The Thanos Family Thrives in Gloucester
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In 2021, I went on a Fitz Henry Lane tour with a Cape Ann Museum docent down to Fitz Henry Lane’s studio on Harbor Loop in Gloucester and returned to the museum to look at its Lane exhibit. Rounding the corner, on the wall hung a photo of the 1906 inhabitants of Lane’s studio, at that time a boarding house full of Greeks. And there, between two bouzouki players, sat a confidently smiling young man with a mop of dark hair, his hands planted on the knees of an immaculate three-piece suit. I instantly knew it was my Papou (Greek for grandfather) Jimmy.

The photo commemorates Greek Easter 1914, or as the Greeks call it, “Pascha” and my Papou had every reason to appear secure in his place in America. Having arrived only three years before, he was well on his way to financial stability and some notoriety in his chosen hometown of Gloucester, Massachusetts.
Short and sturdy, James Thanos (abbreviated from the original name Athanassopoulos), was a hard-working peasant from the town of Agrinio in western Greece. At 19, he escaped cruel brothers who reportedly would throw him into a hole and leave him there. He sailed from the port of Kalamata, Greece, on the ship Themistocles and arrived at Ellis Island in 1911 with little money and the warm, woven goat hair blanket we still have.

Only two years after arriving, James began working for fellow Greek, Peter Grammas, at the Busy Bee Lunch and Tap Room in Gloucester until 1920. From 1922 to 1939, he partnered with Grammas at the Busy Bee located at 84-86 Main Street, where Jalapeno’s is now. From 1941 to 1951, James owned the Depot Café at 129 Washington Street and the Pier Top Café at 14 Parker Street and, in 1948, he owned the Pine Tree Tap Room at 14 Main Street.

The Busy Bee was something more than a restaurant — it was a fishermen’s bar. When I moved to Gloucester in 2012 I was treated like an instant townie whenever I mentioned the Busy Bee. There would always be stories! Many people told me they got drunk there for the first time or had been advised by their parents to avoid the place.
A friend told me that when she was little she and her sister innocently went into the Busy Bee looking for a snack. They plunked down a nickel each and were served a bowl of fruit. On returning home, they were sternly scolded never to enter the Busy Bee again, for any reason.

**Love by Post**

As was the custom in those days, family members in Greece sent my Papou Jimmy pictures of potential brides. In return, he sent back multiple takes of himself from a photo booth. In 1916, he chose Maria Psillias from the island of Chia, south of Athens. Reportedly, she and her mother worked at the royal palace in Athens as seamstresses because their work was so fine. I still have and use some of her linens. Sewing was something Yiayia (grandmother in Greek) Maria made sure was passed on to us, including the notorious ripping up of any seams deemed sloppily done.

I don’t know what they did to people in the “Old Country,” but my grandmother seemed emotionally damaged. My mother Anna Thanos said she was told her mother loved to sing and that her father, an abusive man, once made her stand in the corner for hours because of it. She never sang again. I can’t remember ever seeing her smile.

By 1935, my Papou Jimmy had built a home at 47 Centennial Avenue at the top of the hill boasting a sweeping view of the Atlantic. With its recognizable Mediterranean-inspired hip roof and pink stucco siding, he proudly carved “Thanos” in large letters into the back stucco wall overlooking the rose garden. The front door had a swastika in the stucco next to the front door, which many people do not know was a symbol of peace and good luck in ancient Greece long before World War II, when it became a symbol of fascism.
When my Papou’s house was on the market in 2014, the real estate agent was kind enough to take me through it, even though she knew I couldn’t afford it. Because I had not been in there since I was a toddler, I had forgotten my grandmother’s flair for color. The bathroom tiles arching over the huge bath and shower were a glorious purple, pink, and green, as was the rest of the large room.

I had the pleasure of knowing the late Fran Bruni of Rockport who knew Papou and supplied the materials from the Building Center to build the house. Fran also told me about a time when he accompanied Papou’s son William “Bill” Thanos to East Boston to pick up some olive oil because he said it was scarce. I asked Fran if it sloshed like oil or like rum, but he couldn’t recall. I asked that question because it was rumored my grandfather may have been a rumrunner.

I’d seen the Ben Affleck movie “Live by Night” about rumrunners out of Cuba by way of Florida during Prohibition from 1920 to 1933. I knew Papou had dealings in Clearwater, Florida, but Mom could never explain why. I do remember that whenever we passed The Mast on Essex Avenue (then a mansion, but now condos) Mom would say they stopped there because that’s where her father made “deliveries,” but didn’t elaborate on what they were.

I also met a Greek woman in Manchester-by-the-Sea who reminisced about the outdoor Sunday picnics and dances the Greek community had there. “Theia (aunt) Maria was always so nice,” she said to me, about my grandmother. I don’t know if this woman was using the term “Theia” as an affectionate term or if my Yiayia was related to her.

**Becoming an Entrepreneur**

Papou had other investments too. In 1931, at the height of the Depression, he and James Stavros opened the Cape Ann Golf Course in Essex. In the 1940s, Stavros bought my Papou out of the business, and the Stavros family now runs it.
I remember Jimmy Stavros as a big man with an easy laugh – a real “Zorba the Greek.” He was supposed to be my mother’s godfather, but Yiayia Maria considered him far too much of a Zorba and didn’t approve. If you’re not familiar, Zorba the Greek is the name of a 1964 about a wild Greek man.

In 2012, I visited the golf course and spoke with the late George Stavros, Jimmy Stavros’s nephew, and he said when my Papou came to visit with Yiayia, a Coke would be brought to her but she never left the car. She never inside because she was something of a snob.

Yiayia was quite a proud woman and would not stand for anyone looking down on her. Once, I was told, she was shopping for a pocketbook at Bonwit Teller & Company in Boston. The sales lady looked at her and said she doubted Yiayia could afford it. Yiayia bought the entire case.

Another family legend I cannot verify is that Papou won Cape Hedge, the beach north of Long Beach, in a poker game. He envisioned a mansion on the rocks there, but Yiayia didn’t approve.

Yiayia Maria Thanos in the background, me examining the picnic food, and my mother calling the rest of the children to a barbecue lunch on the beach — either Cape Hedge or Loblolly Cove in Rockport.
because she thought all the grandchildren would plummet to their deaths, even though we scampered over those rocks like little monkeys. And so she made him give it back.

After Papou died in 1951, Yiayia moved to an apartment in a building they owned at 745 Western Avenue in Magnolia. Like so many big buildings in Gloucester, it now consists of condos. When I think of that place, I can smell the lemon chicken soup (avgolemono) she used to make. Yiayia died in 1957, and both she and Papou are buried in Oak Grove Cemetery, near the foot of Centennial Avenue.

I remember Papou well, even though I was close to 3 years old when he died in 1951. He was that memorable a man. In my mind’s eye, I see his smiling face as he tossed me up and down in the air. I even corrected my mother once when she said he was in my parents’ room when he lay dying. But I told her I said it was the bedroom down the hall, and the coverlet was a shiny green material, and she agreed.

Papou said something to me before the ambulance came and took him away. I cannot remember exactly what he said, and I still wonder what it was.

Acknowledgments
My thanks to Lois Hamilton, a volunteer with the City of Gloucester Archives, for her help researching my family.