

Greek Canadian history as community practice

Sakis Gekas, Ph. D.

On September 22, 2021, York University announced the partnership with the Hellenic Heritage Foundation, a national charitable non-profit organization in Toronto, to fundraise \$1.4m for supporting the Greek Canadian Archives. The gift will be used for the creation of position of archivist, director of the archives, graduate assistants and digitization of existing and to be acquired historical material, video or audio interviews and the cataloguing and storing in perpetuity of records on the history of Greeks in Canada. This is the latest example of how far Modern Greek Studies and specifically the study of Greek Canada have come, with significant partnerships with non-profit foundations, 'with a mission to preserve, promote and advance Hellenic education, culture and heritage in Canada';¹ The notion of preservation is far from universally accepted when it comes to heritage and culture, but it certainly applies to the mission of the Greek Canadian Archives; its mission is to preserve historical material donated by Greeks in Canada for future research, teaching and awareness more broadly about the Greek Canadian immigrant experience and the community histories of Greeks in Canada. Such partnerships between foundations and Canadian universities amount to a sort of *belle époque* for Modern Greek Studies in Canada, whose potential has been identified more than fifteen years ago in an article that reviewed the York University Hellenic Studies program experience in particular.²

York University and the Hellenic Heritage Foundation started their partnership journey over twenty years ago. The endowment of a Chair in Modern Greek History, a language and culture program of courses that leads to a BA, the endowment of several undergraduate scholarships and three graduate fellowships – one for international students with fluency in reading and writing Modern Greek - and now the funding of the Greek Canadian Archives project, demonstrate a commitment to the same goal of promoting the study of Modern Greek history and language and in the recent case of the

¹ Hellenic Heritage Foundation, www.hhf.ca

² Thomas W. Gallant, "The Status of Modern Greek and Hellenic Studies in Canada and the York Experience." *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 25:1 (2006), 141-151.

Greek Canadian Archives to support publicly accessible in-person and online accessibility of collections on the history and heritage of Greeks in Canada and Toronto in particular.

The recent gift will take its place within a broader landscape of academic and heritage history developments. Public history is promoted at York University as one of the fastest growing fields in terms of student interest; the Department of History offers a Certificate in Public History with an MA in Public History in the making. Similarly, research and teaching initiatives of migration and communities history have sprung up; the Italian Canadian Elia Chair and its activities, the Portuguese Canadian History Project, the Greek Canadian History Project³ – now renamed HHF Greek Canadian Archives - and the Coptic Canadian History Project. The constellation of such projects resulted from the drive of graduate students to explore their research themes, and in the process they discovered the absolute necessity to build an archive that will support their research.

Between 2016 and 2019 collaboration of research teams from four universities (three in Canada, McGill University, Simon Fraser University and York University, and one in Greece, the University of Patras), resulted in the virtual museum of Greek migration to Canada; a project that explored the history and language of Greek immigrants in Canada and shed light on their connection to the social and cultural history of the country. The research and resources generated and the knowledge mobilized contributes to the study of Greek transatlantic immigration and to the understanding of ethnic diversity in Canadian society.⁴ The virtual museum, an exercise in public history, featured imaginary 'rooms' organized thematically to touch on various aspects of the Greek immigrant experience in the period 1950s-1970s. Such projects, online archives and web portals, exhibitions of the Greek Canadian History Project at York, and the *Immigrec* online museum, are resources that will increasingly be available to researchers around the world. Digital spaces and especially the Immigrec virtual museum of Greek migration to Canada have achieved the goal of promoting the public history of Greeks in Canada online. The collaboration between York University, McGill and Simon Fraser bodes well for similar future projects, that will extend the study of immigration and settlement of Greeks in the twentieth century in various parts of the world, including Western Europe, South America, Africa, and Australia.

The creation of Greek Canadian Archives raises the issue of scale, not least because of the case of Canada and its geography. While it is tremendously ambitious to seek to cover the study of Greek migration and Greek communities in the whole of Canada and over a long period, there are research directions and themes that are inevitably pan-Canadian (such as migration policy, the history of the country in the two world wars, the

³ 'The recovery, acquisition, preservation, and accessibility of vital primary source material that documents the experience of Greeks in the Canadian mosaic'. <https://archives.library.yorku.ca/gchp/>

⁴ www.immigrec.com

organization of Greek communities at a federal level, etc.) that justify such an approach; other research themes are inherently local (labour, community, education, differences between small-town and large-cities Canada, to mention a few). In any case, knowledge mobilization by the Greek Canadian Archives is possible and indeed desirable to take place at a national level, and share online electronic resources such as video and audio interview files and digitized documents as part of nationwide collaborations. Technologies continue to evolve and give us new tools for sharing. The combination therefore of a pan-Canadian approach with local-based resources seems to be a fruitful one. Everywhere however, but especially in Canada, each major diaspora community has its own character and demands local attention, which includes but is not limited to physical materials such as books, photographs, articles, newspapers, and other artifacts that must be cared for, and some of which cannot be digitized. This raises also the issue of where to house historical material that surfaces and becomes available for researchers. The Greek Canadian History Project for example has always assumed that sources generated and offered for donation by Greeks in Winnipeg, Manitoba, for example, or in Kingston, Ontario should be ideally kept in a university or library archive there;⁵ it is only when such an accommodation is not possible that York University and the HHF Greek Canadian Archives would consider and welcome such a donation from a faraway community. Similarly, the collection of oral histories with interviews can be done locally and ideally with some preparation that would familiarize the researcher and the interviewee and create an environment of trust. Local efforts and facilities are therefore essential for recording life stories, including efforts to interview first-generation Greek immigrants and regionally important community members; when for example the research team from York 'touched' on Winnipeg for a only a few days to interview as many Greek Canadians as possible for the needs of the Immigrec project, the approach was one of necessity and not of preference, as the mandate of the project required conducting as many interviews as possible, without unfortunately having the opportunity to do in-depth interviews. In the new round of interviews with Greeks in the Toronto / Greater Toronto Area under the current project, on the other hand, in-depth interviews are the preferred and the feasible choice.

At the same time, public history programs such as archival and museum projects, historical walks, online and physical exhibits and of course teaching and research are necessarily local community-engagement programs. The Greek Canadian History Project and the now HHF Greek Canadian Archives forged connections between the community and its historic roots. Beyond the historical walks, new envisioned projects include the Greek Canadian Business Project that will produce an interactive digital map charting the movement of Greek businesses throughout the City of Toronto. Beginning in the early-

⁵ See for example the Kingston Greek History Project, <https://kingstongreekhistoryproject.com/the-story-of-our-community/>

1900s, the project will situate Greek-owned businesses, with descriptions and photos (where available) on a user-friendly map that will allow the user to navigate the history of Greeks in Toronto's business community. The Oral History Project will conduct and record interviews to display online in a YouTube-style format. This effort will contribute significantly to academic research, undergraduate teaching and high school projects both in Canada and abroad. Participants will reflect the diversity of Greeks across boundaries of gender, class, generation, education, and occupation demonstrating how each person has helped to shape the Greek immigrant experience and culture in Canada. Online public history exhibitions will uncover themes and events that have vanished from our collective memory. The recent coverage of the 1918 anti-Greek riots in Toronto is an example of how the intersection of Greek immigrant and Canadian space can capture the historical imagination of an academic and mainstream audience. Through online exhibitions, users will be able to "virtually" visit sites in Toronto. These unique virtual exhibits will also be a useful guide for those who choose to physically walk through Toronto's historic Greektown and follow along on their phones. An annual public event in which panels of speakers will discuss meanings of Greekness and identity in the contemporary period will give a platform to artists, academics, and other prominent Greek Canadians who have fresh conceptions on what it means to be Greek in today's Toronto. In this way the Greek Canadian Archives will serve as an observatory of Greek Canada, documenting in the present what will be potentially interesting to research in the future.

The emergence of resources, projects and the overall ambition to create a permanent repository for the history of Greeks in Canada at York University and Toronto, comes at a critical moment that has to do with the coming of age 'a new generation of qualified cultural producers, post-ethnic and ethnic' as they were recently called.⁶ Such is the generation of people at the helm of the Hellenic Heritage Foundation, the main partner of York University on a number of academic and public history initiatives for Greek Canadian history and culture. The historical walks on the Danforth, the Toronto Greektown, similarly points to the untapped potential for the promotion of the history of a community. The key to the success of such initiatives is building strong community partnerships that seek to create invaluable Public History resources. Such initiatives were the development of public history walks, one on the occasion of the centennial anniversary of the anti-Greek riots of 1918 with an exhibit at Toronto City Hall in 2018, following a first exhibit in May 2014. New materials developed for the Toronto School Board's Greek History Month, and the work to create popular Greektown walking tours received the Toronto Heritage 'Community Heritage' award in October 2019.⁷ In October 2021, a plaque on 170 Jarvis street, the building that housed the first St George Greek

⁶ Yiorgos Anagnostou, "Rethinking Greek American Scholarships: Hellenism beyond Ethnicity." *American Journal of Contemporary Hellenic Issues*, Vol 10, Spring 2019, https://www.ahifworld.org/uploads/1/1/7/1/117198244/7-hellenism_beyond_ethnicity.pdf

⁷ <https://www.heritagetoronto.org/>

Orthodox church, a Greek language school and the Greek Community office between 1909 and 1938 was unveiled in association with Heritage Toronto; the plaque commemorates the history of the community in the downtown area of Toronto that has changed beyond recognition, with few exceptions such as the building that has been preserved. The similarities between the current function of the building, housing Haven Toronto, a City of Toronto drop-in centre for the support of elder homeless men, and many Greek immigrants who in the early twentieth century sought cultural familiarity and social assistance in the church and community building, were rightly stressed at the event.⁸ The HHF and the York University public history initiatives have plugged into a very dynamic cultural heritage sector that includes various organizations, community groups and a Toronto museum with 'engaging programs and experiences that showcase the history, spaces, culture(s), architecture, and the people, that represent Toronto's unique place in the world'.⁹

The funding for the HHF Greek Canadian Archives at York University comes at a particular demographic moment in the history of Greeks in Canada with the second-and now third-generation of Greeks in Canada being among those at the helm of business, academic, industry, media and community involvement. The example of the HHF History committee, a driver in all the projects mentioned above, is telling; comprised of volunteers, Greek Canadians working in education, business, media and the cultural sector, the committee has generated a number of initiatives, public history events, such as the historical walks, and in 2021 a podcast episode series for the bicentennial anniversary of the Greek Revolution that transcended the interest in the history and education of Greeks in Canada. In 2021 the production of six such episodes, 'the Idea of Greece', a project that was in preparation for about six months, 'aired' online between January and March 2021 and has already reached about 6,000 downloads.¹⁰ Under the auspices of the 1821 Committee in Greece, the production represents one of the best examples of synergy between professional historians, informed members of the Greek Canadian public who have an avid interest in Greek history, and people whose technical expertise ensured the high quality of the finished product. One of the most interesting aspects in the production process was the discussions in preparation for each episode. The exercise required thinking about what are the expectations of the intended audience, assuming that this audience would probably have limited knowledge about the Greek revolution, and aspiring to go beyond the stereotypes that are prominent among Greek

⁸ <https://greekpress.ca/the-hellenic-heritage-foundation-and-heritage-toronto-honour-site-of-the-first-greek-community-centre/>

⁹ <http://www.myseumoftoronto.com/>

¹⁰ <https://hhf.ca/podcast-series-the-idea-of-greece/>

Canadians who have been through Greek school. A second podcast series on the 1922 centennial, its history and memory, is currently in preparation.

Greek Canadian history and studies as community practice represents a great example of how synergies between university resources and non-profit cultural foundations can have an impact in creating awareness for the history and study of recent Greek past in the diaspora; a history that is finely balanced between the historical course that Greece followed in the last two centuries, and the history of Greeks in Canada since the early twentieth century. The challenge, as always, is to write community histories or produce online resources that address an informed as well as a broader Greek audience, but to aim also at addressing communities at large, and therefore making Modern Greek and Greek Canadian history even more mainstream than it has been in the last few years.

American Journal of Contemporary Hellenic Issues | Copyright © 2022 American Hellenic Institute Foundation, Inc.

All rights reserved. All articles appearing in the *American Journal of Contemporary Hellenic Issues* are the copyright of the Journal. The online edition is free to individuals and institutions. Copies of the individual articles are strictly prohibited. Reproduction, storage or transmission of this work in any form or by any means beyond that permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law is unlawful without prior permission in writing of the publisher, or in accordance with the terms of licenses issued by the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) and other organizations authorized by the publisher to administer reprographic reproduction rights. Distribution of the published articles for research or educational purposes is possible, but requires the formal authorization of the Journal editor and the authors. Commercial use of the AHIF Policy Journal or the articles contained herein is expressly prohibited without the written consent of the Managing Editor at AHIFPolicyJournal@aheworld.org. AHIF 1220 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036.