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Interview of George Dumas (Greece)

George Dumas

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HARDING COLLEGE LIVING HISTORY OF MISSIONS

George Dumas who is working in Athens, Greece, and is presently visiting with us today was interviewed by Evertt Huffard, on July 28, 1970.

Huffard: Brother Dumas, we would like to know a little bit about the work in Athens and we would like to begin by asking you to give us more or less a brief historical outline of the work beginning from when you first went over there to the present date.

Dumas: Evertt, the work in Greece was begun by Renational Repon, a German from Switzerland who went down there with a chemical company and actually first began to speak to a few military men who got together on the Lord's Day. I arrived in 1963, about a year after Brother Repon began that work there and started as the first full time missionary supported from America.

We met, as I mentioned, with a few servicemen on the American Air Force base there in Athens and the work began to grow immediately, especially among the Americans. We were placed from one building to the next on the base, and, of course, they required us to turn in our contribution and a number of other things made it difficult for us to continue there. Well, we decided the thing to do was get off the base so that we could have a better opportunity of getting with the Greek people. We rented a building just off the base, about a mile, and the work began to flourish among the Americans and naturally Greeks were able to come more freely since they had had difficulties in getting in at the gate. The base was very jealous, I should say, of our program since we grew so fast and actually in their efforts to harrass it actually brought more people our way among the Americans and God led us to a number of Greek people and they obeyed the gospel.

Since that time the work has continued to grow. This will make, of course, the seventh year that we've been on the field. We enjoy the country of Greece very much. The work has been blessed. We have about four or five Greek preachers who are preaching the gospel full time and a fine congregation of about 70 members, faithful members, with another 100 people who have been baptized and are scattered on islands throughout the different villages of Greece, a small congregation meeting in Thessalonica and only a few, I would say, who have actually become unfaithful to the Lord, plus a number of American people who have been baptized. All in all, the Greek work seems to be on a real sound basis as far as carrying on the work. Since I brought one of our best preachers, I think that is indicative of the fact that we have enough great men in Greece to carry on the work that we could afford to bring this one out.

Huffard: In reference to the Greek people, could you give us a little bit of their religious background and their cultural and economic status?

Dumas: Yes. I am partial since I am half Greek. I didn't know anything about Greece or the Greek language or anything since I was born and raised in America. What I did know about the Greeks wasn't very favorable. That didn't prove to be the case. I tried my best to adapt to the people over there and many say that I am more Greek than anybody over there now. Anyway, the Greek people are so very friendly. There is no

problem in meeting Greek people. So a conversation, a religious conversation, is very easy to get started. The religious background of the Greek people is the Eastern Orthodox or as they would say the Greek Orthodox religion or church. This is very similar to the Roman Catholic Church but it is more conservative. They accepted only the first seven councils whereas the Roman Catholic Church went on and continued to be modernistic and added numerous things.

In regard to the cultural background of the Greek people, we all know that the history of the Greek people is one that is very high. They have contributed largely to the many different facets even of our civilization--law, language and so much archeology is being conducted in that part of the world. Alexander the Great actually took his civilization and spread it all over the then known world along about 325 B. C. Greece has given quite a bit to the peoples of the world.

Their economic situation, I should say, is pretty sound right now. They deal with drachmas which is a Biblical term. They seem to be on a sound basis now. The economy is coming right on up and moving steadily. The city of Athens is beautiful. However, the people in the villages are not near so blessed with modern type things as they are in Athens.

Huffard: What would the average income be?

Dumas: Well, I'm not really sure about that. I would say in the neighborhood of \$100 a month is the average income but the people in the villages don't hardly get anything. They still work on the barter system, many of them, in trading some sheep for some cotton and potatoes or whatever it may be.

Huffard: What is their attitude toward the Bible?

Dumas: Well, the Greek people respect the Bible. They think it is a holy book. The only time they ever see it is when they are in a worship service and after the priest reads from one of the gospels, they pass by and kiss the Bible. As far as reading it themselves, they are very ignorant of what the scriptures teach and they feel that since it is such a holy book that they shouldn't handle it. We are doing our best to overcome this. They accept it as the word of God but naturally most of the religious leaders argue that the traditions are just as valid. It's another leg as they put it of God in reaching man. We feel there is not too much difficulty in refuting this from the Bible itself. They are very receptive, especially the younger generation of college people. They are easily reached with the gospel we feel.

Huffard: You mentioned that you are part Greek but probably when you went over there, you and your family had some changes that had to go about in your life. What sort of serious changes did you have to make?

Dumas: Well, it was very difficult I can assure you. We have five children and when my wife first went into a shop everything was strange looking to her. She couldn't read anything. She was trying to feed five children and a husband and she came out with toothpaste and toilet paper. That just doesn't go very far in the average diet. I had to go in and moo like a cow and do some other girations to get a few things we needed. Under circumstances like that you learn pretty quick. The language has been difficult, but praise God, I think, we've arrived.

Our children are progressing rapidly now in the Greek schools. They take English as a foreign language and they don't hear any English except during that class from morning till night six days a week. We are proud of them for that progress.

The cultural shock certainly was a real thing to adjust to but now we get along better with Greeks than we do Americans, to be honest with you. We've become quite Greek-ized.

Huffard: In behalf of the church work, what type of methods are you using now as compared to the one you began with? Have there been any changes in your program?

Dumas: We've added things as we went along that we felt would reach the people. In my estimation the only way to be successful is to get out and meet the people. I stayed around the coffeehouses. Paul said in Acts 17 that the Greeks gave themselves to nothing but to telling and to hearing new things. Well, that's still true of the Greek people and many of the people in the Mediterrean part of the world. I lived among the people as much as I could to learn the language, to talk to them and to gain their confidence and love which is something that most Americans do not do. They usually keep aloof from the populace when they go into a place such as military personnel. This, I think, has been an asset to my gaining the language and my gaining the confidence and love and respect of many Greek people who have obeyed the gospel. Since they are so friendly and an American who really proves to be friendly as well and tries to learn their language gives them an incentive to love him more and to be led to Christ. Personal work, talking to people in their homes, sitting down and opening the Bible, just getting in a religious discussion will lead eventually some of the people that you are visiting with to the Lord. They didn't come to hear us preach. Only a few people would come out of curiosity to hear us preach.

We continued to use this method and now we have so much more contacts through our Bible correspondence course which is really a fruitful method of reaching the Greek people since they have never had any way of gaining information about the Bible except in their religious classes in school which, of course, is tainted with the priest and the Orthodox views only. We have over 3000 now in a period of less than two years with an average of 250 monthly writing in to receive our correspondence course at home.

Huffard: Have you used any methods in your church work that you have found that were possibly not quite as effective as others that were more or less unusable as far as the Greek people were concerned?

Dumas: I haven't had a chance to really think about that much. We've had several gospel meetings which have proved fruitful. Brother Mike Sinapiades from Camden, Arkansas, came over. He is a former Greek. He came over and conducted two meetings.

We've had other different ways of reaching the Greek people by having a Bible study in the building as well as Bible studies in the communities, using our filmstrips which we have in the Greek language and now have them in completely Greek.

I don't know of something that has not been effective. Everything combined together goes into making it effective. People are not just going to come out to preaching in the sense "Well, I'm here." We can't believe that people are going to come out to

hear you like they do maybe in India and some other places in the world. You've got to get to the people and present them with Christ. The Greeks are very ambitious and if you don't talk fast you are just not going to be able to get your message over to them.

Huffard: You just mentioned about writing in Greek and using Greek and your children being in Greek schools. What was the way that you finally went about learning the Greek language?

Dumas: Actually it was being among the people so much and trying, making thousands of mistakes but nevertheless trying. I did attend the University of Maryland branch that is over on the American air base in Athens and I did learn some there. Likewise, I attended the University of Athens and their language school for a while. I really feel that the way I was able to learn was by living with the people.

Huffard: We were talking about learning the language over here. What are some other ways you might like to suggest in preparing to go to Greece?

Dumas: I would suggest to someone who wanted to go to Greece and become a missionary that they should find a congregation that would help them. Then, go and live in Chicago for one year in the Greek community. There are about 500,000 Greeks there. They could go and worship in the Orthodox Church. They could talk with the priest. They should spend their time with no one except a Greek who is living now in America. They should eat only Greek foods. They should learn all they can about the Greek people, their ways, their habits. Study the language. Have maybe even the priest come into their homes. Let a Greek come and teach them the language. Just saturate themselves with the Greek people and the ways of Greece and the language. At the end of one year they would be prepared to go to Greece. Plus the fact they would be prepared to decide whether they really wanted to go, whether they really loved those Greek people and thirdly, and I think this is a real important factor, they could lead Greeks who are now in America to the Lord. They may in turn be able to take these people back to Greece with them and this is really, I think, a key to mission work. If a man and his wife or family wanted to go to Greece could not have any success in Chicago, that would be I think pretty much indicative of the fact that maybe they shouldn't go to Greece where it is going to be a hundred times more difficult-- out of the environs of America and all of the assets that we have here to help us.

I would like for elders and preachers to think in terms of getting a congregation to send them to a place where we have these different peoples living in our country, eating Greek food or indeed this white goat's cheese and these olives, and olive oil and all of these things that you learn to live with in Greece and really enjoy, and we miss so very much already even though we have been here less than a month. This is my suggestion for someone who wants to do mission work.

Huffard: What is your opinion or attitude toward special groups going to Greece like on a campaign or a concentrated effort in an exodus or something of this nature?

Dumas: I think that these will not be real effective until we have more freedom in the country itself because of the language barrier. The language barrier seems to be that which makes it so difficult for the American to be able to communicate with the person once he arrives.

Huffard: What has been your experience from the American point of view of gaining support and keeping it on the mission field?

Dumas: You mean the missionary himself gaining support? Well, I think the brethren are interested in doing mission work. Then, on the other hand, I am sure we are not interested in doing mission work because we can win the world or at least rock this universe whenever we get ready. Evidently we haven't been ready because we only have a few missionaries scattered out over this world that's lost in sin. I didn't have too much trouble getting support. We are still raising some funds for the work.

Most of our efforts in Greece has been to support the work ourselves rather than to have support come from America. The missionaries on the field have been the ones who have borne the brunt of supporting the work. I think this is good. It is getting to the point now where we have got to have help. We are just overwhelmed. This work is growing so rapidly that we cannot keep up with it and we need help. I think the brethren will rally and provide some of that help we need. We've never had a working fund in Greece, for example.

Huffard: You mentioned here that the work is growing rapidly. In what areas or fields is it growing this way? How do you feel that you are reaching the people more rapidly now?

Dumas: There are so many hundreds of contacts through our Bible correspondence course. Other Greeks are talking to other Greeks and they are interested. We don't have the personnel to follow up to be frank with you. That's a tragedy in some ways. Nevertheless, we can't let that be a reason for not going ahead. Since the Ethiopian eunuch was forced to continue on his way rejoicing we have reason to believe that the church of the Lord grew in Ethiopia because of the fact that he loved the Lord and did his best to continue to preach it.

Huffard: Would you have some suggestions on how we can improve mission work in general? I know it is kind of hard to specialize in something like this or make any definite theories but what are some ways you think we can improve mission work since you mentioned there are just a few missionaries?

Dumas: I think one way as I mentioned, if we could just have our young people when they decide to go to the field, go and work in a commune here in America where they would be able to learn the people that they are planning to spend part of their lives working with so that they won't make a mistake and come to that country and be really heartbroken and maybe lose some of their own faith. They could actually work one year in this country, learning the language and the peoples before they ever left the United States to go into that particular field plus they would be able to bring others with them. That to me, I think, is a real asset in preparing to do mission work.

I would suggest that a group of congregations get together to take a nation and say now they are going to really do what they can to rock that nation with the gospel. That way if you had several fine elderships and congregations really putting in the money and the prayer and the thoughts into planning to see a work through then I think that would be good. That way you could have each year some of the elders coming over and visiting you on the field, seeing your needs firsthand. A group of people could arrange some type of charter flight when you have a campaign, take their vacations from here, because the people would be really close to the work since there were not many works that congregation is supporting. Sever congregations over one great country, you see, and they are really throwing it and getting behind it and

their people are aware of everything that is going on. They get to know and love the missionaries and their children and their needs and their problems and they are praying for them. They are thinking about them in work, at school, at play. I think this would really be a way to win a nation.

If we could get say five congregations really on fire behind Greece who are able to help really support us, then I think things would really start popping over there. As I mentioned we are not able to continue to support our own preachers and to help them like we need to. We are no longer able to carry on the Bible correspondence course. I haven't even got the money to go and visit people who sometimes call and say they want to study more and maybe be baptized. It is difficult. I don't have the funds to catch a plane to go off to an island somewhere and follow up some of this. We are at the point that we've got to have help and our Greek people are willing to work, wanting to work. We are not suggesting that we put them all on American salaries, don't misunderstand me. As a matter of fact, that's been one of the reasons I think we have grown. As I mentioned earlier, we haven't been tied to many American dollars. The time has come though when the church needs to have a good working fund whereby we can at least pay for the fares of our Greeks to go and follow up these contacts and so forth.

Huffard: We see that in many fields now many people are beginning to put in Bible training schools. What do you think of this in Greece?

Dumas: We plan to have one just as soon as we can. One of our Greeks who has just finished at Sunset will head up that school along with Brother Ervin Bishop, one of our missionaries. We have men who are capable of teaching in that school and we feel it will be a real asset. We want to keep our men there in Greece to study. We've done our best to train them. They've learned rapidly and I think the Greeks are capable of preaching the gospel to the whole world as he once did if we can just get the message back to him once again and free him from the Eastern Orthodox religion where he can let Christ come in and motivate him to go and take this gospel of Christ to the world.

Huffard: We've appreciated your taking this time out and telling us about the work in Greece. We want you to know that we will remember you in our prayers and we hope the Lord will continue to bless the work that you and the brethren there are doing in Greece.