

## Pioneers

### Akif Keskin (1923-?)

*"The Turk of Dunedin"*

**Akif Keskin was a Turk from Macedonia who operated a very popular restaurant in Dunedin between the 1950s and 1970s.**

Akif Keskin was born on 27 July 1923 in Skopje, Macedonia. His father Mehmet was a farmer and his mother's name was Nurye (nee Sabit). By this time the territory had been under the control of the Slavic-Serbian King for a few years. Until 1912 the land had been an integral part of the European section of the Ottoman-Turkish lands (in fact Mustafa Kamal Ataturk was born in Salonica which was until 1918 the regional capital of Macedonia). A large Albanian Muslim minority lived there then as it does now.

Absolutely nothing is known of Akif Keskin's early life. However we do know that he was somehow able to register himself as a refugee with the "International Refugee Organisation" (IRO - a precursor of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees). In a 1976 interview Keskin described himself as a tannery worker in Turkey who "wasted little time after seeing a publicity film on New Zealand in an Istanbul picture theatre in 1950."

On 31 March 1951 he departed from the Greek port of Piraeus on board the refugee boat, the SS Goya, alongside other European Muslims like the Albanian Mazhar Krasniqi from Kosova (who went on to become the first president of the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand in 1979).

They arrived together in Wellington on 1 May 1951 and according to the IRO roll Akif Keskin was described as a furrier by trade. His first job in New Zealand was with Fletcher Construction Ltd. in Dunedin as a plasterer. However when the Department of Internal Affairs held an internal review of the SS Goya refugees in January 1953, Keskin was working as a tanner at the freezing works at Pareora, Timaru.



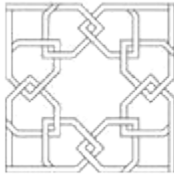
In 1953 he married a 24-year old Aachen-born German spinster named Maria (nee Steffans). Akif and Maria had three children: Soraya Nurye in 1955, Anafa Yusuf in 1956 and Yasmin Leila in 1960. In 1956 Keskin opened his first restaurant on Princess Street, in the central city area.



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From 1959 Akif Keskin attended every Anzac Day ceremony in Dunedin. Over the next two decades he regularly hosted the Gallipoli veterans then RSA members for dinner every Anzac Day at his restaurant on Princess Street.

In November 1961 Keskin was briefly hospitalised with an ulcer following a breakdown in his health from work exhaustion. A week later on 10 November his restaurant caught fire while his wife was there alone and in the ensuing disaster the premises was thoroughly gutted. The fire broke out at 4:30 p.m. and the fire engines were slowed down by traffic. Keskin's wife escaped with minor burns but the business was closed for repairs for three months.

On 2 February the restaurant re-opened with new decorations. However at the end of the month Akif Keskin was involved in a minor car accident and was back in hospital after his car was badly damaged. Akif Keskin and his wife were evidently very popular people. Following newspaper reports of Keskin's stays in hospital and the fire at his restaurant, in April 1963 the entire family were featured in the women's section of the Otago Daily Times after a nine month holiday in Germany left the children unable to communicate properly in English.



On 24 October 1961 Keskin was naturalised as a New Zealand citizen and in 1965 he travelled abroad with a group of war veterans to Turkey to mark the 50th anniversary of the battle. The following year he visited Turkey again and souvenired a piece of rock from Gallipoli that he took back to Dunedin and presented to the R.S.A.

After establishing two further restaurants in and around Dunedin from the late 1960s, Akif Keskin left New Zealand in 1976. Initially he returned to Europe, planning to settle in Germany with his wife and children. However they later moved from Germany and on to California where Keskin set up shop again. He was last reported by the Otago Daily Times in April 1982 attending the Anzac Day parade in Dunedin. In January 2006 the Otago Daily Times reported that friends in Queenstown had met Keskin with his son and daughters in Istanbul in 1986. At that point he had been planning to resettle in Izmir.

**By Abdullah Drury**

**Picture Credits:**

1. "Their English Is Forgotten" in *The Otago Daily Times* (22 April, 1963), p.12.
2. "Remodelled Restaurant Starts Anew After Fire" in *The Otago Daily Times* (2 February, 1962), p.7.



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