

BITZES

George and Yiasemi

Three generations prior to the immigration to America of George John Bitzes, his grandfather, George John Bitzes, was born in the early 1820s in Karisto, Euboia, the large verdant island very closely situated to the North East coastline of Greece. Many Greeks left Euboia for the Turkish mainland about 1840, a decade following the destruction of the Turkish navy by non-Greek allied forces at Navarino which ended the war of independence. John George Bitzes was born in Alatsata, Turkey in 1861 and became a tobacco farmer and money lender. American immigrant George J. Bitzes, who was to become a St. John's communicant was also born in Alatsata. By 1914, Alatsata was a far western Turkish town near the Aegean Sea of approximately ten thousand inhabitants predominantly populated by Greeks who were served primarily by three Greek Orthodox Churches, St. Constantine, Holy Trinity and Eisodian.

George Dilboy was a Greek boy born in Alatsata who had immigrated to Somerville, Massachusetts in 1908 during an early Greek atrocity period at the hands of the Turks. He returned to Greece to fight in the First and the Second Balkan Wars in Thessaly and Macedonia during 1912 and 1913. After his return to Somerville, he volunteered and fought as an American soldier in the Mexican Border war in 1916 and re-joined the US Army after discharge to fight in France during World War I at Belleau Wood. He surprised Germans machine gunners and on his own attacked the Wood infested with machine gun nests. He killed two Germans and wiped out three guns before the Germans withdrew. He was killed at age 22 fighting in France and is the first Greek soldier to be awarded the American Congressional Medal of Honor. Black Jack Pershing, the American General listed him as one of the ten greatest heroes of World War I. The Dilboy and Bitzes families knew each other in Alatsata.

Because of the Greek political situation pitting the newly restored Greek King against political reformers on the Greek mainland coupled with the thirst for retaliation by the new Westernized Ataturk for the lands because of lands lost by the Sultan after World War I Ataturk ordered widespread Greek killing. Officers of the Greek Army garrisons stationed in Western Turkey were recalled to Greece. The Greek troops began to withdraw in disarray leading to the 1922 Turkish pogrom of wretched annihilation of Greeks and destruction of their properties. Tens of

thousands of Asia Minor Greeks were killed and displaced. Those with funds or connections found their way to the coast. Those without either asset perished. Along the Western Turkish coast, harbor piers filled with overflowing throngs of Greeks seeking help and passage out can be seen in pictures taken at the time, especially at Smyrna. Looking on from outside the harbors were English and French military ships, including an American vessel, which offered no help to the refugees on orders from civilian politicians. Churches were desecrated, burned and razed, the stones from which in Reisdere were using for paving streets.

Yiasemi Gillas was then living in a village near Alatsata, Reisdere, where one Greek Orthodox Church had been erected. Her father was a tobacco farmer while her mother, Filio, looked after the large family. Yiasemi lost thirty two of her male relatives, including her father, to the slaughtering Turks. Bitzes women were lost. Yiasemi's mother herded five of her children into one of the churches where they remained until they were smuggled out about ten days later. The harrowing tale of escape by small boats led to the nearby Greek Island of Chios where relatives lived. Later, Filio and the father of the Bitzes immigrant, George John Bitzes, arranged a marriage between Yiasemi Gillas and George John Bitzes which was consummated on Chios in 1926. George had earlier immigrated to America in 1917 but returned to Chios to marry. John George Bitzes and his wife had fled from Alatsata prior to the arrival of the barbaric Turks and also arrived in Chios where they remained and held commercial interests until their deaths during World War II. Other relatives re-settled in Athens and Crete. →

Yiasemi Gillas Bitzes's family remained on Chios until about 1930 from whence the Greek government settled them in Piraeus and Athens. The escape from Asia Minor was followed by further impostures from mainland Greeks who resented the refugees who would work for any wage, who were better skilled, more civilized and more industrious than the indigenous Greeks. Asia Minor Greeks were called "Turks" by Greeks and called "Greeks" previously by the Turks. However Greece was a country of less than two million and the influx from Asia Minor exceeded a million thus overtaxing the ability of Greece to handle them.

George John Bitzes at age 17 had been sent by his parents to a businessman uncle in Alexandria, Egypt in order to avoid conscription into the Turkish army as many Asia Minor Greeks were so taken before World War I when Turkey sided with the Germans to their great loss after World War I. He worked at Swift & Company for 43 years in South Omaha and

raised four children, John, Nick, Aphrodite and George all of whom were baptized at St. John's. Yiasemi was a highly skilled seamstress who constructed clothing for her family, including dress suits for her sons. Additionally she kept a rather large house and its inhabitants in more than presentable condition at all times. George became president of St. John's at a difficult juncture in the church history. Son, Nick G. Bitzes, and grandson, Philip Bitzes, also became presidents of St. John's in their turns. All of the Bitzes children remained Orthodox Christians during a period of time when many Omaha Greek first generation children of the 1920s and 1930s abandoned the church. The third and fourth generation Bitzeses in kind have been baptized in the Greek Orthodox faith.

Having visited both the Alatsata and Reisdere in 1972, 1979 and 2001 alternately with Greek cousins, his wife and a Turkish guide, Nick Bitzes located the family home in Alatsata. It was partially standing but in poor condition. Nick was taken to the former home of a priest who was murdered by the Turks because he preferred to be killed at his church rather than flee Reisdere. Giving some credit to the Turks now occupying the house, Nick relates that he felt some respect was shown by them in the display of the pectoral cross of the priest which was been exhibited on the mantel of the house. Even an elderly Greek speaking cab driver who had been employed by Greeks before the massacre admitted that the Turks had not maintained the fields and that, all in all, "things were better for the local Turks when the Greeks lived there".

Generally, George John Bitzes and the Asia Minor Greeks came to America with no thought of returning to their former homes as was the mindset of a majority of the early Greek immigrants from the Greek mainland. These refugees were a tribute to the resilience of the human spirit. None were heard to advocate revenge, retribution or reparations. Rather, they became Americans who truly started a new life in the profoundly free United States of America. They were referred to as "Turks" by other Omaha Greeks and the particular enunciation of the Greek word for "refugee" by the pre-1920 Greeks itself conveyed a vituperative flavor when spitted out. Nonetheless, through example they became church and Greek community leaders, contributors, workers and supporters. John and Nick Bitzes both served as American soldiers during World War II and the Korean war. George, now deceased, served during the Korean war. The family is a sterling representation of church-family-country values as Greeks and as Americans.