organization with his fellow Greek

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customers. These accounts further assert that Poulos, after formulating these ideas on his own, presented them to the leaders of Atlanta's Greek community. The majority of those community leaders not only accepted Poulos' ideas – without altering them in the least – and then went onto become the Supreme Lodge.

The 'establishment' of AHEPA has seen other explanations which, given the nature of Greek interaction and social organization, seem more plausible. In "The Greeks in the United States" (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1964), Theodore Saloutos offers his version of AHEPA's origin:

"George A. Nicholopoulos – then known as 'Poulos' – and John Angelopoulos, both traveling salesmen working out of Atlanta and well known to each other, met by chance in Chattanooga, Tennessee during the early summer of 1922. Their principle topic of conversation was how to best control the wave of hostility that had developed against members of their nationality." The two men "agreed that this could best be effected through the formation of a patriotic organization, national in scope, nonpartisan

in politics and nonsectarian in religion. They also believed that such an organization had to be secret and comprised of a select group of individuals, whose purpose would be to unite their fellow countrymen; inculcate in them an aggressive national consciousness; educate themselves in the fundamental principles of Americanism; and aid them to adapt themselves to the social and commercial climate of this country."

The two men, "after giving more serious thought to the matter, proposed to present their plan to the Greek American public. They chose the name of the organization; drafted the rules and regulations; selected titles for the officers; and attended to other details before openly presenting the plan. On July 26, 1922 they met with the most prominent members of the Atlanta Greek community in the classroom of the church, and unfolded their plan of organization. Following a lengthy discussion, 17 of the 25 present expressed their approval."

Events moved quickly and smoothly. On September 25, 1922, again with Poulos leading the way, the incorporation papers for the new organization were filed in Fulton County, Georgia. An important section from AHEPA's charter crystallizes their intent: "(to) advance and

promote pure and undefiled Americanism among the Greeks in the United States, its territories and colonial possessions; to educate the Greeks in the matter of democracy and government of the United States; and for the general promotion of fraternity, sociability and the practice of benevolent aid among this nationality."

The First Supreme Lodge or, (as it is now known) the Mother Lodge, was composed of Nicholas D. Chotas, Supreme President; James Campbell, Supreme Vice President; Harry Angelopoulos, Supreme Secretary; George A. Poulos, Supreme Governor; and James Vlass, Supreme Governor. Support for AHEPA was immediate. The speed at which AHEPA grew is telling in its appeal.

By the time of the first national convention in Atlanta on October 14, 1923 (or "convocation," as conventions were then called), 32 chapters were organized around 1,300 members. By 1924, in an obvious symbolic gesture, AHEPA national headquarters was moved to Washington, D.C.

By 1928, the Order had over 17,000 members in 192 chapters all across the country. By 1930, the complete AHEPA Family saw completion with a woman's auxiliary, the Daughters of Penelope, and two

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his persuasive power as a salesman, and other newly ar-

# rted to Protect Greeks from KKK

youth organizations, the Sons of Pericles and Maids of Athena.

But this story of origin, in whatever version you choose, just doesn't ring true.

## COMMON CAUSE

Merging what Mantzoras, Leiber and Saloutos have to report, we can now come to a more rounded social sequence of concurrent events. Poulos had undoubtedly been talking, and at considerable length, with local Atlanta Greeks and other compatriots in the Deep South, who were all feeling the pressure of nativist hostility against Greeks.

Rather than seeing Poulos as the lone innovator, Mantzoras and Leiber offer, Saloutos is more focused on the common cause Greek businessmen shared at this specific juncture in history. Even as we accept Saloutos' basic point of departure, we must push beyond even this man's thoughtfully constructed narrative.

It is clear from statements made by members of the Supreme Lodge that Poulos, in the years following the First World War, was using his business contacts to talk about his ideas with other Greeks, as well as (we can be sure) as gathering a few together.

As silver-tongued as Poulos may have been in presenting the organizational goals and structure, and even the name of the new group, without one word of real dissent, it does not seem in keeping with the way Greeks typically interact in social settings. Consequently, certain issues must have been already completely worked out in these informal

later attributed to Poulos, his contact with the Klan was nothing short of terrifying. While Poulos' role as a Klan consigliere is never explained in any detail, the fervor and single-minded dedication with which he later preached his vision of a Greek American national origin speaks volumes for how his role at the KKK's Palace was unquestionably as a spy, and not as a fellow conspirator. We can also be fairly certain that Poulos, in his private conversations with fellow Greeks over tabletops in restaurants, or behind the closed doors of hotel rooms, shared his experiences in the Imperial Palace.

Still, no amount of conversation by Poulos about the Klan would have moved Greeks to organize on a national level, and with such deliberate speed, unless these same Greeks were facing a common problem.

## ANTI-GREEK RIOTS

Sustained attacks against Greeks were commonplace all across North America from the late 1880's well into the 1930's. Since that time, a mixture of Greek American pride – and shame – has resulted in a kind of collective memory loss concerning these attacks. The attacks can be documented in hundreds of newspaper accounts all across the United States and Canada. Most of these attacks were leveled against Greeks individually, or in small groups. Petty license infractions, gambling and drinking absorb most of the official police involvement with Greek immigrants. The rest of these news stories involve "native-born

"native-born Americans" quickly became "a mob, which consisted of 500-1,000 defiant men, women and children (who) began marching west on O Street from the site of the meeting, and then south to Q Street, where it began its attack on the unsuspecting Greeks (208)." Of the estimated 2,000 Greeks in South Omaha, by George Washington's Birthday in 1909, only 1,000 remained in the area. Curiously, while the South Omaha riot sparked two copycat anti-Greek riots in Dayton Ohio and another in Lowell, Massachusetts, we hear nothing of these in Greek American historical accounts.

The 1918, the Anti-Greek riot in Toronto, Ontario has finally seen print in a recent 45-page booklet issued jointly by the Thessalonikean Society of Metro Toronto and the Canadian Hellenic Historical Society. With this slim volume, we finally hear of the tragic events which took place over three days and nights (August 2-5, 1918), when more than 5,000 people destroyed every Greek-owned business in their path.

Finally, the attack on an all-Greek railroad gang near Rushville, Illinois by some 1,000 "native-born Americans" led to the killing of two Americans. Over the next couple of years, a lengthy series of legal battles involving 29 Greeks was reported in the Greek and the American press.

## ORGANIZING FOR SELF-PROTECTION

Thus, rather than simply attribute George A. Poulos' success to

discussions between Poulos and the (more prominent) others. We can safely make this assumption, since these men moved quickly, surely and collectively to establish their new organization.

#### INSIDE THE KKK

George A. Poulos had some very unique experiences, which must also be considered in any historical survey of AHEPA's founding. He was an esteemed confidant at the Imperial Palace of the Ku Klux Klan, which has only garnered this man lasting honor.

As V.I. Chebithes reports in his series of National Herald articles on the foundation of AHEPA (published in October 1950), "It is an established fact that George A. Poulos was employed by the Imperial Palace of the Ku Klux Klan in a confidential capacity, and that he was present and participated in its secret meetings and conferences with the policymakers and high administrators of that then-dreadfully powerful group. In this capacity, he was in a position to have advance knowledge of the plots and plans of the Klan; the causes out of which they arose; and the objects of their madness. This advance information was constantly used to the best advantage of the unsuspecting victims. There is no doubt that what Poulos saw and learned from his experiences in the secret service of the Klan's Imperial Palace prompted the germination of the idea to establish among the Greeks an organization which would counterbalance the power of the Klan..."

All fine phrasing aside, and reading between the lines of statements

Americans" and other newly arrived immigrants fighting with Greeks.

Beginning in the 1880's, the New York Times and various Chicago newspapers note innumerable attacks and "riots" involving Greek street peddlers. But the problem was far more complicated. As an example of this wider problem in just a two-year period (1907-08), I effortlessly located some 70 anti-Greek news reports in the Pueblo Sun (Colorado). Newspaper accounts in Mason City, Iowa also speak of police and "ordinary" citizens attacking Greeks for drinking, playing their music too loud, and consorting with "white women." That three of these offenses were conducted inside private residences or Greek-owned businesses did not stop police (and assorted others) from breaking up these alleged disturbances.

The phrase, "Anti-Greek Riot," alone brings four different events to light. In Roanoke, Virginia on July 13, 1907, after an argument over a nickel sandwich, a riot broke out during which, finally, nine Greek businesses and at least two Syrian businesses were totally destroyed.

On February 20, 1909 South Omaha Nebraska police officer Ed Lowery was shot and killed by John Masourides. Lowery, it seems, wanted to arrest Masourides for vagrancy after a heated discussion of the Greek being with a "white woman." In "The Anti-Greek Riot of 1909 - South Omaha" (Nebraska History 51), Dr. John G. Bitzes succinctly outlines how the very next day, February 21st, more than 1,000

his persuasive power as a salesman, the wider context of violence against Greeks across the nation must be reconsidered in any evaluation of how AHEPA was initially successfully founded.

The choice to form a fraternal organization to combat these attacks is also very revealing. As Saloutos observes, "What, in effect, was happening was that the Greek American businessmen were organizing for self-protection. Instead of meeting kind with kind, and resorting to violent action marked by bigotry and hate, the Greek Americans, the immigrants of yesterday, chose the method of peaceful assembly and democratic discussion. They decided upon organization, persuasion and positive action. If their methods in the past had been inappropriate, they meant to right the situation."

At a time when it seems uncertain the Greek community in America will be able to maintain its existence, we need - more than ever - to reflect upon the lasting accomplishments of our forbears. For they faced dangers and uncertainties we do not have to contend with now because of what the adversity they suffered and the socioeconomic challenges they underwent. By serving as an enduring model for the cool manner in which to overcome an adversity of the day by reason, courage and collective force of purpose, their legacy extends beyond mere institutions.

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