

“Service”: A Poem Honoring a Cypriot-American Hero of World War II

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My father, Ermogenis Moustoukas, at seventeen, jumped ship and came to the US. When he was forty-one, after working in a number of food joints, after serving in the United States Army during WWII, and after marrying off his three sisters, who had come to live in America, he returned to his native island of Cyprus to marry a good Greek girl, my mother. His dream was to raise and educate their two girls and to see them succeed in the land of opportunity. Sadly, he died too young, never reaping the benefits of his many sacrifices. This poem is a tribute to a proud American who served his family and his country with honor.

I
Fresh off the boat,
the busboy moves
with ease.
He feels at home,
wiping tables,
piling plates,
dirty dishes tall
as the dreams
stacked in his head,
hopes that his
sweat-earned tips
will be enough
to make it to
tomorrow.

II

At their favorite
 local joint,
 two GIs wait
 on swivel stools,
 sipping and spinning
 the American dream,
 while the grill man
 flips their ham and eggs.
 He smells it,
 can almost taste it,
 sizzling with
 the crispy fries.
 He's lived the stories
 that they're serving,
 proud to have paid
 the blood-stained price
 for his Bronze Star Medal
 and his meager slice
 of homemade apple pie.

III

On the corner of
 34th and Fifth,
 The Riverboat is packed.
 Sporting his toque,
 the head chef preps
 his mixed grill
 special of the day.
 He flavors lamb with
 old world spices,
 stuffs shrimp with
 feta cheese,
 happy to blend
 and send new flavors
 out to the crowded front.



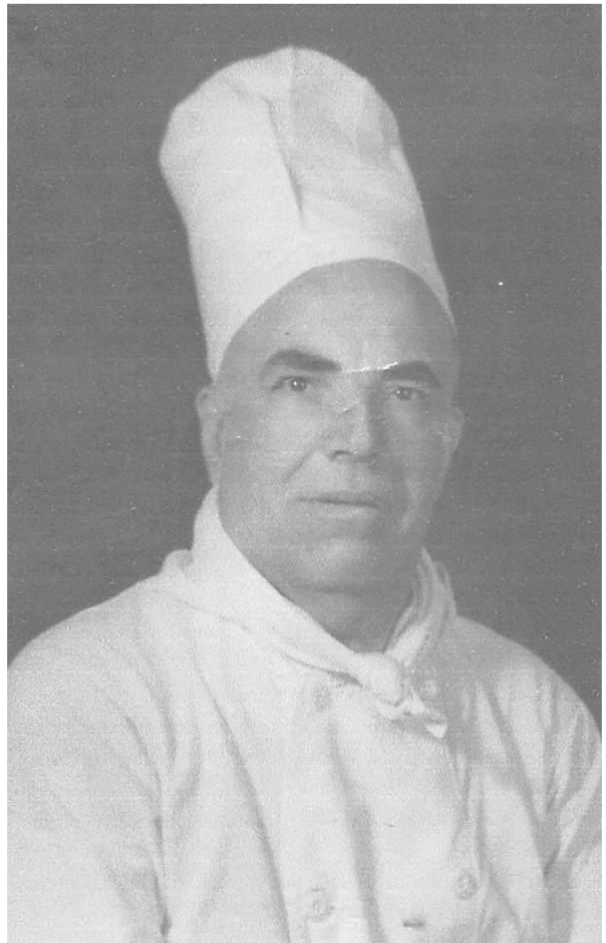
Ermogenis Moustoukas, Hawaii 1943

He wants to salute
 the fresh-pressed collars
 raising their new-bought
 plated cuffs,
 wants to oblige
 their call for service
 on fine china
 and white cloth.

He's happy here
 in full command,
 this galley his to rule,
 his aprons proof
 of his success,
 of reasons to stand tall,
 his service to
 his fellowman,
 this country,
 now his home,
 his rise from rags
 to freedom's gifts,
 his blessings
 to his kin.

IV

At home, he sits
 to rest his feet
 in the room
 designed for living,
 his apron off,
 Greek music on,
 he reads the daily news,
 finds comfort in
 his native tongue,
 reminds him of a time
 when he was young
 without a dime,
 ahead of him
 just time.



Ermogenis Moustoukas, 1950's

He won't look back
to what he's left,
sees only what he's gained.
He dares to dream
for his two girls
a future he won't see.

V

Now I stand in
an open field
of red and white and blue,
clutching the sacred triangle,
folded like spinach pie.
It is my father's gift to me,
it tastes of homespun pride,
his legacy of hope to those
who dare to enter still,
to those who put
their lives at risk
to those who
trust and pray,
to those who worry,
those who sing,
who cry, who fear
they'll never hear
the bells of freedom ring.



[***Editor's note:* For me this poem is very personal. For most of my youth, this Cypriot-American hero was simply my "Theo Eri." He and his family were our closest friends in America; his daughters Mary and Anna are like my sisters. Theo Eri told me that he had joined the Army because he wanted to be an American citizen and fight for freedom. Because he was a Greek with kitchen experience, he was automatically assigned to be a cook. However, during the battles of the Aleutian Islands, his unit soon found that he was needed more on the combat field than in the field kitchen. His bravery was recognized with the award of a Bronze Star by the 7th Infantry Division, a fact which he modestly never mentioned to me or to any other family member. He simply said that he fought the Japanese and was grateful to have survived. His official service records, though badly

damaged in a government building fire, indicate that Ermogenis Moustoukas served to defend his adopted country for almost three years and sustained injuries due to the hardships of war. Like many other Greek and Cypriot Americans, he answered America's call for the defense of freedom during the darkest days of WWII. These men and women are part of what history now calls "the greatest generation," and like many of us who grew up in 1950s, I feel honored and privileged to have known them. CGH]

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