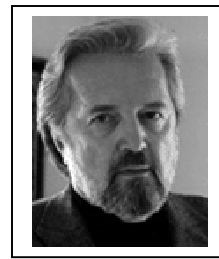


## *WCEA President Visits Epirotes in Australia – Nick Gage*

Late last February I flew to Australia to visit Epirot communities and organizations on the continent to celebrate with them the liberation of Epiros from the Turks in 1913 and the autonomy of Northern Epiros declared a year later.

I found Epirotes in the country to be thriving in their new country but still closely attached to their ancestral homeland.



The most important result of the trip was a successful effort to organize a number of Epirot organizations throughout Australia into a new Panepirotic Federation of Oceania. I was asked to preside at the event where Epirot leaders from several Australian cities announced the formation of the new federation and I took the opportunity to bring the leaders of the existing Panepirotic Federation of Australia with me and initiated talks between the new and old groups that will hopefully lead to a merger of the two national organizations.

I flew first to Sydney and was welcomed by George Vellis, a dynamic young leader of Epirotes not only in Sydney but also throughout the country. He introduced me to the leaders of the three Epirot chapters in the city, took me to a dinner dance they were holding to celebrate the liberation of Epiros my second night there and to a picnic the following day jammed with over 2,000 Greeks gathered to raise funds for the Greek community's old age home.

One day later I gave a lecture at Sydney University about my adventures as an investigative reporter and foreign correspondent for The New York Times attended by more than 300 people. The lecture was organized by Dr. Vrasidas Karalis, the chairman of the Greek Studies Department at the university, who has been very helpful to the Epirot community in Sydney.

From Sydney I flew to Melbourne and was welcomed by Con Vassiliou, a creative young leader of the new federation who arranged for me to speak at a gathering of more than 200 Greek Australians in the heart of the city the same evening. I was very impressed at the number of young people who attended and the interest they showed in their Epirot heritage. Several promised to attend the WCEA convention in Ioannina next July.

Over the next two days I met individually with a number of Epirotes who now make Melbourne their home and we discussed ways to strengthen Epirot chapters throughout the country and to attract the participation of young people. Among those I discussed these issues with was Dimitris Varnas, the president of the Panepirotic Federation of Australia, and Kostas Kalymnios, his young deputy, who is a successful attorney and a skillful advocate of the Northern Epiros issue.

I discussed with them the wisdom of merging with the new Federation of Oceania and they agreed to begin talks with its leaders with an open mind.

My last night in the city I was invited to a gala dinner dance organized by the Epirotes of Melbourne, where I was welcomed with great warmth and enthusiasm and spoke to the more than 500 guests in attendance about the efforts of the World Council of Epirotes Abroad to unite Epirotes scattered in all five continents.

I left the next day so impressed by all that I had seen and everyone I had met that I vowed to return for another visit before the year was over.