

# AMERICA! AMERICA! WHAT A JOURNEY!

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Crossing the **Gates of Hercules** [*Gibraltar*] in September 1952 on the ocean liner *New Hellas*, the vast Atlantic Ocean opening up was as much of a mystery and adventure to me as it was for **Christopher Columbus** 560 years earlier. I had no idea where America was nor what would happen to a 17-year-old boy from a small village in the hills of Macedonia in northern Greece. My knowledge of the United States was based on movies. I was aware that Hollywood, New York, Texas, and the Empire State Building existed there, but had no idea in what sequence. My knowledge of the English language equaled that of my geography of America. The **17 nights on the ship were a blast** for a teenager who loved dancing, however!

I was one of 5 seniors [*flag bearer; foto*] from Veroia high school whose names had been submitted in 1951 to an office at Columbia University as potential candidates for a scholarship to study in America. Principal D. Papadopoulos, who was my Boy Scouts chief and mentor, cautioned me not to pay much attention to the nomination, since only 3 to 5 scholarships were to be awarded for all of Greece. Upon graduation, a year later, I wrote a somewhat caustic letter to the office in New York inquiring why I had not heard anything at all. My audacity ruffled Dr. Chryst Loukas, the executive director of the scholarship program that **General Eisenhower** embraced when he became president of Columbia University. Within weeks, I received new application forms, which I filled out, but again I was advised not to hope for too much, being that I was the Number 2 student in my graduating class.



As part of the application, I wrote a letter to the **King of Greece** explaining that I would study irrigation design to dam the Aliakmon River to help farmers increase their yields. For my knowledge of English, I had to go to be examined by **Rev. House**, the director of the Agricultural Farm School in Thessaloniki, 45 miles away. He asked me to read what I believe was a third grade book with lots of pictures in it. I knew no English, but my 5 years of French and the pictures in the book served me well for the translation. However, when he asked me to write, "*I am going to America to become an engineer*", I misspelled every word including the letter "T". Rev. House smiled sympathetically, gave me tea, and bid me farewell. I apologized for inconveniencing him and I left **hopeless and dejected**.

Discouraged, I quit the Boy Scout camp and went to Thessaloniki to take tuition lessons to try to pass the entrance exams at the Aristotelian University. I was sitting on the windowsill in the tuition hall in the hot month of August, when I heard someone calling me. I jumped out to face my father in his black regalia of a Greek Orthodox **priest**. He had come from Veroia with the fantastic news of a full boarding scholarship for one year at the prestigious **St. Paul Prep School** in Garden City, New York, to learn English before going to the university. However, there was a catch. I had to be in New York by mid September. This meant I had to get certificate of political correctness from the secretive homeland security police, deferment from the army, visa from the American consulate, raise money for the ticket, etc, etc, and all in less than a month in the summer of 1952, when bureaucracy reigned supreme in Greece. The stories are long and convoluted, so I will not go into them. Miraculously, in September 1952, **with no money** in my pocket, I arrived in America where I always **dreamed** of going [*as a child in the village, I have been told by many, I was going around saying that I was going to America, and that was during the German occupation in the early 1940s*]. I spent the first night in a dark room at Columbia U in New York, crying. It hit me that **I was alone in Paradise**. I missed my family.

The adjustment to St Paul's boarding school was agonizing, but that is another long story. I had to learn the language, but at the same time, I had to compete for good grades with students from wealthy families, who were destined to go to Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Princeton, and the other prestigious schools of the **Ivy League**. My math teacher turned out to be the hardest to please. At the end of the first semester, however, I got the highest grade on the math final. After that, I coasted to my graduation with honors. The math teacher wanted me to go to NY area universities, and I could, but I decided I wanted to get away

from the Big Apple with all its distractions. I took the bus to Orono, Maine, without ever looking in the map to see whether it was west, north, or south. **It was very north!**



Registering at the University of Maine in autumn of 1953 was a task worthy of the skills that Theseus had used to kill the Minotaur in the **labyrinthine palace** of Crete. Upon entering the Gymnasium Hall with hundreds of other students, I was shoved at a number of tables arranged in a randomized block design on the basketball arena floor with old ladies sitting behind them. **I ended up registering in electrical engineering, when I actually wanted civil engineering.** I discovered the mistake when I went to purchase the books. When I returned to the arena to change my courses, a lanky tall man approached to help me. He introduced himself as Winthrop Libby [foto, right], Associate Dean of Agriculture [who 20 years later became President of the university, succeeding my dear friend and mentor

*President Hauck in the center of the foto*]. It is a long story, but after explaining to him my career goal in irrigation, he took me under his wing and guided me into agricultural engineering, [I endowed an award in memory of mentors W. Libby and Rev. Pavlos Taiganides is awarded to the outstanding international student of the year.]

My first semester was the easiest one. I worked 25 to 35 hours a week washing dishes [the scholarship covered only tuition] besides taking a full load of courses with a dictionary always in my hand. Yet, I ended up with all **A's except for one B in English**. With that kind of academic record and with a handsome roommate who was dating one of the campus beauties, I too became a heavy recruit by several fraternities and clubs. We both joined **Sigma Chi fraternity**, and I ran successfully for vice president of my sophomore class. I became president of the international club, which included all the foreign students, all 7 of us, was elected **Winter Carnival King** beating a star football star, etc. In the meantime, my grades were slipping. In my junior year, I moved out of the fraternity house and devoted more time to studies managing to graduate with low honors, but combined with my extracurricular activities, I was recruited by many companies for engineering [joined Allis Chalmers for a while] and was given graduate assistantships by several universities for graduate work.

My first ever airplane ride was in 1956 in my junior year at Maine. I flew to New York to be one of the speakers at a fund-raising dinner at the famous Plaza Hotel by Central Park. The guests included a who's who of Greek shipping magnates, movie theater moguls, top restaurateurs, distinguished professors, famous personalities, the Greek Ambassador, and **General Van Fleet** [the man who helped Greece overcome the communist rebellion in the 1940s], who went of his way to tell me how much he enjoyed my speech. I froze when I saw the influential, powerful people in the audience and had to refer to my notes in the middle of my speech.

Afterwards, I asked Dr. Loukas why I was chosen instead of the number 1 student in my class. He startled me when he screamed, "**He was Jewish.**" I had never thought of Isaac Daniel in those terms; we were friends. Then he added in a more mellow voice, "Do not worry, there is plenty of Jewish money to help him". [Indeed, Daniel came to USA; he also became a professor.] "**But you are a Pontios**", he said and looked at me kindly. [I had never thought of myself in that term until decades later when prejudice against minorities became a social taboo, in the 1990s. Pontians were, in the 1950s, a maligned minority, like the Jews and all the other minorities before the Civil Rights of the 1960s in the USA. My parents came as indigent refugees from Pontos, northern Turkey, in 1922; most of those refugees from the shores of the Black Sea that were inhabited by Greeks since antiquity were settled in isolated mountain villages or in shanty towns; they became easy recruits for the communists]. Dr. Loukas explained that I was the only **Pontios** and the only one interested in working in agriculture among the hundreds nominated. He contacted a **Pontian association in New Jersey** that agreed to sponsor me. **And that is how miracles**

**happen.** People like Dr. Loukas and Rev. House, who devote their life to helping others, create miracles. [*Their souls must be in Heaven.*]

At the **January 1, 1957 Rose Bowl**, University of Iowa was playing against Southern Cal U. in warm, **sunny Pasadena, California**. I watched the football game on TV bundled up in the university dorms where I worked as a proctor in my senior year. The campus was empty, I was alone in the dorm, and it was cold and windy in **freezing Maine**. I saw spectators from Iowa and California watching the game in short sleeves, and yearned for the warm sunny weather of Greece. I had applied for graduate assistantship to universities in the states of California and Iowa. I surmised that those states were both located along the warm **Pacific Coast**. I accepted the scholarship from **Iowa State U** because they answered first.

In August 1957, I arrived in mid-afternoon after a long, long train ride from New York to Ames, Iowa. It was hot, sunny, and strange. I sensed I was finally in the **Wild West** I had dreamed of. I was the only one alighting from the train; no one boarded the train; **the station was deserted**; there was not a soul to be seen anywhere, and the stores were apart of each other some distance away. I saw a telephone and decided to call Sigma Chi Fraternity. Within minutes, several cars loaded with jovial brothers surrounded the station and I was the subject of inquiry, them never having had a foreigner as a brother. After several beers and chats ranging all over the place, I asked them how close was the **beach** from the campus. They could not figure what beach in the Iowa cornfields I was talking about, so they asked for the name of the beach; "*Pacific Ocean*" I said. They laughed at my ignorance and began to question my selection and qualifications for graduate research. They told me with glee that the **Pacific Ocean was 2000 miles away!** Not surprisingly, we all got drunk that night, laughing. I boarded in the fraternity house for 2 years, and a carload of us did drive to the Pacific Ocean over the Thanksgiving holiday.

My phone rang several times that afternoon in **September 1961**. Each time it was another secretary from the Registrar's office informing me that a pretty Greek girl was going through the **labyrinthine registration** process [*Ariadne to my rescue?*]. I arranged to meet Maro at the nearby coffee shop. We got engaged in October. We left for Greece in November with the **same sport coat I had left 9 years earlier** [*in both of the B&W fotos*]. We got married Christmas Day, December 25 [*my father and 9 other clergy officiating*] on the island of **Crete** where the temperature was in the **+70's**, and returned January 1 to Ames where the temperature was **-70 F** [*chill factor*] and would never rise above freezing for the next 3 months.

Two years later, I completed my PhD in bio-environmental engineering after getting a master's in water resources and irrigation engineering. Maro delivered our first son. I was given the thrilling title of assistant professor; and ISU arranged for me to stay on the faculty as a permanent resident. University professors in Greece had advised me through my father not to return at that time to Greece, as there were no posts in environmental engineering, not that there were any in the USA either, before the first ever **Earth Day**, 1 April 1969.

At a conference in Colorado in 1964, Professor Stewart of Ohio State University invited me for a cup of coffee because he was looking for an environmental engineer in his department. The campus interview was short. Dr. Roy Kottman who used to be Associate Dean at ISU and knew me was now Dean at OSU. The offer was almost double my salary and a promotion to associate professor. It was wonderful to be a faculty member in the biggest university campus in the USA, where many interesting things were going on at a time of revolutionary happenings. I blossomed.

Being one of few engineering specialists on the environment, I was constantly on demand as a speaker not only on the campus but also throughout the USA, Canada, Europe, and Asia, in over 30 countries. Companies like Foxley Cattle Co of Nebraska and much later FAN Separator GmbH of Germany made me their environmental ombudsman/consultant. Serving on national committees helped me get research grants, all of which made me an easy recruit by other universities. To keep me at OSU, Prof Stewart, before he departed for Texas in 1968 for a post of Distinguished Professor, got Dean Kottman to sign a letter approving my promotion to full Professor. **Becoming a full professor at a prestigious university was a dream-come-true, and it was my 34<sup>th</sup> birthday!** Like my hometown boy Alexander the Great I achieved my dream.

In 1975, after doing considerable consulting for the EPA of the USA and for agencies of the United Nations in Europe and publishing a book, I was recruited to manage UN projects in Singapore and Malaysia. I took one year's leave from the university, which I extended to 2, to 3, and finally resigned from OSU to stay in the technical services of the United Nations, and work in several countries around the world for more than a decade. Another dream of mine since the days of the civil war in Greece after WW II became reality. As a boy, when I would see vehicles with the UN symbol, I would run alongside them, smiling at the strange faces of the people inside, and **dream of going abroad**.

On April 21, 1967, upon returning from the office at Ohio State University, I noted the huge headline in the local newspaper that a Junta of 3 army colonels had taken over the government of Greece to restore "**law and order**". I felt ashamed that my country, the mother of democracy, became the mistress of dictators. Next day, I asked Dr. Stewart and our church priest Rev. A Sarris to serve as my witnesses and godfathers; I applied to become an American Citizen. In 1968, I voted for the first time in the chaotic American presidential elections, and my vote did not go Nixon, even though his running-mate was the Greek-American Spryro Agnew, because they were trumpeting the standard fascist theme of "**law and order**".



A month after joining OSU in Columbus, Ohio, Maro delivered our second son and a year later, when she delivered a daughter, I rushed to the campus to break the news to my mentor, Prof. Bob Stewart, but he was not in. I left a note on his desk saying: "*Happiness is ...two boys and a girl*". Ever since, those sediments became the headlining theme of an annual newsletter I started and continue to be our sentiments to this day. Our pride and joy are our 3 children and the **9 precious beautiful grandchildren they gave us** [foto], 6 of them born in the USA, 1 in Netherlands, 1 in Argentina, and 1 in Mexico, but all 9 of them were baptized in Greece with panegyric fanfare!

Indeed, my family has become citizens of the world living in Diaspora but maintaining our traditions as envisioned by my hometown mega hero Alexander the Great. We fulfilled **HIS dream**, HIS vision: **FUSION!**

Greek poet C P Cavafy of Alexandria Egypt said it so eloquently in his poem *ITHACA*, the island home of Odysseus: **it is the journey!**

**DREAM-MAKER AMERICA, THANKS FOR THE JOURNEY HOME!**

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