AMBASSADOR
MICHAEL SOTIRHOS

One year was more than enough to make Michael and Estelle the most popular envoys to have ever reached the shores of Hellenic soil.

By IRIS LILLYS

A year and a half has gone by since the day Ambassador Sotirhos arrived in Athens as the representative of the United States to Greece.

Usually that short time does not suffice any diplomat to get properly acquainted with a foreign country, to seize its people and to assert his position. But not so with Michael and his wife, Estelle. One year was more than enough to make this couple the most popular envoys to have ever reached the shores of Hellenic soil.

Furthermore, the bitter-sweet feeling which in the past years existed in Greece towards the United States seems to have relinquished. Be it the most agreeable personality of the couple, their uncanny talent for public relations and certainly the far cry from their unsympathetic predecessor, the Sotirhoses are adored in Athens...

At their last post in Jamaica, Ambassador and Mrs. Sotirhos granted me an interview (Nea Yorki, May 1988). In Athens, things are different... “I have not given any interview in Greece, says the Ambassador (and for obvious reasons as Greek colleagues are known for their lavish imagination...) and, naturally you understand I cannot make exceptions, even for old friends... Besides you have known me for many years, write anything you consider proper. I trust you...”

Yes I have known the Sotirhoses for a great long time. Yet I did not think it would be proper to come out with a short story tabloid style. So I came up with an idea: what about a private polling (this word being widely popularized by CBS' Ernie Anastos...). Let's see what the Greeks think of the American ambassador...

I tossed my idea at Michael Sotirhos. He smiled. I took it for a green light and got to work immediately...

My first streak of luck came on an...
The Ambassador and Mrs Sotirhos during one of their frequent visits at the Archaeological sites of Greece.

The plane, charted by Megas Evergetis Panagiotis Angelopoulos, was to carry officials, clergy, dignitaries, friends and the press to the ordination of Bishop Meliton Carras as Metropolitan of Philadelphia. The newly promoted dignitary has been, for many years arch-secretary of the Patriarchate. He is considered the most brilliant, learned and capable clergyman of the Phanar. Thus, he has been elevated to Metropolitan at the unusually young age of 40. The ceremony of the ordination has been a rare occasion, a revival of Byzantine pomp with 12 bishops officiating during the four-hour unforgettable ritual...

So, on that airplane, at 7 in the morning, among Mr. Angelopoulos’ guests, I got my chance to gather opinions on Ambassador Sotirhos. My first approach was Viron Polydoras, rather His Excellency Polydoras, Minister of the Presidency and spokesman for the Government. (Actually his name is Byron but he chooses to spell it his own fancy way...). Now, the spokesman of the Government couldn’t have an opinion that would differ from the Government, could he?

It was with great pleasure that I heard that... “Sotirhos is the best thing that America did for Greece in a very long time... For many years we have been hurt in our political expectations (Cyprus again and the Aegean Sea...). Although Ambassador Sotirhos is not a career diplomat he is the very best. His judgment is sound and so is his approach to every situation. Besides, he has an uncanny way to deal with people... Both he and his wife are exceptional. We are very happy to have them in Greece. At this point Mr. and Mrs. Angelopoulos who overheard Polydoras’ eulogy just added “Einai thavmassioi...”

With the press on board the airplane it was less pleasant. “I am sure he is good, says the very aggressive reporter of the daily “Kathemerini” but how should I know? He refused to give me an interview...” I tried to explain that in principle, Ambassador Sotirhos, (and neither his wife for that matter...) do grant interviews, but she would not accept it. “He should, she said. We want to know what he thinks...” I did not mind telling her that this is exactly what the Ambassador does not want and that is why he is successful... The reporter
accord, came out with one word — “Exceptional!... It was high time that America made a good gesture towards Greece...”

From the legal world, Michalis Papaconstantinou, one of Athens top lawyers, remarked: “I have not met the ambassador personally but I am told by friends who know him that, although he is not a career diplomat, he fits the position to perfection.” Businessman Christos Pakis, a frequent visitor to New York, had also something to tell. “I have not met Ambassador Sotirhos but I understand that besides everything else he has an excellent sense of humor... And he came out with the perennial Sotirhos joke about being an islander as he was born in... Manhattan!!!

Last but by far not least, Johnny Bilimatis, head of Mobil Oil for Greece and the Middle East, came out with a long speech about Michael Sotirhos. “I have known him since the time I was Consul General of Greece in New York. Even at that time I was aware of the abilities of the man, his acute intelligence, his business acumen and his way of presenting his point of view. These qualities have increased through the years and with his training in his ambassadorial position in Jamaica he came to Greece all prepared to tackle the difficult job. Difficult because in later years Greeks have been hurt by what they claim the United States friendship towards Turkey and the Cyprus matter which to the Greeks is unforgivable. So, the appointment of Michael Sotirhos was a God-send. Yet, at the news of a Greek-American as Ambassador, public opinion became divided vehemently. Half the people did not like the idea. It took Michael and, of course, Estelle, to change this thinking and convince, with their gracious approach that the fact of being Greek-American and not a career diplomat has worked for the best. Definitely, this couple is admirable and I'll go as far as to take a guess: I would not be surprised if they turn out to become the best envoys that America has ever sent over...”

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