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The Shipping Decision Makers Forum

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First of all I would like to congratulate the Navigator 2013, The Shipping Decision Makers Forum, for their excellent idea to start honouring Greek islands that have excelled in merchant shipping, as well as their selection to commence with Oinousses. I believe our island and our mariners deserve it, because in the contest of life they've made it and have contributed significantly to international shipping. On behalf of all of them, I thank you.

Oinousses: A case-study.

Turning a disadvantage to advantage - Poor Land, Rich Sea

I believe that the study of the past can be a guide for the present and the future. In the current crisis of Greece, the success story of the Oinoussians in merchant shipping ought to be a case-study for every Greek, as well as for the Greek State. The Oinoussians, thanks to a problem, an obstacle, i.e. the infertility of their small land, were clever and adventurous enough to turn this disadvantage into an advantage; they turned away from being shepherds and farmers to become mariners, in order to exploit the riches of the endless sea, and finally, through their daring to conquer it.

I will try to give you a bird's eye view of this success story.

The Nobel Prize winner, Odysseas Elytis, wrote in his collection "The little mariner": "*I completed my higher mathematics in the School of the Sea*". I would paraphrase it to: "*The Oinoussians completed their Business Degrees in the School of the Sea*".

Indeed, life at sea is very educating and character building. It teaches one self-discipline, hard work, team work, inventiveness, loyalty, patience, persistence, courage, anticipation, thinking ahead, and builds up strong personalities. Apart from these qualities, it gives you the opportunity to get to know foreign lands and people of different cultures. Greeks, through the ages, travelled not only for trade but also for knowledge. It is this spirit that guided us for thousands of years to turn to the sea and trade goods; its consequence, apart from making a living, was to meet with other peoples and cultures and exchange ideas, thus contributing to the progress of civilization.

As the Geographer E.C. Semple wrote, *“Traders were the apostles of civilization in the Mediterranean Basin. The great universities, poets, philosophers and artists of the ancient world were found in commercial cities like Athens, Corinth, Rhodes, Miletus, Tarsus, Alexandria and Massilia, for here the currents of thought flowed full and fast.”*

This “route” of their ancient ancestors was followed by the Oinoussians of the early 19th century. Due to the rockiness and infertility of our land, our forefathers set off to the sea, in order to earn their living and improve their lot. Instead of staying within the boundaries of their island, they decided to throw themselves out into the unknown, yet intriguing and fruitful “fields” of the vast oceans. Visualize them: They are men of hard work and determined. At first, they start as sailors and then they become captains, engineers, and eventually a great number of them ship owners.

By mid 19th century the Oinoussians own 15% of the sailing ships of Chios with which they plough the Mediterranean. Later on, they sail out of Gibraltar into the Atlantic. Looking forward, as opposed to some other traditional Greek shipping communities, they foresee the end of the age of sail and in 1904 some families join forces to buy the first Oinoussian steamship. As time goes on, they establish offices based in Piraeus, London and New York. During World War I the Oinoussians own 10 steamships of about 4,000 tons deadweight. Then, in 1923, they start buying more ships. During the world crisis of 1927-1933 they work for very little money, but manage to hold onto their ships for better times to come.

In World War II they have a sizeable fleet consisting of 8,000 tonners transporting goods for the Allies, but most of them are sunk in the War of the Atlantic. Thus, peace finds our island with very few ships. Shortly after the war the Oinoussians buy 14 of the 100 “Liberty” ships for sale and by the mid 1960’s they own 150 ships, bringing Oinousses to the top of the ship owning list worldwide, taking into account of course its size and population. Today, we have over 200 modern vessels, we face the difficulties of the present and look forward with optimism to a challenging future.

To recap: how has this success been achieved? The answer is simple: our forefathers turned a disadvantage into an advantage through a free, adventurous and entrepreneurial spirit that did not look upon the state or the politicians for support. Instead, they relied on personal initiative, hard work, familial unity and helping each other on the island, on mutual understanding and cooperation between the owners and the crew of their ships, honouring their commitments, not spending more than what they earned, saving money, being credit-worthy. All these demanded great sacrifices, but the rewards were also great. And last but not least, our mariners - who were sailing for many years away from home - had the full support and patience of their wives who were left behind to run the household and rear their children.

The Oinoussians love their home-island and they have done a lot for it. In particular its ship owners have served it in many ways and endowed it with many facilities that bigger places would be jealous of. Oinousses bore many local and national benefactors. Our little island today does not really lack much in material terms and we invite people to take the opportunity to come and stay permanently with their families or send their children to study in our schools and the Academy of Merchant Marine, for they one day may become ship owners too, as others have done in the past.

As you can understand, it was this love for my island, *“τήν γενέτειραν καί τροφόν”*, that made me accept an invitation by my compatriots to put up as a candidate for Mayor of Oinousses. In doing my civic duty for the last fifteen years, I always had in front of me the achievements of our forefathers. I started with a vision to give the opportunity to the local community to develop itself by solving for them the big and long-term problems of the island, especially the lack of modern works of infrastructure. These problems, inter alia, have now practically been solved and all infrastructure projects are being completed.

I took part in four electoral contests and in each one I was straightforward with the voters; no false promises. I presented my programme to them and declared that my target was:

- to solve problems of the community and to serve the citizen;
- to govern in a meritocratic way and with integrity, with no favours to anyone, and no politicking;
- to operate prudently with financial discipline - you do not spend more than what you have, you do not squander public money, the taxpayer's money;
- to improve the efficiency of the Municipality;
- to enhance the work ethic and promote the entrepreneurial spirit of the citizens.

I did not, I repeat not, follow a populist policy. You may ask “and the result?” The result is that by running the Municipality in a businesslike manner, we did a great deal of works and we still have plenty of cash in the kitty!

We also organized educational, cultural and sporting activities, in order to give the opportunity to the local community of a small island, far from the Greek mainland, not to lag behind in terms of culture, athletics, etc.

Finally, as Mayor and public servant, my motto has been *“To give not to gain”* - in every sense of the words - and I kept to it.

The small community of Oinousses should be a case-study for success in personal, business and public life. Our island can proudly stand up and say to the people of Greece and the world: Yes, you can achieve great things, as long as you have a vision, as long as you dare and work hard!