



## NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

### George Hazinas, Greek Patriot Morningside

I read all of Alan Furst's novels about the Resistance movement in Europe during World War II, almost without pausing. The courageous people about whom he writes are my heroes and heroines. But I never expected to meet someone in Morningside who could have stepped from the pages of Furst's most recent book, *Spies of the Balkans*. Then I met George Hazinas, a Greek patriot who grows basil, sage, oregano, and okra in his Morningside front yard, and grapes in back. The homes in this quiet neighborhood are high on a bluff above the Allegheny River, away from through traffic, but snug up against one another. These are not the sun-bleached bungalows of the Greek islands; rather, they are the brick and frame houses of every style, typical of a Pittsburgh neighborhood, stacked on a hillside. The strong sense of community felt just right when George Hazinas settled here decades ago.

Hazinas was born in 1923 on Kassos, an island that had been occupied by Italy since 1912. "But we went to Greek schools, we spoke Greek, and we learned to love our country," he said, tipping a ball cap that spelled out KASSOS in gold letters. Because of his experience, he has an aversion to the occupiers of homelands. "I say to everyone, British, Americans, Germans, anyone occupying another country, 'How would you like to have someone come in and

tell you what to do, what color to paint your house, what language to pray in?'"

Hazinas became the head of his family quickly, after his mother died young, leaving five children, and his father lost his sight. "We were poor; we had to beg for food," he said. His feeling of responsibility for his four sisters determined the choices he made throughout his life.

When he was 16 years old, cleaning and cooking in the kitchen of the Italian customs office, the Resistance recruited him. "A Greek naval officer approached me, and asked me, in secret, to take him to the customs office. I said 'How will you get in? I don't have a key.' 'Don't worry,' he said, 'just go there with me.' Since the customs officers spent all their evenings with their girlfriends, I knew we wouldn't be disturbed, so we went there, and he got the door opened somehow. He had a small camera and he photographed the pages of the code book used to send messages about ship arrivals." The officer, a member of the Resistance, made Hazinas promise to tell no one.

When the war began, Hazinas was rounded up with 20 young men from Kassos and imprisoned by the Italian army on the nearby island of Rhodes. But imprisonment lasted only eight days: Italy surrendered to the Allies on September 8, 1943. The Germans anticipated the likely capitulation at Rhodes and fought fiercely to take over the island, a valuable staging ground. They succeeded in establishing a German occupation, rushing in

from mainland Greece and making short work of the British garrisons. As Hazinas tells us, though, some British remained as members of the Resistance.

That first experience with war had a lifelong impact on Hazinas. He saw a battle between the departing Italians and the arriving Germans, where the Italians were mistakenly firing on each other. "I saw an Italian soldier dying, with his insides spilling out, calling for his mother to help him. I will never forget that sight."

When Hazinas was freed from prison, he became a cook for the village's Italian mayor, and lived in quarters on the mayor's property. "He saved my life, giving me that job. People were starving on Rhodes. When the Red Cross delivered boatloads of salt, sugar, and flour, people sat down in the street, mixed those things together in their hands, and ate them."

Then the Resistance approached him again. "A photographer in the village, whom I knew only by sight, called me in one day and asked me to take a document, at night, along with another young man, and deliver it to a British man who would be waiting for us at the top of a nearby mountain. We went that evening, and the moon was very bright. It was like daylight, and the Germans were patrolling the streets. When they came by, we slipped down over the bank into the river. At that moment, a cloud passed over the moon, and the Germans didn't see us. We reached the top of the mountain, and gave the British man the document. He sent a message to England, with



George Hazinas in the Greek  
Merchant Marine.



# UP FRONT

George Hazinas (right) and one of the Sylvestros brothers in their White Kitchen restaurant in East Liberty.

a small generator, for which we created the power by pedaling a bicycle wheel. We came back before dawn, and when the German ships came into the harbor, American and British planes dropped bombs on them.” That was the message he had carried.

Hazinas did other things for the Resistance, such as cut telephone wires, but his responsibility for keeping his job and sending what he could to his sisters on Kassos was always on his mind.

While living on the mayor’s property in Rhodes, Hazinas shared space with a German soldier named Fritz. “One evening when other soldiers were searching for someone, they broke into the house of a young mother with three children. We were both disturbed by that, and Fritz pulled out a loaf of bread, and we went to her house, where she was cowered in a corner, crying. We gave her the bread, and fixed her door.” Fritz sent him a note after the war, and told him he would never forget him.

When the Germans went to round up the Jews who lived on Rhodes, Hazinas hid his Jewish friend, Fortunata, in his room. “I offered to marry her, because if she was married to a Gentile, she would not have to go, but she refused and said she didn’t want to get me into trouble, too. She chose to surrender to the Germans.” The Gestapo rounded up almost 2,000 Jewish inhabitants of the island and sent them to concentration camps.

When the war was over, Hazinas became a policeman with the British Military Administrative Authority, first on Rhodes, then on Kassos. “I met that British man again, whom I had taken the message to on the

mountain, and he said, ‘I put in a good word for you, George!’ I only saw him those two times in my life.”

After a few years, Hazinas joined the Merchant Marine as a cook and captain’s apprentice. He was offered the chance to study to be a ship’s captain. “I was sending \$100 a month to my sisters, and I couldn’t do that if I went to school, so I declined.” He sailed the world for two years, until his aunt persuaded

him to come to Pittsburgh. By this time, his sisters were settled in Australia, and George came here to work as a shoemaker.

He put his cooking skills to work at the White Kitchen at Broad and Highland avenues in East Liberty, which he bought and operated from 1958 to 1980 with brothers Lefty and George Sylvestros. The three men came from Kassos, but they offered their customers American cuisine.



Owners Mr. Sylvestros and Mr. Hazinas are quick to praise their new Gas Air Conditioning. "We used to have 972 sq. feet of unbearable wall-to-wall heat in summer. Now we can prepare meals in complete comfort without annoyance and our customers can eat in relaxed comfort . . . Gas Air Conditioning is great and we highly recommend it."

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George Hazinas and his wife, Celia.

“Turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, the whole thing for \$1.99,” Hazinas recalls with a smile. At one time, they had 17 employees.

Today, Hazinas volunteers in the kitchen at St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church in Oakland, but sometimes he returns to Greece. When he couldn’t raise his arms a few years ago, and doctors couldn’t help, he went back: “I swam in the ocean, with seaweed with iodine clinging to my shoulders and arms. Then I covered them with the warm sand. Now look at this,” he said, as he raised his arms over his head. It was a triumphant gesture.

*During our conversations, George Hazinas often showed me a book of photographs of Kassos. The images of white houses, bleached by the sun and set against a sparkling blue ocean, made one long to be there, including George. Recently he was watching Greek television—it is always on that station in his home—and a show was about his island. Suddenly, he saw his sister on the screen, telling the story of George’s work in the Underground, for the world to hear. The image of his sister, telling his story, halfway across the world, was the tipping point. His family had been pleading with him to return home, and now he will close that circle and go home to Kassos.* 

**Bette McDevitt** is a regular contributor to *Western Pennsylvania History*.