

“THE “SOURLANGAS” HIDE TANNING FACTORY AND ITS ENVIRONMENT”

By P. Paraskevaidis

INTRODUCTION

My interest in the history and destiny of this big Industry in my island Lesvos started many years ago, because although it was so big, nothing or almost nothing has been written about it.

My first contact with the factories, after their closure in 1990, was in 1995, on a visit of TICCIH being as a member of it.

Then I got permission to visit the plant from the lawyer, who is in charge of the interests and the legal affairs of the bankrupt Industry.

I wandered about the buildings, specially the room of its archives.

The third time I visited the Factories accompanying my colleague in TICCIH Mrs. Olga Caligianni and we took photos of the installations and the idle machinery.

This year I had an interview with the last director of the Industry, Mister Stratis Sourlangas. He gave me very useful information about the Industry.

More useful was the study of the dossiers and the files with the records of the General Assemblies of the Industry Administrative Council. The documents are kept in the Commercial Chamber of Mytilene, the capital of Lesvos.

Reading the annual accounts about the ups and downs of the Industry the difficulties, the problems etc. I saw the subject from inside.

This paper draws on the initial lines in the theme.

I hope a further investigation, research and more interest for the past and especially its future will be shown in the future.

Perama is a littoral village in the Gulf of Gera. In the resent past, in the second mid of 19th century and early past of 20th century it was an exporting center for oil, soap and other products of Lesvos Island.

The village had many industrial buildings, olive presses and soap factories, as well as offices, agencies, shops etc.

After the de - industrialization, which took place all over Lesvos Perama was abandoned by workers, employees and a larger number of inhabitants. The marks of this alteration in the village and the surrounding area are obvious.

Industrial buildings, factories, houses, warehouses etc. are empty and many of them half ruined - ruined or near destruction.

Some chimneys of olive – presses have started falling in, windows of ancillary buildings are bricked up or gaping giving forth an air of dereliction.

Among or near them are the houses of the village. Small, humble, simple, without yards suitable for the roofing of the families workers and the permanent inhabitants.

We have to say that several of the old industrial buildings are restored already and reused as taverns, shops, warehouses etc., showing the possibilities of the place.

On the other side of “Sourlangas” Industry near the sea the old inhabitants of the inland villages of Gera had built their cottages. The cottages during the 20th century became villas with gardens etc., as we can see them today.

Behind the factories there is a marsh belonging to them.

Therefore the environmental problem is located in the village of Perama and the “Sourlangas” Industry itself.

THE HISTORY

By the close of 19th century the family Sourlangas continuing its commercial enterprises in oil, soap etc. established in Perama, building these the first hide tanning factory.

The story of this family started in 1833 with Efstratios Sourlangas, who traded in Gera.

During the 19th century the family enterprise got bigger and by the ending of the century, as we said above, the Sourlangas tannery began working. Founder and director was Demetrios Sourlangas till 1971. He died two years later, in 1973.

At first the tannery had 5-6 workers and its production was in a small – scale. In the course of the 20th century the Industry expanded occupying 300 and more workers. The buildings were multiplied, composing a plant of 30 stone – built industrial buildings spreading in an area of 30 acres. The production became large – scaled and was transported to the nearby port of Perama by the small cargo railway of the Industry.

Ships owned by the Industry transporter the leathers to Greek, European and other markets.

The “Sourlangas” Industry became the largest one in Greece and the Balkans, in the middle of 20th century.

The factories manufactured at least 200 kinds of leather in various colors, thickness etc., suitable for shoe or boot soles, heels, outer coverings, as well as for gloves, garments, caps etc.

In 1922 a new factory had been added producing tanning extract from acorns and pine barks with which the hides were being tanned. A large quantity of this production was exported too.

That factory absorbed not only all the big acorn production of Lesvos, but it bought also large quantities from other parts of Greece and abroad.

Annually 8.000 tons of tanning extract was produced and consumed or exported. In the times of full function the daily production was 25 tons of leather.

The export was great and as strange and improbable it was (or it is even now?) to “take coals in Newcastle”, as the proverb says*, the “Sourlangas” Industry exported and sold in Soviet Union furs and headdresses.

It is useful to have a comparison among the work conditions in the tanneries in the past and in the present. I mean the “Sourlangas” present.

In the past the conditions were bad and pitiable as we read in a narration: **

* Neil Cossons “Perfectives on Industrial Archaeology” (London 2000, p. 116)

** C. Calatgis “The Tannery” (Athens 1992, p. 35)

“The workers worked starving, stinking, sweating, barefooted in the waters and filth. They suffered from pneumonia, bronchitis and tuberculosis. Many of them died. When they grew old became beggars...”

On the contrary, the “Sourlangas” workers worked in a much better environment. The buildings are high with many windows bringing inside the factory light and air.

The floors are cement or stone paved. Buses brought the workers to the factory from their homes in the nearby villages of Gera.

They worked in two shifts 8-11 a. m. and 1-5 p. m. In case of need for more production one more shift was added, the night shift.

They were paid a good salary and got pension when they retired. The overtime was paid extra. All the workers were insured in I. K. A. (the National Insurance Service).

In the history of the Industry during a century only three deadly accidents had happened.

Very often all the staff of the Industry received bonus for its work, gifts and receptions were organized for them, offers very much estimated in the poor decades of 1950 and 1960.

The following praise was written in the newspaper of Mytilene “Denocratis” (5-8-1957):

“The Industry makes profits, becomes bigger by the work of its laborers, without exhausting or paying them shabbily. The revenues are not bands of their skin. They prosper...”

THE ADMINISTRATION

As we have already said almost the whole of “Sourlangas” Enterprise was a family affair and maintained this character until its end.

The Administrative Council consisted of:

The General Director, the General President, the Vice President, the Secretary and five Councilors, all members of the Sourlangas family except one or two councilors employed in the last years of the Company’s life.

The General Assembly of shareholders consisted of 12 or 15 members, all having the surname Sourlangas and met once a year during the summer.

Throughout the 20th century until his death, as we have said, General Director was Dim Sourlangas, the founder of the Industry.

He was also an active social person who in 1939 became Mayor of Mytilene, but resigned when Nazis occupied Greece in 1941.

The last Director Stratis Dim Sourlangas was in “the greatest day of the War” in Normandy as officer of the U. S. A. navy.

Now, after the closing down of the Industry, as we’ll say afterwards, he lives in Mytilene idle remembering the old days of activity and efficiency.

In the days of full function of the plant there were offices in Mytilene, Athens and Salonica. Employees, chemists and mechanics were sent in Europe to get information about the leather market and learn more about chemistry and engineering.

All these were wheels within wheels, but the director was the steering wheel, the one who had to decide, to order, to supervise, who had the responsibilities for the progress of the Industry. He inspected the employees, the workers, everything in the

factories, he had also good public relations and in general he was always under pressure.

But in spite of the efforts and all the measures taken the decline of the Industry could not be avoided.

TO THE END

The Industry had passed already throughout great events and crises as the liberation of Lesvos (1912), the World War I (1914), and the national division (Venizelos – King, 1916), the Greco – Turkish War (1919 – 1922) in Asia Minor etc.

In these times in spite of hard times the Industry remained, expanded and got confirmed.

During the German occupation of Greece (1941 – 44) the factories closed down. After the liberation they started working again and flourished. In 1957 a new building was added manufacturing moccasin leather.

In the statement of the general assembly in August 12, 1959 the director Dim Surlangas said about the new factory:

“It is of the most perfect in whole Europe. We spent 17 million drachmas. The production got increased, the cost decreased and value of our shares went up. We thank our staff and workers. Because of them we have these good results.”

But the difficult days were ahead. The first crisis arose in 1960, when chemical substances substituted the acorn and pine bark extract in the tanning of hides.

The “Surlangas” Industry imported tons of chemicals from Germany, Italy and other countries closing up the newly built but useless factory of acorn extract.

New machinery and tools were bought and used for the new technology.

The rapid progress in chemistry had a profound effect on other industries too and caused changes in the machinery.

Another danger arose from the steady increase in mechanization in shoe manufacture, which started to diminish the demand of leather in the markets.

But the greatest danger for the Industry was plastic which initially step by step and then impetuously replaced leather. Cheaper, easier and more flexible it conquered the shoe industry and market.

“A lot of plastic was introduced during the 1950s, while the 1960s can be characterized as the decade of wider use. By the late 1960s it had become obvious that plastic had become a natural part of the consumer society”, as Liv Ranskjaer says.*

A new but expected obstacle appeared in 1970s the ecologists, a new kind of “Luddites”, demanded the pollution caused by the refuse of the Industry, in the waters of Gera Gulf should be stopped.

The Industry responded to all these by introducing contemporary machinery, storing the abounds of leather, installing biological cleaning system, reducing the number of workers.

* In his article “Developing consumption and the plastic consumer goods in Norway” in the book “Industrial Revolution to Consumer Revolution” (Leeds, 2001)

But in vain. The shrinkage of sales, the lower prices offered by the rivals, the loan interests, and the loan its elf demanding payment led the Industry to close down.

In 1990 the “Sourlangas” Industry went bankrupt and under Bank jurisdiction. The machines stopped, the factories closed and the gate was padlocked.

THE REMAINING PROBLEM

After that the workers lost their job, the machines stopped and covered lie useless, but preserved and ready for use, the installations are still there wearing out as the packs and heaps of old leather are piled up in the warehouses. There is bad luck for the archives. The windows of the building are broken, the roof started falling in and dossiers, documents, paper are thrown on the floor.

The buildings of “Sourlangas” plant get older year after year, but because of their strong structure they resist time expecting restoration, regeneration and reuse.

The derelict buildings of Perama and the closed “Sourlangas” plant are a challenging problem seeking solution.

Our Industrial Heritage continues to be largely neglected by the public, by professionals and by academics as well as businessmen and politicians. Appointed exception is Mr. Nicos Sifounacis Greek member of European Union Parliament. Sifounacis saved from decay several industrial buildings and old mansions in Lesvos, restored others and made useful multicenters at least four olive – presses in four villages of our island, when he was Prefect. About it there will be a paper of Mrs. Courvaniou in this Congress.

The closure of “Sourlangas” Industry has been something like a trauma for the village Perama and the whole island and a reopening of it will revive the region and the local economy.

I mean reopening for a new use, of course.

Closing my paper I must say that such a big Industry of Lesvos and of Greece, as “Sourlangas” has not had its history told, and this is the first approach to it.

It is also the first time the “Sourlangas” problem becomes known to a wider audience and especially in a Congress like this one of TICCIH.

I hope something better than farther silence will come out of this speech.

P. Paraskevoidis

6-6-2006