

## Vallas, Pota: A Greek Heart <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Pota Vallas: A Greek Heart

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>[2]</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 5/11/2003. Copyrighted.  
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I visited with Pota Vallas at her home in Raleigh. She is a radiantly beautiful 92-year-old and the matriarch of the city's Greek community. Her father, Gus Vurnakes, is remembered as Raleigh's first Greek immigrant. He opened a fruit stand and soda fountain on Fayetteville Street, then brought Pota to Raleigh in 1924. Her mother and sisters followed in 1939 as Nazi Germany prepared to invade Greece.

Between 1890 and 1924 more than a half-million Greeks immigrated to the United States. Most were young men, like her father, fleeing poverty and political upheaval. They settled mainly in northern cities, but a few scattered across the small towns of North Carolina, where they worked hard to help families back in Greece and to build a community here.

Pota married another Greek immigrant, George Vallas, in 1929. Their marriage was arranged by their families. "The Greek people, you marry the family, always the family," she told me. Theirs became one of the city's great loves. "My husband died 37 years ago," Mrs. Vallas confided, "and when I walk here I am always talking to George on one end of the house and my Lord on the other."

Still very active, Mrs. Vallas only recently sold her successful home decorating business, National Art Interiors, a landmark on Hillsborough Street since 1946. Her voice seems to hold both great love for life and much sorrow. Her Greek accent is still strong.



**Pota Vallas. Photo by Chris Seward, 2003. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.**

"I lived as a child in one of the oldest villages in Sparta, thousands of years old. The landscape was hilly, very hilly, and I loved the earth. The snow was on top of the mountains and you see the orange trees below, and on this side, olive and In the bottom was the biggest spring you ever saw. The water was coming out of a lion's mouth, and there was a little church, St. George, built in the 1600s. You come out of the church and have your cheese and olives and bread for lunch at My father loved everything in America and wanted to bring us here, but he wanted the Greek culture to be in our heart. He wanted us to know where we came from, and he liked the Greek way to raise his children. But the first time that I came Then my daddy lost everything in the stock market crash in '29. It was a catastrophe. He lost the business, he lost our home in Hayes Barton, he lost everything. That's why he didn't want to bring my mother from Greece until 1939. It was hard In 1931 or '32, I applied at the Singer Sewing Machine Company for a job. When I was in my school in Greece, that's all they taught us, and I loved it dearly. So when I was at Singer, my boss used to enjoy showing me off. I made that sewing My boss man, Mr. Bourd, had an automobile accident, so headquarters in Richmond appointed me as manager. I had 18 salesmen who went door to door in the country. It was tough. I worked like a dog, day and night. I didn't want them to tell In the beginning the church was the only thing we had to look forward to. The three Russos families and my daddy and his nephews got together, and we rented a little place close to the city market. Downstairs it was a little grocery store and We stayed there six, seven, eight years, then we built a little church across from the city market. We opened in 1937, our own Greek Orthodox church. We knew all the Greek people in Wilson, Rocky Mount, Fayetteville, Durham. There were Everything at the church was in Greek. In the beginning, you feel empty without hearing the neighbors say something in Greek. Like somebody is pushing you out. And don't forget, David, at that time all the foreigners used not to be wanted. I You know, I am pouring my heart out to you. For a long time I was counting the days when I could come back, but can you believe, I did not go back to Greece from 1924 to 1973? It was so different. My son-in-law, Nicholas, was with me. I was Greece used to be the light of the world, but they took the art, they destroyed the beauty, they took everything. I had to leave, and I never have gone back.

My young life seems like it was yesterday, David, and I think I still can touch it. I think every child, the place where he is born when he first sees the daylight, I think that penetrates his soul and his body, and he always remembers that. And by

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