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Lions Do Lie Down With Lambs: The Dimitris Perrotis College of Agricultural Studies

By Brenda Marder
Special to The National Herald

NEW YORK - The twentieth century in the Balkans died in the way it was born, tormented by ethnic strife centered in disintegrating Yugoslavia. When Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia on February 17, countries threatened with separatists in Western (Spain) and Eastern (Russia) Europe, and others, grew apprehensive. When and where would the lions lie down with the lambs?

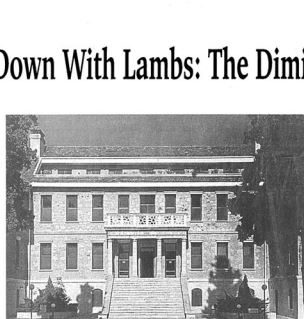
For Greece the foreboding emanating from the disintegration came in 1991, when a republic seceded from Yugoslavia calling itself The Republic of Macedonia. "Hold on," objected Greece. "Alexander the Great? Macedonia is Greek.!" Whoever would found a university in 1996 in Greece and invite applications not only from European Union member countries, but also from implacable Balkans states. The explanation lies largely in the ethos of the American Farm School in Thessaloniki, Greece.

The parent institution for Dimitris Perrotis College of Agricultural Studies, The American Farm School, a boarding facility, was founded by American missionaries when the region was suffering under the Ottoman sway. After 104 years, the Farm School has provided Greece with educated agriculturalists who have advanced to leadership positions in almost every segment of Greek society. Esteemed in Greece, the Farm School became secularized in its early years and functions under the Greek Ministry of Education and Religion. Tuition free, the philanthropic school has been funded by generous donors in the United States and Greece ever since.

In the world of the 1990s, the Farm School's plan to draw students from European Union member states made sense since Greece, a member, was benefiting from the organization. But it was another thing to recruit from implacable Balkan countries. Would lions lie down with lambs in classrooms? In dormitories? In the gym? On the campus green?

The then- President of the American Farm School, Botsonian George Draper, articulated his motives: "Greece's membership in the European Union as well as general globalization of standards and regulations will continue to exert a strong influence on the Greek agricultural and food industry. The influence is characterized not only by the imposition of standards, regulations, rulings on production, and incentives, but almost equally by policies that encourage…cooperation among Balkan countries."

A miracle occurred: students from Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Serbia, and FYROM (as Greeks call the Republic of Macedonia)--all 81 of them (the enrollment in 2008)--study together, eat together, sleep in the same dormitories, participate in extra curricular



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activities, joke in their only common language—English. From afar, come students from Kyrgyzstan, Romania, Turkey and this year from the United States.

The Dimitris Perrotis College of Agricultural Studies was founded in 1996 through a endowment from Mrs.Aliki Perrotis, to honor her late husband, by offering education for careers in the food and agricultural industries. The challenge lay in tailoring the College to the needs of a disparate student body. In the process, Perrotis College was accepted as a partner institution of the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC), a charter branch of the University of Wales. Degrees conferred through Perrotis College are recognized anywhere that UK university degrees are accredited. As a result, the College awards a three-year BSc(Hons) degree. Perrotis offers two majors, one in International Agribusiness and one in Agro-Environment Systems Management. Each of these majors has three concentrations): Agrotourism, Urban Landscape & Xeriscape Technology, Precision Agriculture, International Agribusiness Management, Marketing Management for the Food Industry, and Livestock Management. Graduates are working throughout the Balkans in tourism, food processing and industry, and many have earned advanced degrees in the United States, hoping to return to their own countries, where they will have much to contribute.

This curriculum appears to be tailor-made considering the multicultural student body. But how does it accommodate the language problem? English, which serves not only as the language of instruction, but as the common tongue binding the polyglot students into a coherent social and peaceable community, is rarely spoken by any student as a mother tongue.

Given that the proficiency of new students--not only in English, but also in other areas --varies wildly, according to the students' country of origin, the College conducts placement exams. Candidates may be granted admission in one of two categories: first, Full Admission to begin Level One of the BSc (Hons) program for those who meet the appropriate level in mathematics, biology, information and computer technology, and English. Alternatively, Conditional Admission is granted to candidates who meet all criteria for admission, except English or any other subject for which the placement exam is given. This group takes one or more Foundation Program courses before entering the regular program. Two full-time and two part-time English teachers serve on the faculty.

In this turbulent Balkan society, creating a "peaceable kingdom" demands careful crafting. That process begins during recruiting, when the Perrotis staff culls from the applicants students whose backgrounds suggest a spirit of tolerance and desire to form a community with people from other cultures. When the students arrive on campus, the College offers an orientation to acquaint newcomers with the nitty-gritty of academic life and practical aspects of getting along in Greece, and to forge a sense of community. The orientation includes a trip, guided by faculty, to the surrounding area (Thessaloniki abuts the breathtaking Aegean) and to Mt. Olympus, where students relax in each other's company and delight in the beauty of Northern Greece. The orientation, according to faculty leader Professor Tryfon Adamidis, plays a key role in cementing bonds within the group.

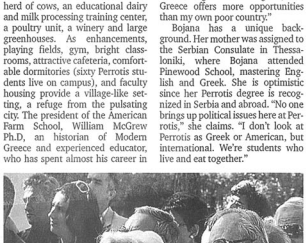
An intern, Georgea Polizos, lives in the dormitory with the students. An American of Greek heritage, she graduated from the University of Georgia. She had completed an internship at the nearby Pinewood School in Thessaloniki, which offers a K through 12 American curriculum and approach to education. Since Pinewood draws an international student body, she became accustomed to working with multicultural groups. Living in close contact with the students, Georgea sometimes detects among certain individuals a hint of tension, but claims, "that's all it is –a hint. I'm really interested in the new Student Council. Just think. The president is from Albania, where student councils are unheard of."

Consider, too, at Perrotis financial assistance is based not only on need, but also on behavior. Educational costs of all students are supported through a provision by beneficetess Mrs. Perrotis. Many students qualify for additional support through scholarships given by Mrs. Perrotis and other donors in Greece and the United States. Approximately 15% of the students receive scholarships covering full tuition, room and board, and understand the value of conforming to a high standard of ethical conduct.

No experiment in international living could endure unless the faculty was approachable, and attuned to the student body. Among the faculty members at Perrotis, Professor Tryfon Adamidis, received his BS from the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, and his Ph.D in genetics, from Michigan State University, and postdoctoral work at the University of Minnesota. Departing from the formal code of social intercourse typical of Europeans (and in most cases American) academia, he encourages students to call him by his first name. He always keeps his office door open. After seven years teaching at Perrotis, he has taught a variety of courses, but the most meaningful for offering a model for rational, international behavior is his course on the European Union: how the organization functions, its governance, its problems, its solutions. "I find it exciting teaching students from different countries. There are barriers at first, when some of the newcomers form cliques. With time, barriers fall."

His colleague, Gerasimos Moschonas, received his BS and MS from the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, and is an expert in Agricultural Economics, a principal field of study for Perrotis students. He is deeply engaged in student life, advising the campus International Agricultural Club and organizing such extra curricula events as a Celtic program, when Irish visitors visited campus to perform Irish dances, while Perrotis students learned Irish history, geography, songs, and a few words of Celtic. Altogether there are six regular faculty members and five adjunct faculty members at the College.

What beckons students to Perrotis? In a series of interviews with fifteen students, it became clear that Thessaloniki, home to three Greek universities, is a drawing card. The city enlivened by a waterfront, is lined with student-crowded cafes. Thessaloniki, an historical landmark, a cultural, business, and entertainment center, stands as a showcase in a peaceful, prosperous, and progressive part of the Balkans. Add to this attraction, the American Farm School campus (a few miles from the city center) offers a rich library, state of the art laboratories, computer resources, set amidst a campus farm of 170 acres, and agricultural infrastructure to include a herd of cows, an educational dairy and milk processing training center, a poultry unit, a winery and large greenhouses. As enhancements, playing fields, gym, bright classrooms, attractive cafeteria, comfortable dormitories (sixty Perrotis students live on campus), and faculty housing provide a village-like setting, a refuge from the pulsating city. The president of the American Farm School, William McGrew Ph.D, an historian of Modern Greece and experienced educator, who has spent almost his career in



Mrs. Aliki Perrotis (left), benefactress of the Dimitris Perrotis College (named in honor of her late husband) with President of the American Farm School and Dimitris Perrotis College, Dr. William McGrew.

Greece, along with some members of the faculty and staff, live on campus, reinforcing the spirit of community. The opportunity to master English, the linqua franca of globalization, is a magnet. And to learn the Greek language figures prominently in some students' plans, since flourishing Greek banks and businesses, potential employers, are located throughout the Balkans.

The American Farm School, founded by Americans, and deriving financial support from the United States, retains an American ethos, another factor beckoning Balkan students. Faculty introduce attitudes and activities that are features of student life on American campuses. At Perrotis, enrichment programs such as the Greek Language Club, Student Council, and a club of volunteers who raise money for the needy, are activities prominent in State-side institutions, just as the concept of a work/study program is a factor in American universities.

Students coming from countries outside of Greece are used to a high rate of unemployment and limited opportunities. Krasimir, who hails from a town in Bulgaria, describes Thessaloniki as "cleaner, less expensive than cities in my own country. The city and Perrotis College are cosmopolitan." He estimates that "a Perrotis degree is more prestigious than a degree from Bulgaria, and Greece offers more opportunities than my own poor country."

Bojana has a unique background. Her mother was assigned to the Serbian Consulate in Thessaloniki, where Bojana attended Pinewood School, mastering English and Greek. She is optimistic since her Perrotis degree is recognized in Serbia and abroad. "No one brings up political issues here at Perrotis," she claims. "I don't look at Perrotis as Greek or American, but international. We're students who live and eat together."

Pantelis, a Greek student, is an American Farm School graduate. He still relishes a stint in upstate New York last summer, where he worked on a farm, through a Perrotis internship program. He concluded, "American farms are much more organized." He hopes to go to the United States for a Masters Degree. "I enjoy living in a world of globalization—it's good to have foreign students here at Perrotis."

"It is, indeed, a virtue to have foreign students on the American Farm School /Perrotis Campus. As they work, and study and play together, what a rare example they set in these fractious times," adds Dean of the College Don Schofield.