

Agnew Is Still a Hero In Ancestral Village

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GARGALIANOI, Greece—Former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew is still a hero in this village of his ancestors in the Peloponnesus.

Its 6,000 residents may have endured more collective pain than any other Greek community watching the son of Theofrastos Anagnostopoulos fall from the heights of power and prestige.

The suddenness of his demise at first baffled and hurt the village. But then most of its residents seem to have taken a collective decision not to believe sparse newspaper reports last autumn alleging that Agnew had fattened his purse illegally and had resigned from his high office to gain immunity from criminal prosecution.

It's impossible, villagers say. We know that Agnew is "straight." We knew his father, his grandfather, whose grave is in the tree-lined village cemetery, his great aunt Akriyan Anagnostopoulos, who founded the covenant of St. Spyridon. The people of Gargalianoi are honest, they say.

Only a few younger residents hold the view that "a crook is a crook," even if his ancestors lived in the village. But they whisper this while drinking orezo, the potent local brandy, and look over their shoulders to make sure they are not overheard.

"You must understand," one says, "that this village had idolized Agnew. Many Gargalianois have emigrated to America and Australia, but none had a son who became Vice President of the United States, who also could have been President of the most powerful country in the world. Now we simply cannot admit that he was wrong. That would shatter our fantasies and hopes."

Such opinions are rare. The majority of villagers, with a singular stubbornness, ascribe Agnew's fall to inexplicable and mysterious forces of American politics.

At the village tavern, filled with the pungent smell of roasted lamb and loud bouzouki music from a jukebox, a group of villagers reacted to Agnew's plight.

"We love Agnew. He is not a crook; he's as straight as they come," says Apostolos Soukas, owner of a shop selling bathroom fixtures and plumbing equipment.

Dionisius Thevropoulos, 34, who emigrated to Australia 10 years ago, agrees. He is in Gargalianoi on vacation and is looking for a Greek woman to marry. A 38-year-old olive picker disagrees but is silenced by stern glances from fellow villagers.

Driving the narrow, twisting streets of Gargalianoi, one enters a world of square houses and shops marked by simplicity and gentle austerity. The village is not wealthy, and its young were forced to emigrate to faraway places just as Agnew's father did in 1897 when he set out for America.

At the corner of Ermou and Socrates streets is the old Agnew home, a two-story stone and stucco structure with red-tiled roof. Agnew's family has been living there for 164 years. Now a marble plaque, a gift from Agnew, hangs at the arched entrance. It reads: "To my origins here and in honor of my Greek inheritance."

Cousin Andreas Anagnostopoulos and his family still live in the house. A few steps away is Andreas' paint shop.

Andreas, an elderly gentleman with a black moustache and receding white hair, displays a picture of Agnew in the shop. He has been besieged by visitors and questioned about his cousin's fate. Greek newspapers have given very little attention to the Agnew affair so villagers sought information from a relative.

"People came in here and asked is it true," Andreas said. "I told them it was not true. Things are not clear. Nobody here believes what the newspapers say, all that about taxes."

"That thing preyed on our minds. But since it's not true, we don't believe it."

No visitors are at the Hotel Ionian View at this time of the year, but the restaurant still is fairly busy. Its owner, Athanasios Sigalos, leads a visitor to room 5, opens it with a flourish and says, "I have put you in the Spiro Agnew room."

Agnew and his family were at the hotel during their brief visit to Gargalianoi Oct. 19, 1971, but did not stay overnight. The Greek government gave a banquet in honor of Agnew in the hotel dining room, from which there is a breathtaking view of the blue Ionian Sea.

The village is perched on a plateau. Between that and the sea are a vast expanse of olive trees, their leaves bluish green and the earth beneath them bright red with a tint of brown. Down in the olive groves is the Agnew farm, Sigalos said.

Sigalos has dozens of Agnew pictures and offers as a gift to guests a small contact print showing Agnew and his wife in the village square.

Yes, Sigalos says the people of Gargalianoi are following Watergate developments with great interest. But after all Gargalianoi is far from Athens—about 200 miles of tortuous road—and information is sketchy here.

That evening, in a long discussion at the Ionian View restaurant, seven villagers speak in measured tones, raising questions that have been asked hundreds of times the past few months and giving the same answer. Yet they seem to have more questions.

"Agnew is not a crook," says Simas Kataras, a well-to-do farmer. "I knew his grandfather. Agnew is a gentleman and an honest man."

"It was Nixon who pushed him out," says Sigalos, the hotel owner. "Agnew was clean, he was not involved in Watergate. So what does Nixon do? He secretly plots against Agnew to divert public attention from his own troubles. It was pure politics, nothing else. Don't tell me they discovered it only last summer after Agnew was twice elected vice president."

"I don't read books, and I don't have much education," says an olive picker, "but I feel Agnew was the fall guy. He took the rap."

"The Washington Post was against Agnew, and that helped Nixon," says Kostas Krisikos, an elderly farmer who has two brothers living in Fresno, Calif. "I had letters from my brothers. They are there and they know."

How else can they explain things, they ask. How is it that Agnew was fined only \$10,000 if he committed high crimes? How are they to judge what seems to be a discrepancy between alleged crimes and light punishment?

"Tell us," they ask somewhat sheepishly, "can Agnew run again in 1976? Is it not possible? Why? Didn't they say the same thing about Nixon 10 years ago?"

The villagers hunger for news but display scornful aversion toward newspapers. The impression grows that they yearn for vindication of Agnew since that also would be vindication of their ideas.

Everyone seems reluctant to talk about a scholarship Agnew had promised to establish for two Gargalianoi youths to spend a year studying in the United States. So far, there is no money for the scholarship fund.