"Okay, we got Koufax to pitch, Hank Greenburg on first, Andy Cohen on second...." My husband and his friends were going through their own mid-life ritual — composing an all-Jewish baseball team. I had heard this all before but this time, as one man called out, "Al Rosen on third....," and another said, "... Goody Rosen in the outfield...", I thought of my son, Greek on his maternal grandfather's side, and for his sake I tried to do for the Greeks what his father so blithely did for the Jews. Unfortunately, the Acropolis All Stars are not exactly the Boys of Summer; the only Greek player I could come up with was Harry Agannis on first base and I only knew his name because his niece, wearing an ice blue Grecian gown, had beaten me out for Junior Prom Queen in 1961.

Still, it didn't seem right that on his father's side my son has the security of the full-blown Jewish identity and ethnic background, to say nothing of all the good jokes, while on my side, in spite of Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles, there was what seemed to me the great wasteland of 2,500 years. So I called my father, the repository of every Greek-American name in the Northeast and asked if he could put together a Greek baseball team.

He came up with Harry "the Golden Greek" Agannis right away, gave me Milt Pappas to pitch, Gus Triandos and Gus Niarhos to catch, Alex Gramis for shortstop, Kampouris in the infield and his voice drifted off.

"Daddy, don't leave me now." I begged, as the names of Jake Pitter, Phil Weintraub, Sid Gordon and Moe Berg rang in my head. "Think of your grandson, do it for him. His father's got first basemen coming out of his ears." I paused for dramatic effect. "A boy needs his team."

"How about Pete Petropoulos?" he said.

"I don't now. Did he play?"

"He didn't play, exactly, but he did hand out Chesterfield cigarettes at the Veterans Hospital for the New York Giants," he offered brightly, as if that made up for second base.

"That doesn't count."

"Well, there was Billy Loes who played with the Brooklyn Dodgers." His voice grew weak again. "I'll check around but it doesn't look good."

It doesn't look good. This from a man who can name three Greeks who can put grout between your bathroom tiles, two who parachuted onto the beaches at Normandy, Grace Metalious' husband and those are just the ones from New Hampshire. The cradle of civilization, the source of democracy and what have we got? My yaya, Greek for grandma, who never believed that the great sixties rock and roll hit, Sittin' in My Lala, Waitin' for My Yaya had been written with her in mind, Uncle Panyiotes who looks a little like Al Jolson, and no one in the out field.

There is, of course, a providential side to being Greek that I learned when I was twenty years old and spent a year studying in Athens, and which I will get to, but first I would like to share some linguistic short cuts that might prove valuable to those of you planning to visit Greece in the future.

The Greek word for 'How are you' is postse but one can substitute 'post toasties' for the same effect. I also found that instead of saying 'efharisto' when I wanted to thank someone, 'Harriet Beecher Stowe' did just fine. The Greek translation of my own name is Ioanna, which sounds like 'you wanna' to which, of course, the words 'filthy post card' were added. It was a sure-fire ice breaker at parties.

The Greek people themselves turned out to be very kind, kind to non-Greeks and particularly concerned and friendly towards me when they learned I was half Greek. They processed various visas quickly, threw in the extra baklava...
in restaurants, asked me to read poems at the graves of modern Greeks who had fallen in battle and generally treated me as one of the family who has spent some time in the New World. When I returned to America, I assumed that this concern for my well-being would continue, and for the most part it did. From cab drivers to hot dog vendors to orthopedic surgeons, they all made a fuss and I enjoyed every minute. There was one instance of this fabled Greek-American philanthropy run amuck.

When I held my first post-college job, I was making very little money. What I did earn I was loathe to spend on anything such as food, that could not be worn on my back or applied to my face, so I was thrilled to find a Greek coffee shop in my neighborhood. The men who owned it — Greeks never work for anyone else if they can help it — were kind enough to sell me two slices of bread at a time. Why waste money on a loaf of bread when it could be better used to buy clothes was my motto, so I was overjoyed to have to part with only 25 cents for the bread and the price of a can of tuna fish for my dinner. One afternoon, when I stopped in to buy my daily bread, I must have looked particularly wan and indigent for when I got home and unwrapped my parcel, I found that the owners has slathered the slices with butter and slapped them together, presumably to provide me with a healthier diet. It also must have been easier to split the atom than to part those two pieces of bread. When I found myself weeping into a bowl of tuna fish, I figured it as time to buy the loaf and stop depending upon the kindness of Greek-Americans.

Much more recently, I attempted to open a charge account at Demetrious’s Dry Cleaner, reputed to be the finest tailor and cleaner around. I hopped in one day, although perhaps hopped is too strong a word, at my age, expecting to be welcomed as a treasured customer; you can imagine my horror when I was put on the waiting list. This was much worse than the buttered bread. This was I, Aphrodite’s handmaiden, waillisted at a Greek dry cleaner. I considered many options. I thought of grabbing his hand and doing the handkerchief dance around the automated clothes rack or sidling up to him and asking if he’d like to toss back an ouzo or two but both choices made me sound fast and Greeks take a dim view of fast women. Well, my brother doesn’t but that’s another story. Anyway, I decided on my next move. Softly, and, I thought, rather tunefully, I began to hum the Greek national anthem. With this song, I hoped to send a subliminal message that would conjure up blue and white images of pristine beaches and limpid Aegean waters so that when Demetrious looked at me, he would see Athena, sprung full-blown from the head of Zeus and Milt Pappas and then he’d clean my clothes. I hummed, I ironed and said, “Leave your name.”

“I will,” I said eagerly, with what I hoped was a Hellenic gleam in my eye. “It’s Joan Jakobson but you may call me by my real name, Ioanna Caraganis.”

He shrugged as he put a little steam on a trouser crease. “I’ll call if anything opens up.”

That was two years ago and it struck me last week, as I was dialing his number to see if anyone had died or otherwise moved off the list and improved my chances, that it was then that I lost my innocence.

But there was another moment that was as lovely and explained the Greek character as well as anything. I described it to my son as I tried to explain why, over the long haul, baseball teams don’t say it all.

It was the fall of 1964 and I was a college junior, sitting by myself on a beach on the Greek island of Hydra. Late one evening, I had wandered away from the local taverna where I was having dinner with some friends. I found a rock to perch on and I was quietly sitting there, staring out to sea, when a Greek man walked up to me. He gazed out at the boats gently bobbing about in the small harbor, then turned and said, in heavily accented English, “I, too, am so sorry about President Kennedy. It was a terrible thing for you Americans, his death, and it was terrible for Greece. We loved him, too.” He patted my hand. “I know how you feel. We will be sad forever.”

He stayed with me for another few minutes, standing there silently, and then he walked off into the darkness and I never saw him again.

So that, my son, that sweetness, that compassion, that’s your heritage from your Greek grandfather. It should get you through nine full innings with enough left for overtime.

And Harriet Beecher Stowe for your attention.

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