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CHAPTER 1

Difficult Choices

"What you leave behind is not what is engraved on stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others."

—Pericles, Greek Statesman,
Orator and General of Athens during
the Golden Age.

Pericles Rizopoulos should have died a long time ago, along with his brother, Panayiotis, in the rose limestone mountains of Northern Greece overlooking the blue crystal waters of Lake Orestiada. They faced death from the poisonous fangs of an angry horned viper while the brothers hid beneath the graceful branches of a weeping willow tree. When the viper aggressively stretched itself out and gazed intently at the brothers, they had no choice but to remain completely immobile for as long as possible while the twitching snake decided which brother to strike first. Or, if they ran, there were Nazi soldiers on the other side of the willow's protective branches. The Nazi snakes or the horned viper? A very difficult choice.

But a choice was made because there we sat in his dining room in the Bronx, New York, seventy years after my grandfather's first brush with death with only a few months remaining before his last. As I looked across the table at Pericles, my grandfather's eyes were bright, his hands were scarred but his spirit was strong. Before he was my grandfather, he was a father, a husband, a fighter, a survivor, a Greek, and a young boy facing a vicious and powerful chaos that would have paralyzed most grown men.

Hard choices have been the fate of Greeks during the last 500 years. In earlier times, we were the glorious dawn of Western Civilization—the philosophy of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the science of Euclid and Archimedes, the medicine of Hippocrates, the theater of Euripides & Sophocles, the poetry of

Sappho, Homer's *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Herodotus' history and the architecture of the Parthenon. And then, in 330, when the Roman emperor Constantine moved his capitol to Greek Byzantium from Latin Rome, there were the glories of the Byzantine Empire, of Κωνσταντινούπολις, Constantinople, now Istanbul, the magnificent Greek city on the Bosphorus that controlled the rich trade between Asia and Europe. The Byzantine Empire was the most powerful economic, cultural, and military force in Europe, as well as the cultural and religious heart of Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

Then, in 1453, Constantinople fell to the Turks, and all that had been Greek was overwhelmed by the Ottoman Empire. Since then, we Greeks have been facing obstacles at times created by Turks, Italians, Germans, French, British and even Americans. We have always fought back. We have always fought for the freedom and democracy that were the founding ideals of ancient Greece.

But we have also, just as we did in the ancient Peloponnesian Wars when Sparta and Athens became bitter rivals, fought with each other. Unfortunately, we are still fighting with each other. Hard choices. These hard choices however, have often made us into very resilient people. Just as in Albert Camus' portrayal of Sisyphus whose face pressed so close to stone became like stone, so too have Greeks gained strength from their difficulties. Pericles Rizopoulos was παππούς μου, my *pappou*, my grandfather and he was one of these strong people.

Looking back, I recall that the most important meeting I had with him was when I was just eleven years old. It was a hot, sticky, New York summer morning when I stopped by to visit with him on my way home from my cousin's house. I had only just walked in the door when my grandfather told me that I should sit at the dining room of the dimly lit first floor of their home in the Bronx, New York. His and Mollie's house. Mollie was η γιαγιά μου, my *yiyia*, my grandmother.

My *pappou* was an old man even then, but on that day he was expectant, vigorous and excited. He sat down next to me and showed me a red covered, bound, unlined book that he handled with such respect, such reverence, that even before he told me what the book was, I intuitively understood that this was a very important document. He sat down and stared at me. "Perry mou," he said, "this book is the key to my life...and to your life. It is a story about φιλότιμο (*philotimo*)."

We sat on the couch where the sun came through the blinds, reflected light onto the book and illuminated *pappou's* gold crucifix that hung from his neck. The house was unbearably warm. Using their air conditioning was always viewed as a sign of weakness and a waste of money, so we both sat in our

undershirts and tirelessly went through every page of the book. As he carefully folded back the pages and translated the handwritten Greek, I was totally captivated by his stories of war, adventure and survival, and he was unrelenting in his telling. We spent the whole day together, without a break, just the two of us. He never stopped speaking, and I never stopped listening.

Ten years after our first conversation, in September 2013, when I was 21 years old, I was sitting in a classroom on my first day of graduate school at Columbia University's Teachers College. The class was called "Family as Educator," and my professor, Dr. Hope Jensen Leichter, Director of the Elbenwood Center for the Study of Family as Educator, waited for class to begin and walked up to each and every student, shook each student's hand and asked how we were doing. After these brief conversations, she walked to the front of the room and asked the class to share a story that showed how our grandparents educated us. I sat in the middle of the room and listened attentively to each student when I suddenly found myself reflecting on that remarkable day I spent with my grandfather. It was my turn to speak and Dr. Leichter looked at me with an expectant smile as I shared the bits of the story that I could remember. I felt the importance of that experience growing with each example I provided.

At that time, pappou could still go outside and work in his yard, cook and walk around freely. Yet, I sensed that he was getting weaker. At family gatherings he was quieter, less responsive.

But the others in my family preferred not to focus on pappou's warning signs. My father refused to say or do anything but encourage pappou while convincing himself that his father was going to make a 180 degree turn and be completely healthy again. Yiayia Mollie, my grandmother, was also becoming somewhat forgetful and absent-minded. Then there was my mother. She noticed, but also did not want to exacerbate the obvious. I did not want to look away from what my pappou was saying and what he was doing. When I told our story to my class, I faced the reality.

That's when it occurred to me that I should go to see pappou and find that notebook. I decided my grandfather and I would read through his brother's journal, and he would tell me their stories while he was still able to do so. We'd be together... again, like we were on that distant summer morning.

A few days later, when I was in the Bronx, I stopped by my pappou's house unannounced, which was typical for me. I found a parking spot only half a block away from his house, a miracle in itself because finding parking in the Bronx can be a very difficult task. I threw my bag over my shoulder and walked toward

his side door, through the small white gate that stands at the height of my hip. I walked over to the side window of the first floor. I knocked and the white shade shook from the vibrations of my knocking. I yelled, "It's me."

My yiayia, as she always did, greeted me warmly. She yelled to pappou, "Perry, your grandson is here." Then back to me, "He'll be right there, honey." I walked back through the gate to the front of the house. I waited a moment and the garage door slowly began to rise. I quickly ducked my head under the door, mostly because I am perpetually impatient, and there he was.

Pappou was wearing a white v-neck undershirt tucked into khakis, and *pandofles*, or sandals, and black socks. His hair was brushed back and his eyes were bright and alert. He hugged me and put one hand in the space where my jaw meets my neck and gave me a slight smack as a gesture of endearment.

I immediately prepared for the first of the three questions he always asked. "How are you, Perrymou?" With his hand still on my jaw, I said "I'm good, how's it going?" He smiled and said "Good, come see yiayia."

As I walked in, I was confronted with the second question, "How goes the school?" I turned back for a moment, "It's good... I have to ask you something." He responded "Ok, Perrymou."

I saw yiayia and she raised her arms into the air, *zeibekiko*, Greek dancing style, to express that she was happy to see me. We embraced. Then as we broke our hug, pappou asked the third and final question as I was sitting down at the dining room table. "How goes the girl?" he asked with a smile.

"Still looking," I replied. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "*Endaxi*," or "ok."

After yiayia asked if I was hungry, and then looked annoyed but still hospitable when I said no, I asked about the book. Pappou immediately understood what I was referring to although we hadn't spoken about it in a decade. It took him 15 minutes of rummaging through the closet next to his desk before he found it.

"Perry," he asked me, "why do you want me to find this book?"

I told him I was going to use it for my graduate school thesis.

"Graduate school thesis!" he appeared somewhat nervous. "You will make sure it's safe?"

"Of course, pappou."

Then he gave me a sly smile. "But Perry, you don't read Greek."

"I guess I'll find someone to translate it," I said.

"Ah, Nai, yes, you will need someone to translate my brother's words."

"Exactly, pappou."

“And where will you find someone, Perry?” Again he gave me a wry smile, as he looked me in the eye. “How will someone know what my brother and I were thinking?”

I smiled and nodded in agreement with his argument.

“Well” he said as if the idea had just occurred to him, “I could translate.”

I smiled back at him and only took a few seconds to realize that this would be our project, together. He put his hand on my shoulder and then stuck it out towards me. We shook hands.

With a grin, I said “Ok, let’s go.”

And so we agreed I would meet with him every week, and he would tell me all over again, the stories of the killing, of the blood, of the planting, of the children, of fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, of brothers killing brothers, of the harvest, of treachery, of bravery and salvation. I walked to my car after this first conversation fully aware that I made him a promise that was not to be broken.

When I returned a week later, we started with the ritual that would, more or less, begin each story. My pappou would sit in his chair in the living room, waiting. When I entered the room, he always stood up and walked towards me with open arms. He invariably said, “Ah, it’s the writer.” We would hug and kiss. He always asked me the same three questions and I would greet my yiayia as she was sitting on the couch. When we hugged and kissed, she would smile and ask me, as always, if I wanted to eat something. I usually said no. She would, as usual, be slightly annoyed, and I, of course, always told her that I had already eaten. She would put some kind of food on the table anyway which I would inevitably eat.

Then we three walked into the dining room and sat down at the dining room table that became our work desk. Pappou sat across from me. On our first day speaking about his story, he began by looking at me directly in a very formal way. He sat straight. His blue eyes were shinning. His gaze was clear and sharp. His full head of gray hair was flecked with some strands of white and was meticulously brushed back from his face. He dressed that day as he did for all of our meetings, in a variation of the same clothes—a button-down flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up, his shirttails tucked into a pair of crisp, pressed khakis.

This was how he dressed years earlier when he was working full time with my father in the laundromats. Now, our project was to be his new work, and as such, he dressed for the part. My grandfather had one set of clothes for relaxing in the house, one set for work, another for going out to eat or to go shopping, and then there was his most important look, his church clothes. The only carry

over in attire were his church socks, which he often wore while sitting around the house, relaxing.

Yiayia enjoyed sitting with us. She would smile and nod and follow the conversation. She was also very helpful when my pappou had trouble translating certain Greek words, phrases, or expressions. She was born in America and her English vocabulary was much larger than my grandfather's. She would gently tap pappou on the arm when he was searching for a word, he would look at her, she would smile and nod toward me, perhaps supply a word or two. Then pappou would calm down and resume telling the story in English.

She also had a habitual way of dressing in a long black skirt worn by traditional older Greek women and a long-sleeved blouse, usually blue or white. Her hair was always nicely combed. They were the perfect portrait of an elderly Greek-American couple—attractive, proud and comfortable about who they were and what they had accomplished.

When we were settled in, my grandfather reached for his brother's notebook. He never opened it right away. Instead he placed one hand flat on the cover, the other on the table. Then he would lean forward and place both his elbows on the table and ask, "What do you want to know, Perrymou?"

I would answer: "What do you want to tell me?"

He always started by reading briefly, silently, to himself, from the old notebook to revive his memories, and then the story would begin.

The First Story:

Our homeland, Perrymou, Ελλάδα μας, Greece, is not just a land in tourist brochures where they show off our sunny islands, or ancient ruins, or modern busy cities like Athens, or those pretty little fishing villages with painted wooden boats and white stone houses that are built on steep hillsides over the water.

There is also the north of Greece, a beautiful land of tall mountains and deep green valleys. This place has clear blue lakes and small fast rivers. Everything is rich, fertile, and very green in the summertime, but it can also be cold and silent, and everything is covered in snow during our long winters.

These places change violently with the times. We Greeks from the mountains, we can be warm and sunny like the vineyards on a hot day, or cold and distant like ice in winter.

This is also the area that brought WWII to Greece. Our mountains and our village are near the Albanian border. They are in an area called Epirus, a territory that was fought over in modern days between Greece and Albania. After World War I, when Turkish control over that part of the world ended forever, *πάλι καλά* (“All is good”), North Epirus was given to Albania and South Epirus was given to Greece. This was not before the Turks killed hundreds of thousands of Greeks and Assyrians and over one million Armenians.

Then, Perry, in the 1930s, when I was just a little boy, there was a terrible depression. Everyone lost all their money. You must know about this from your studies, no? Well, the people were angry and dictators came to power. There was Franco in Spain, and a man named Salazar in Portugal. And that’s when that bastard Hitler ruled Germany and that fool Mussolini ran Italy.

But, Perry, I have to say, we also had our own fascist dictator, a man named Ioannis Metaxas, who thought Mussolini was a great, great man. But, *μερικές φορές ο διάβολος παίρνει λόγω του*. (He spat the words. Yiayia tapped him on the arm. He frowned.) Oh yes, in English, yes, sometimes the devil gets his due.

On October 28, 1940, at 4:00 in the early morning, after an elegant party at the German embassy, the Italian Ambassador, a man named Emmanuel Grazzi, went to see Metaxas and said to Metaxas: Greece has to let Italian forces enter Greek territory or Greece and Italy will be at war.

When Metaxas heard what Grazzi had to say, he made maybe one of the only good decisions he ever made. He said, *Όχι*, No! and that, Perry, is why Greeks all over the world celebrate October 28, *Επέτειος του Όχι*, Oxi Day, as one of our important holidays.

In the summer of 1939, Italy had occupied Albania in order to create an Italian presence in the Balkans. The southernmost province of Albania, Albanian Epirus or North Epirus was a territory with historic links to Greek Epirus or South Epirus. In ancient times, all of Epirus and the nearby island of Corfu was a Greek province that was, briefly, the most important Greek state when Epirus controlled large portions of Southern Italy. The term “Pyrrhic victory,” meaning, to win a battle but lose the war, comes from the Greek ruler Pyrrus who won victories against the Romans but eventually lost everything to the Roman Empire. Anyway, Perry, Epirus was Roman, then Byzantine, then Ottoman until after World War I, when it was split between Albania in the north and Greece in the south. But it remained mostly Greek, and the people spoke a dialect of Greek.

So, in November, after Metaxas said no to having Italian troops in Greece, Mussolini ordered the Italian army in Albania to invade Greece by marching

from North Epirus in Albania into South Epirus in Greece. This was the beginning of World War II for Greece. After the Italians invaded, our country was very united and we fought heroically, especially in those mountains where I was living when I was a young boy. Our Greek soldiers were trained mountaineers, and the brave mountain women, the women of our village, my mother and her sisters, my aunts, all volunteered and carried food and ammunition through deep snow over high mountain passes to support our soldiers as they resisted the Italians.

By December of 1940, there was a great counteroffensive by our Greek army that not only retook South Epirus but they were also able to push back the Italians deep into Albania. At the end of that fighting, Greece controlled almost all of North Epirus where they set up defensive positions called the Metaxas Line. That was one of modern Greece's greatest victories, and it happened against huge odds. It was also the first Allied victory against the German/Italian alliance that was sweeping across Europe and North Africa with little resistance.

So those were the times and that was the land and those were the people who were your ancestors, Perrymou, and now I can tell you our family's story.

Our village, Λάγκα (Lagka) in the province of Kastoria was a very small village with maybe, oh ... maybe 750 people. We had no running water in our houses. Instead, we had a fountain in the central village square where the women of Lagka would collect water and carry it in large jugs to our homes. There was no electricity. There were no electric lights. We used lanterns and torches to move around at night. There was only one telephone, and we never had any newspapers unless someone brought one from the city. We were not συνδεδεμένος (he looked toward yiayia who said, "Connected") *naí*, yes, connected to the outside world.

And, during winter, we were really cut off from the rest of Greece because Lagka was buried in snow. We survived on the food we put away during the spring, summer and early fall, and we all shared whatever we had with our neighbors.

Before the war started, no one in the other parts of Greece paid any attention to us. We had a mayor, one priest, and one head teacher. Each of these officials was respected and each of them earned our respect.

The mayor was a good man and a kind man who cared about everything in the village that needed to be dealt with, and he did that without ever getting any help from the central government. He did it all himself, and since he was not paid a salary, we all took care of him just as he took care of us.

The teacher was another important man. He ran our local school from his own home, and he wanted to make sure all of us had an education. It was a

simple, one-room school on the first floor of his house—all the children, both boys and girls of different ages, studied together, and the older children helped teach the younger children. There were few textbooks and not a great deal of reading material, but everyone was expected to learn to read and write modern Greek, and to master addition, subtraction and basic mathematic equations. Our “science” came from the practical experience of planting crops, caring for the land, and hunting and raising animals. Our moral and spiritual training came from studying the Greek Orthodox religion and the glorious history of ancient Greece and our later struggles to become a free and independent nation again.

Our teacher donated a piece of his own precious land to the village school and we turned it into a garden. Children, from the very small ones to teenagers, came together to work on this garden, and it became something very, very beautiful. We planted all sorts of vegetables from tomatoes to peppers, and we carefully marked them so we knew what we planted as it grew. During the winter, all of the children brought wood to our teacher’s home to keep all of us warm during our lessons.

Our priest was also very important. I remember that many, many times he would visit our home and ask my parents how we were doing in school. If any of us had problems, he would take the time to tutor us himself. If we were sick, he did what he could to find medicine. When the old people were dying, he helped care for them and comfort them and their families. Everyone in the village went to church every Sunday, and church service was an occasion that brought us all together in prayer no matter what problems we had.

In those days, we didn’t have much, only what we needed. And we had each other. I was the second oldest of seven boys. There was Panayiotis—he wrote this notebook here—me, Pericles, Harileous, Demetrios, Efthemios, Euripides, and Philipas. My mother’s name was Ourania and my father’s name was Athanasios. Nine of us. That was our family.

My father was very thin but very strong; he had high cheekbones and a slightly pointed nose. He always wore a hat with a brim in the front. He dressed very nicely all the time, and he was a very neat man.

Father was a tailor, and a tailor was a craftsman. We needed a tailor in the village, because there were no stores carrying ready-made clothes, so everything was done by hand. Although factories in the cities manufactured the cloth, it was the tailors working in their workshops in the small villages that cut and sewed the final garments. My father made everything, from everyday clothes for men and women and children, to valuable items for wedding dowries, to rough blankets to keep everyone warm in the winter.

My mother was a short woman with thick, wavy black hair and round cheeks. She always wore a big smile and a dress. When she was not working in our house, she worked in the fields, farming. She was loving and kind, but she was also *shpirtó*, that's a word from Albanian that we used for people with a fiery personality and sharp brains. When she thought no one was looking, she used to sneak cigarettes, but we all knew she did it.

I was closest with Panayiotis. We were always together. He stood a bit taller than me, and he had a lanky build. I was the shorter one, but I had wider shoulders. We both had coal black hair and dark, olive skin. We both had blue eyes. The other children in the village would make fun of our blue eyes, calling us cats. They would yell, “Γάτες!” (“Cats!”), when they saw us coming down the road. All our brothers had blue eyes, and when the children would mock us, we would end up fighting with them. Mostly it was Panayiotis and I who did the fighting. Then we would fight and wrestle with each other. When we went to school, we went together. We studied together. We did everything together.

Our home was very simple. It was built from wood and stone. On the first floor, we had a kitchen and a separate room for storing food. There was a small living room where we had a fire burning and where we would light candles so we could read and study. On the second floor, there was a bedroom for my parents and a bedroom for the seven boys.

There was another space at the back of the house where my father had his shop. He learned to be a tailor when he was fifteen, and he spent three years as an apprentice learning the trade. He was very good at his craft, and he made clothes for the entire village upon request, and he fitted them for each person. The house always smelled like leather.

The other houses in the village were more or less the same as our house, and most of the other men in the village, along with their wives and children, farmed the harsh, stony mountain land and developed other skills to provide some cash or items to barter for necessities. There were woodworkers, carpenters, and stonemasons, a shoemaker, a barber who, along with his wife, could tend to very simple medical and dental emergencies until the person could visit the doctors in Kastoria. There was a butcher although many butchered their own animals, and two small stores that stocked basic foodstuffs like sugar and salt and boxed or canned goods. There were two very simple *tavernas* where mostly men would gather to talk politics, discuss village affairs or conduct business. A blacksmith whose forge was used for all kinds of metalworking. In the winter, some villagers trapped rabbits, fox, ermine and mink, and then dried and scraped and stretched the pelts to be sent to the furriers in Kastoria where the skins were shaped and sewn into garments.

My father was not just a tailor. He was very skilled at many tasks where he used his hands. Panayiotis and I would go into the mountains with him and watch him split open trees to get pitch to burn. Then we would place the pitch in metal lanterns to give us light so we could stay up, sometimes until midnight, studying together. When our grandmother put us to sleep, she made sure that we said our prayers every night. We stood next to our beds, dropped to our knees, crossed ourselves, and said a prayer. Then we repeated this ritual ten times before we finally climbed into bed.

Both Panayiotis and I were very good at our studies. Before we were old enough to go to school, our parents taught us our letters and how to count, so we were prepared. We had a desire to learn. Both of our parents could read and write, which was unusual for our village. They appreciated learning because, when they were young, they were forced to sneak into school at night, since the Ottoman Turks, who ruled Greece, would not let them study in the Greek language.

Our life was simple. Each morning, when we woke up, we sat together and ate breakfast, mostly a piece of bread with butter. Then we would go off to school. My father went to his shop and my mother went to the fields. When we came home from school, we helped my mother in the fields.

My mother welcomed our help because she was working very hard through the morning and early afternoon. I remember her hands were rough from working, but her touch was always soft. She had a special ability to be both tough and gentle, and she raised us with this demanding love. When we were tired in the field, she didn't let us leave. Instead, she started singing. When she saw us get worried or tired she placed her hands on our shoulders and started singing the old Greek songs about love, exile, freedom, and pain. *Na*, yes, yes, I do remember she would look at us and start singing what I call her Wheat Songs.

After we worked in the field, it was time to go home, eat a simple meal—soup, maybe a bit of meat or cheese, and then study. Our mother always insisted that we study. All seven of us boys. She kept us in line. The whole village respected our family, and my mother was the center of our family.

We lived in poverty, but everyone did, so it was not special. The mountains of northern Greece had been a forgotten part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries. We were left alone and that was good because the only demands the Turks made upon us was that we pay our taxes to Istanbul, but being left alone also meant we received no money from the Ottomans, and because we were not connected to the modern world, our village life remained very simple. Then, when the kingdom of Greece gained its independence in 1832 with the

Treaty of Constantinople, we were still forgotten because the new government was controlled by the French, the Russians and the British who had defeated the Ottomans. They installed a German king, the Bavarian Prince Otto, because the Great Powers did not want a strong Greece independent of their influence. Besides, the new kingdom had a very small population, less than 800,000 people.

The Greeks fought a lot of wars over the next 100 years as they tried to unite all the Greek people in the Balkans and Asia Minor into one country. They gained more territory when they supported the Allies in World War II, and the population increased to over three million, but battles between the populist democrats who wanted to get rid of the king, and the royalists who wanted to keep a king created divisions that split the country to this day, Perry. So Greeks started fighting Greeks, and we mountain people remained poor no matter which side was in power.

The whole village worked the fields together. As children, we all went everywhere our parents went, and we helped with the harvest working alongside them. We harvested wheat, rye, corn, beans, and lentils, and we worked in teams. In the spring we cleared the land of weeds and wild grass. We planted new crops. Then we carefully kept the fields clear of weeds so the wheat could grow clean and strong. Everything was done properly with attention to detail because every plant was valuable. We couldn't get tired. When we did harvest, we kept what we needed and took the rest to nearby cities to sell in the markets.

The men made the day trips to the cities, exchanged their goods, and came home. We were excited when we waited for our father to return late at night after he left so early in the morning. We waited to get our small gifts that our father purchased from the market—mostly some kind of candy. One simple piece of candy for each of us brought such joy! My father walked up to the front door and we were all waiting for him in a clump of pushing and shoving children. He put one piece of candy into each of our hands and we devoured it. When the weather was warm, all us brothers would greet our father and then stay outside playing.

Each season was special in Lagka. Even the winter, although it made everything very difficult, was a beautiful picture. The summer and spring were especially beautiful. In April, when the snow melted, when spring came, everything turned green with new life and the wild flowers bloomed on the hillsides. There were green trees everywhere all the way into the far distance until our eyes saw the cool blue waters of the lake. It was a beautiful life, but it changed a lot when I was still just a boy.

After Mussolini ordered the invasion of Greece, and the Italian soldiers pushed their way south through Epirus, our beautiful mountains were filled

with the thunder of bombs, raging fires spread by the fighting, and clouds of thick white ash that rained down on everything. Then, when we fought back and defeated the Italians, it was peaceful again in the spring of 1941, but Hitler, furious with Mussolini for the Italian humiliation at the hands of the Greeks, flooded German troops and tanks from Bulgaria into Thessaloniki in northeastern Greece. The German panzer advance was relentless, and despite valiant Greek resistance, Greece was forced to surrender. Then the Italians came back into Greece from Albania and occupied our mountains along with the Germans. Our poor country was swallowed by the beast.

But even before the worst horrors of the occupation destroyed our little village, I experienced the terror of what was coming. A Thessaloniki Jew named Marko Yehoshua was the regional sales manager for Singer sewing machines. Before the war, the Jews of Thessaloniki, a city they called Salonika, were the majority population there. They were originally Jews from Spain who were thrown out of that country a long time ago by the Spanish queen, Isabella, who in that same year, 1492, sent Christopher Columbus to America. They spoke Ladino, Spanish really, among themselves, not the Yiddish you hear German and Eastern European Jews speak. But they also spoke Greek and considered themselves Greeks. They were very powerful in Greek political and commercial life, and they were very passionate soldiers in the Greek army, fighting against the Italians and especially against the Germans.

I had seen Marko many times when he visited Lagka to sell equipment to my father. He was a kind and gentle man who often visited our house just to chat even if there was no sale to be made, because he and my father were friends. Somehow he sent word to us that he had been trapped in Argos, a city on the Peloponnese, the southern part of Greece, by the rapid German advance and occupation of that peninsula. He was desperate to get back to Northern Greece where there were many Greek Jews from Thessaloniki fighting against the occupation. Marko told my father he had a contact that could smuggle him out of the country to Palestine if he could get to the mountains in the north.

My father sent me to Argos because he thought the Germans wouldn't stop and question a young boy who wasn't old enough to be in the army. He was right, and I was able to get to Argos without being stopped at any of the German roadblocks. I found Marko hiding in the factory of one of his Greek clients, a man who was willing to protect him until I got there.

Our plan was to travel together and I was to be his son. I brought a fake identity card for him, and we found old clothes that, when he dressed in them, made him look like he lived in a Greek village. I remember being worried about

his hands because they were soft, not calloused, not the kind of hands I saw every day, not the hands of a person who worked in the field, so we made him wear gloves.

When we left Argos, there were many Greeks walking along the roads and hitching rides. Total chaos was happening all across Greece, and people did their best to avoid being caught up in the fighting. I was used to all this confusion because I saw so many crazy things when I travelled down to Argos. But Marko was very nervous. Although he was the adult and I was the child, I worried about him and I tried to tell him jokes to calm him down.

Our return to the north was working very well until we got to the bridge that crossed over the Megdovas River near the village of Episkopi. The Germans were very alert around our bridges because they were prized targets.

There was a huge, long line of people carrying all their things trying to cross the bridge, and we grew very nervous as we slowly came up to the checkpoint. Suddenly, not far ahead in line, a woman started crying when two German soldiers dragged a young man out of the line. She wrapped her arms tightly around the man, and so the soldiers also dragged the woman, who was kicking and screaming, out of the line. Then, at the edge of the bridge, one of the soldiers pulled out his pistol from his holster and shot both the man and the woman in the back of the head. Blood spurted from their skulls as they collapsed onto the ground. Then the shooter yelled to another soldier and the two of them lifted the bodies and heaved them over the bridge into the muddy waters of the Megdovas.

After that, Marko was shaking so badly he couldn't stop, and I was terrified. But so was everyone around us. As it turned out, this was a good thing. We were no more upset than the others being questioned, and the German soldiers didn't want any more problems, so they only asked simple questions, made quick investigations of our ID cards, and hurried everyone on through the checkpoint.

We did make it back to Kastoria. A few days later, we brought Marko to the Albanian border where we spoke to villagers there who would hide him until he could escape to Palestine. The villagers there were very friendly and they, like many Albanians at that time, took care of Jews. They had *besa*—they will die before they go against their word. These were noble people, our neighbors in Albania.

After we left him, I never saw Marko again. I don't know if he made it to Palestine. I hope so, because in 1944, the Ladino Jews of Salonika were rounded up and transported in cattle cars by train to Auschwitz where they were murdered. Almost no Greek Jews survived the war. I had already seen that beast face-to-face on my journey with Marko, and I knew that the beast killed.

As the fighting against the Italians grew stronger in the mountains, we worried how we could save our big family with its nine members. The fierce battles were destroying our land. Fires burned off the grain in the fields. To make money, we cut down trees and crafted spoons and other things including tools for digging and trenching. We made wooden packsaddles and many other items that would be useful for carrying food and ammunition on mountain trails. We also made charcoal for heating and cooking.

Then we melted down our metal objects on the blacksmith's forge, and we made braziers to hold burning charcoal. We shaped iron that could be used for grills and roasting spits. We carried all of these things on our backs to the city, and the long walk seemed to last forever when we carried those heavy things down the mountainside. But we had no choice: if we did not go and trade what we could for wheat and corn and then return to our younger brothers and our mother, they would not have survived, so we walked.

Still, there was not enough to eat, so Panayiotis and I found a job at a restaurant in Kastoria. Since we often worked late into the night, we made beds out of the chairs in the restaurant and we slept there only to start work again at daybreak. That restaurant was able to stay in business because we served the soldiers who were fighting the Italians. When the soldiers left after eating, Panayiotis and I swept up their leftovers and that was what we ate. That was how hard those times were. If we could save food for our family by eating crumbs, we did.

But the restaurant couldn't stay open after our Greek soldiers were defeated. We were forced to leave Kastoria and go back home.

When we returned home the second time, the situation was very, very bad. The fields were completely empty. Our father couldn't make any money in his shop. No one in the village had money for clothes; they didn't even have money for food. Mussolini's men, under Hitler's orders, began to take and kill our animals. This was the beginning of our starvation, just one of the many terrible things the beast forced upon us.

With that ominous closing phrase, my pappou set aside the plain white paper napkin he had been methodically folding and unfolding. Then he made a circle on the tabletop with his hands.

His hands were always a marvel to me. As a child and even in my adolescence, I would watch his hands very closely when he spoke to me. They were working hands. His skin had been bruised and torn, his fingers gnarled,

his knuckles thick from years of manual labor—working on the farm in the mountains as a child, then as a dishwasher when he first came to America, and eventually as his own mechanic for the small chain of laundromats he owned. His hands were dark, sunbaked, olive on the outside, but perhaps only in contrast, very pale white on the inside. He often flung them around as he spoke. His hands were like his personality, both soft and hard.

In his appearance, pappou exhibited classical Stoicism. He walked with an erect posture, his chest out and chin up with an uncanny alertness for someone his age. His steps were very deliberate and confident, even when he slowed with advancing years. Life and business had hardened his exterior and made him tough, taciturn in speech and hot tempered when working.

These traits were juxtaposed to how he interacted with his family, his neighbors and his friends. His story about Marko reminded me about the close relationship he had with his Albanian neighbors in the Bronx. When they first arrived on the block, my pappou offered money to the father to help them get established. It was not a great amount, but it was from the love and respect pappou had for their culture. I have wondered if the story about Marko prompted this kindness toward a stranger.

As I was taking notes, my pappou leaned back in his seat. He locked his fingers and placed his hands between his chest and his stomach, and took a deep breath. He exhaled and thought to himself, and then he said, “You know, Perry, we didn’t feel poor. We didn’t have much, but that didn’t mean anything because no one had much. No one had more than anyone else.”

“That was why, when the war came, when starvation and death came to our village, our loss was more...” he searched for the right word, “σφοδρός...”

Yiayia said, “Intense.”

“Nai, yes, yes, intense. We began to *feel* poor. But when I say we felt like we were poor, I mean we felt like we lost something we once had. We felt ‘lessness.’ Is ‘lessness’ a word, Perry?”

Yiayia shook her head, no, but I shrugged. “Works for me.”

“Before the war, we didn’t feel the loss of ‘anything more.’ There *was* nothing more.”

Yiayia nodded. “People had to work very hard, but I think they were happy.”

“Yes,” continued pappou, “work is not a bad thing. Your father and I, we work all the time. You’ve seen us. You’ve worked with us. And I see you. You also work all the time. You know work is...” he slapped the table, “...work is good.” As his voice grew louder, yiayia laughed as she watched pappou’s growing strength.

He continued: “Being tired isn’t painful, it’s a gift.”

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