

## Worcester Epirotes Remember Tsamantas

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NEW YORK –In 1914, Constantinople intellectual Nikolaos Nitsos (1865-1940) decided to visit the newly-liberated village of his birth, Tsamantas, located below Mt. Mourgana in Epirus. It became a permanent stay when World War I – and then the Asia Minor Catastrophe and population exchange - prevented him from ever returning to Constantinople. Today, his observations are preserved in *Tsamantas: A Cultural History*, published in 1926. For decades, the book – covering the village’s history, geography, economy and folk culture (from songs to colloquial expressions) - existed only in Greek, offering a portrait of a place before the tumultuous wars and migrations of the 20th Century. Now, a decades-long dream of having the book translated into English is being realized by Worcester’s St. George’s Hellenic Benefit Society of Tsamanta(s) and New York-and Athens-based publisher Aristides Caratzas and his Melissa International. The publisher said the work, which is scheduled for a Spring 2012 release, is important, and praised Nitsos’ “scholarly and scientific approach,” careful observation and rare insider’s perspective. Dr. Dimitrios Konstadakopoulos, of the University of the West of England, who is completing a book on Tsamantas’ micro-economy from its late Ottoman days to the present, agreed, noting: “No one ever matched Nitsos for his zeal and thoroughness.” St. George’s is backing the definitive translation that may number over 350 pages.



In early years, immigrants from Tsamantas in Epirus were united by their St. George's Society. They held picnics, but also sent funds to their village. The Society was named after the village church. These kind of social gatherings were common and kept the heritage alive.

This is one of several academic-minded projects made possible by an unusual legacy provided to the Worcester, Mass. society by Stavros Bellos, a cook and society member - who was secretly a millionaire! When the 85-year-old (born in Tsamantas in 1913) passed away in 1999, everyone was surprised to learn that the bachelor who never owned a car, dressed simply and lived in a rented room had earned \$2 million in stock market gains.

Fifty percent of his legacy went to the village once known for its itinerant tinkers. The rest was divided evenly by the society and local St. Spyridon Greek Orthodox Cathedral. (Worcester’s Tsamantas immigrants began as fruit and vegetable peddlers and built their livelihood based on kinship connections, as Konstadakopoulos’ study reveals.) The will dictated that the benefactors draw interest for 20 years –at which point they could access the main sum.

Like so many villages in Greece, Tsamantas village – only a short walk from the Albanian border, Northeast of Igoumenitsa - today is nearly empty. Soterios Zoulas, St. George’s Co-Vice President, said there are about 60 people living there today, compared to 1,400 in the past. Many live off animal husbandry, in the village not far from author Nicholas Gage’s Lia (of Eleni fame.) Zoulas, who is a communications analyst/instructor, said St. George’s Society only has about 30 active dues-paying members. The group once numbered 350 but is committed to the village – and its past. Former St. George’s President, nonagenarian Arthur Athanasiou, said the society became a non-profit after the major gift; some funds went to scholarships, but even more, in 2008, were invested in a centennial celebration, with an academic conference entitled 100 Years in America that resulted in a book (available on Amazon.com. “No other Greek regional society has done anything like this before in the U.S.,” noted Athanasiou, pointing to the many distinguished guests. Speakers included Gage, Ellis Island Archivist George Tselos and scholar

Alexander Kitroeff. The book includes two papers by Konstadakopulos (who has also studied Vietnamese rural society,) UK scholar Lynn Morrison's look at the imperiled Folklore Museum of Tsamantas and other immigration-related pieces by international scholars. The society also backed an academic workshop in Tsamantas in 2005.

Athanasiou says the village today lacks nothing – except for people. For years, U.S. and Australian immigrants have sent money to the village and its church and two schools (one is now the museum.) Bellos' gift improved road and water infrastructure. The society isn't interested in dances and dinners, but history. He noted: "When you have a glendi (feast) at night, the next day it's forgotten." The question is what to do next, in nine years, when Bellos' full funds are available. Athanasiou said: "We are thinking of what we will do best, in collaboration with universities and others." Zoulas – who is related to Nitsos and Bellos- said of the village that only fills with people for the August 15 feast day: "In one sense there is a sadness with what's happened to it." At the same time, however, he underlined: "There is such a commitment to the village." He said he thinks Bellos would approve of the group's activities, including a focus on immigration, in a time when anti-immigration voices are being heard in the U.S. Zoulas noted: "Old immigrants can teach new immigrants and vice versa."

To find out more about the organization, visit [www.100yearsinamerica.org](http://www.100yearsinamerica.org). In September, Caratzas/Melissa International will release the major compilation The Genocide of the Ottoman Greeks. [Angelike.contis@ekirikas.com](mailto:Angelike.contis@ekirikas.com)

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