

The Miami Herald

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The Miami Herald

February 18, 2001 Sunday

BOULIS LED TANGLED LIFE, LEAVES TURMOIL IN DEATH SLAIN BUSINESSMAN'S DUAL LEGACY

BY DANIEL de VISE AND LARRY LEBOWITZ

Gus Boulis was a man who didn't mind dirty hands.

If a table came loose on one of his 150-foot floating casinos, Boulis would grab a hammer and pound it back into place. If crowds grew too large somewhere in his empire of eateries, Boulis might don an apron and wash dishes.

And when negotiations turned sour, enemies said, Gus Boulis wasn't above cracking an adversary over the head with a court reporter's briefcase to make his point. In his wake, he left spurned lovers, shattered friendships, angry ex-partners and a tangle of lawsuits.

What was true in life is now true in death. In the 12 days since his unsolved ambush slaying on a dark Fort Lauderdale side street, two wills have surfaced. Teams of lawyers representing his widow, who filed one will, and his business associates, who filed a second will, are likely to battle for years over the tycoon's millions. And that is classic Gus Boulis.

Self-made multimillionaire, benevolent Macedonian mensch, volatile control freak, Boulis sailed into America on a submarine sandwich, an Alexander the Great of fast food. He became a blue-eyed Greek godfather, lavishing jobs and cash on relatives and friends and many people with a Hellenic heritage and a hard-luck story.

The founder of Miami Subs and SunCruz Casinos steamrolled through life, playing by his own rule book. He arrived in North America as a stowaway. He married to secure his citizenship. He kept two families, one in Greece, the other in South Florida. His long-estranged wife eventually filed for divorce, his mistress took out a restraining order against him and one business associate accused Boulis of threatening to kill him.

Instead, it was Boulis who perished, ambushed gangland-style on Feb. 6 by assailants in two cars, dying in a hail of hollow-point bullets on a dimly lit street blocks from his Fort Lauderdale office. Police are still knocking on doors to determine whether a third car was involved in the slaying.

THE LEGEND Humble beginnings in Greece led to pursuit of the dream It's hard to separate fact from fiction among the stacks of clippings on the life of Gus Boulis, who sometimes gave contradictory accounts of his own past.

This much is clear: Konstantinos "Gus" Boulis was born on April 6, 1949, in the town of Kavala, a port on the Aegean Sea in the ancient civilization of Greek Macedonia. The town rises to a majestic Byzantine fortress and wraps around a horseshoe-shaped harbor.

Kosta, as he was known back home, was a fisherman's son, the third of four children. As a child, he would run to the shore after school to wait for his

father's boat. As soon as he finished elementary school, Boulis went to work for his father.

Asked in a 1998 deposition about his limited formal education, Boulis shot back: "Every day is an education."

Boulis' ambitions were much larger than Greece. He yearned to leave the impoverished postwar economy to try his luck in America. He took classes in ship mechanics and in 1966, at age 16, he joined the merchant marine over his parents' protests.

In 1968, Boulis stowed away on a cargo ship, jumping overboard in Halifax, Nova Scotia. With no friends and no money, he eventually made his way to Toronto, where it was easy to blend into the large, tight-knit Greek community. The only English words he knew were "yesterday" and "I love you."

"The only opportunity for him, for any of us, to do anything was to come to the United States," said Dimitris Karavokiris, a longtime friend who owns a service station on State Road 84. "He went to Toronto with no money and an American dream."

Boulis landed a job at a sandwich shop called Mr. Submarine in Toronto's hippie enclave. He worked double shifts for \$1.35 an hour. While the ragtag band of draft-dodgers and hippies he called co-workers lounged about in the back of the store, getting stoned, Boulis memorized every item on the menu and mastered every job in the restaurant.

"He didn't speak English, but you knew he was a great worker," recalled Laura Males, who was the store's 17-year-old cashier. She remained a lifelong friend and employee at an array of Boulis ventures in the Keys. "He had honesty in his eyes."

In 1971, the 22-year-old Boulis married a 16-year-old girl from Kavala who lived in Toronto and had Canadian citizenship. By Boulis' own account, they married just a week after they met.

Boulis once described his marriage to court officials as "more of a friendship, that resulted in marriage when he experienced problems with immigration." But Males contends Efronsini "Frances" Boulis was several months' pregnant with Boulis' child at the time. Males insists the two were in love.

The Canadian owners of Mr. Submarine offered Boulis control of a shop and, ultimately, a partnership and a 27-percent share in the company. Boulis began importing his Greek friends to Canada to work for him. Under his stewardship, a handful of sub shops grew into a 180-franchise chain. Back home in Kavala, they were calling him the second Onassis.

Gus and Frances Boulis would have two sons in Canada, Christos (Chris) and Panagiotis (Peter). The family returned to Greece in 1977 to avail themselves of the Greek school system. But the Boulises were drifting apart. In 1978, Boulis left his wife for good, taking his Mr. Submarine earnings to South Florida, where the sun-baked Keys reminded him of home.

Boulis, who wasn't out of his 20s yet, told people he was retired, intent on living a life devoted to scuba diving. Many who knew him said the retirement tale was bunk. Boulis, they said, came to South Florida to build his own empire.

ALWAYS ON THE GO Miami Subs, SunCruz Casinos bring success, troubles "He never knew the word 'retire,' " said Karavokiris, who reaped Boulis' generosity as president of the Macedonia Association of South Florida.

Boulis would later say he had left Greece partly because of the accidental electrocution of his brother, Panagiotis, in a building the brothers constructed in Kavala. Gus Boulis felt a need to distance himself from that tragedy.

He apparently felt little compunction about distancing himself from his wife, who did not file for divorce for almost two decades. In a 1998 court document, Boulis said he "liked his wife" but was "in love with his business and his customers."

In America, Boulis wasn't retired long. He opened the first Mr. Submarine in Key West in 1983, adapting the Canadian eatery with a splash of tropical color. It became the prototype for the Miami Subs chain that he started in 1990.

Along with friends Gus and Perry Bartsocas, Boulis peppered the Keys with restaurants: Perry's Seafood, Captain's Table, The Quay and, recently, The Italian Fisherman. The empire spread to the mainland: Stan's in Fort Lauderdale, Martha's in Hollywood Beach. He built and redeveloped resort hotels, waterfront restaurants and marinas throughout Broward, Miami-Dade and Monroe counties. He angered environmentalists by building and dredging in sensitive areas. He taunted bureaucrats. He feuded with former partners.

In 1994, Boulis was entertaining 300 Miami Subs franchisees on a "cruise to nowhere" out of Port Everglades. He started negotiating the next day to buy a \$2 million dinner boat that he retrofitted into his first SunCruz Casino. It docked in Key Largo outside one of his resorts.

The largely unregulated gambling business attracted plenty of trouble for Boulis. He waged epic battles with local, state and federal prosecutors, investigators and elected officials.

After federal officials nailed him for lying on Coast Guard licenses in violation of a 70-year-old law designed to protect American shipping interests from foreign competition, Boulis agreed in February 2000 to pay \$2 million in fines. He also secretly agreed to divest the SunCruz fleet within three years. But some speculated that his sealed deal meant he was working as an informant, divulging inside information on other players on the fringes of high-cash businesses.

"Never," said attorney Bruce Zimet, who negotiated the criminal plea for Boulis. "Gus was many things. But a rat was not one of them. It just wasn't in his fabric."

His attempts to sell the SunCruz empire led to a massive web of lawsuits that will take years for his estate to untangle.

WORK ETHIC Owner shunned tuxedo lifestyle for work clothes on the job Boulis dressed in jeans and sport shirts, shunned corporate meetings and worked 12 to 16 hours a day, every day. But he seldom showed up at the Dania Beach headquarters of KB Holdings, the parent company of the dozens of corporations he owned. Instead, Boulis spent most of his time at his lunch counters and on his boats.

"I like to keep a low profile," Boulis told The Herald in 1997. "I do things. I don't talk about them."

On one New Year's Eve, when the crowds at the Marriott Key Largo restaurant grew too large, Boulis helped cook. When there was a line for valet parking at one of his floating casinos, Boulis became an attendant. The wee hours of the morning would often find Boulis rubbing shoulders with the graveyard-shifters at his restaurants.

"He would go to the stores, 1:30 in the morning, to check on the franchises," said longtime friend Karavokiris. "He would keep [the employees] there till 3 or 4, making sure the store was clean. Two hours of sleep. And the next day, he was all smiles."

That tireless work ethic bled into his personal life. Ex-girlfriend Margaret Hren complained to social workers that Boulis once showed up at midnight for a custody visit with his infant son.

One time, at a party on one of his boats, Karavokiris found Boulis dressed in a brown work shirt, hammering nails into a table that was coming loose from its bindings while the ship's staff strode past in tuxedos. "Why aren't you in a tuxedo?" Karavokiris asked. Boulis replied: "I have employees for that."

In his scant leisure hours, Boulis gobbled vitamin pills and played soccer. Former Kavala Mayor Elestherios Athansiadis says his lifelong friend was fanatical about the Olympiakos soccer club, following the team all over Europe in his private jet.

PATRONAGE Generous multimillionaire never forgot Greek roots Gus Boulis became South Florida's Greek Robin Hood, a one-man employment agency for nephews, friends and innumerable eager Macedonian immigrants.

His giving verged on compulsion. Once, according to court records, he defied a restraining order and sneaked into ex-girlfriend Hren's house, dropped an envelope stuffed with cash and fled.

A psychological profile from a 1998 court file states that Boulis "seems to have taken it upon himself" to provide homes, jobs and money to a large cast of relatives.

Boulis wrote checks to any Greek-American organization with a need and hosted their meetings free of charge at his restaurants. Once a month, Boulis would treat the local Greek community to dinner and music and gambling aboard one of his SunCruz boats.

At Christmas, Boulis became a secret Santa, dispatching anonymous packages and wads of cash to poor families. When a Greek needed money for healthcare, Boulis delivered. When a parent back home fell ill, Boulis would buy the plane tickets to send the children home.

But for every tale of public philanthropy there were darker tales of a private, temperamental, self-absorbed Boulis.

In 1989, a Key West lawyer accused Boulis of hitting him over the head with a briefcase in the middle of a deposition in a case involving the sale of a Hollywood restaurant. Boulis denied he struck the lawyer.

Boulis' 18-year relationship with Margaret Hren deteriorated in 1995, shortly after the birth of their second son. Hren claimed Boulis beat, stalked and tormented her.

While Boulis had started a new family in Florida, Frances Boulis remained in Greece, caring for his dying parents. When she finally filed for divorce in 1997, Boulis repeatedly showed up in Kavala and threatened to throw her out of their seaside home.

In September, a group led by Washington, D.C., businessman Adam Kidan agreed to buy 90 percent of SunCruz from Boulis for \$147.5 million. Within three months, the relationship deteriorated. Kidan started bringing bodyguards to business meetings. He publicly worried that Boulis would kill him. He hired a security firm to write up a "threat assessment."

Claiming that Boulis tried stabbing him with a pen, Kidan obtained a restraining order that forced Boulis to move out of the SunCruz offices on Dania Beach Boulevard.

Boulis relocated to glass offices on the 17th Street Causeway in Fort Lauderdale.

He was on his way home, on the night of Feb. 6, when a team of assassins operating at least two vehicles executed the hit that stunned South Florida.

No one knows what the lawyers will find when they finally determine how much his estate is worth. Boulis regularly jousts with lawyers, investigators, business foes and lovers who wanted an accurate accounting of his net worth.

The running joke at the Broward County Courthouse since the murder is that the Boulis estate should be renamed the Broward County Bar Relief Act of 2001.

Boulis once joked in a deposition that he had a large family: "I have two sons with my first marriage, and two sons with [mistress] Margaret [Hren]. And I have a lot of adopted lawyers."

Staff writers Jennifer Babson in the Keys, Wanda DeMarzo, Jason Grotto and correspondent Toulia Vlahou in Greece contributed to this report.