

A Pacifist's Life and Death

In memory of my grandfather who died for freedom and social justice,
two ideas still embattled in 21st Century Europe

A Pacifist's Life and Death:

*Grigorios Lambrakis and Greece
in the Long Shadow of Civil War*

By

Evi Gkotzaridis

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The political leadership did not realize that this deep state would drag it to the precipice and push it over the edge. This is the great lesson! Whoever limits democracy or helps in its tearing-down for selfish reasons, as the Right-wing Establishment did then, dooms, not only the people by putting them through immense suffering but also themselves because they will be without doubt the next victims.

Georgios Romaios

I have begun to emerge from the events. I have come out, like the diver after a long header, breathless, with my eyes tingly with salt because I insisted on keeping them open in the depths in order to find out things that would help me draw the map of your submerged Atlantis. So many layers of water covered me, and yet in this absolute darkness, it was you who gave me my heart's excitement. I want to forget you and save myself from your beauty that weighs on me. I need to retire to a neutral region where you do not exist. I cannot resurrect dead fires. I prefer living fires even if compared to you they seem like ash.

Z. Vassileos Vassilikos

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FOREWORD

How does one write about dislocation and silence? I have often wondered. Yet most of the time, I was just content living my life, the life I had dreamt of and which for some odd reason prevented me from holding a mirror up to myself. I was good at postponing and procrastinating, at telling myself each time the agonizing voice inside cried for attention that the timing was not right. I sensed obscurely that I was conniving in a silence bigger than mine. It was a silence that came from the depths of a past full of dark corridors and walled doors. It may well be that this silence had been imposed on me. Even so, I needed to confess to myself that my faintheartedness had unnecessarily prolonged its tyranny. On the surface, I was an aspiring historian endlessly fascinated by how men and women succeeded in overcoming and making sense of horrifying events, of events that had stretched their physical and mental strength to breaking point. Underneath, I was a woman afraid of her own shadow, stuck in a no man's land of her own making, obsessed with the past, yet incapable to muster the courage to break its spell. My behaviour had been an exercise in self-censorship. Growing up in a family where disunity ran deep, I learnt, from a tender age, to repress my opinions, knowledge and especially my doubts. The feeling, comparable to walking on eggshells or worse negotiating a narrow passage through a minefield, was unbearable.

There were of course highlights, mostly professional accomplishments, but a nagging feeling of fragility always overshadowed them. There were also moments of devastating anger, when my loss of control would scare me out of my wits. One such moment, I remember, was during an argument I had with my uncle. Feeling chatty and bouncy, I was sharing my plans of attending a conference on the Civil War. It was for me a special occasion, corresponding to a long overdue decision to engage more proactively in my own history. Suddenly my uncle cut me short, interjecting: "What on earth did I think I was doing?" For a split second, I was tempted by my usual silence, but then, I spurted clumsily the words that released me from my inward chains. Curtly I replied, "Doing what a historian does". Provoked by my abruptness, my uncle launched into a tragicomic tirade about how I was out of vanity exposing my family to unnecessary attention. Determined to remain calm and collected, I tried to reason with him, arguing that the Civil War had come under serious scrutiny from historians and no aspect of it was still taboo for them. In

spite of my best intentions, our row escalated into nasty and snide nonsense. Yet, when I was able again to process my emotions, I began to wonder what buried memories had lurked underneath my uncle's irrational outburst. Some years later, I heard him, at once surprised and embarrassed, describing in a voice full of repressed tears how after the killing of my grandfather on 10 July 1944, he and his younger sister were forcibly taken to an orphanage run by wealthy ladies where they stayed for four years. Yearning for the maternal caress, in the dead of night, they fled twice, desirous to find their way back home, but before long, their excitement yielded to the fear of getting lost or being caught, hunger and exhaustion. Naturally, my curiosity was kindled and I entreated him to continue his tale of woe. But this little window on the past, all the more precious for its spontaneity, was shut sententiously with the remark that man must live in the present not in the past. At times, the thought crossed my mind that my family had elevated this slamming of the door on the past into a *Modus Vivendi*; a convenient compromise that relieved the older generation of delving into a loss they had never mourned and the younger generation of the responsibility of inquiring. Everybody knows that ignorance is bliss and when my nephew found the courage to ask about his great-grandfather, he was rebuffed with the well-meaning aside, 'you don't need to burden yourself with all this'. We were brainwashed to believe that our success and happiness lay in a future entirely cut off from the past. Social scientists have sought to get to the bottom of this phenomenal paradox when survivors of tragic events conspire in the disintegration of their own history. They do so in two ways: by repressing an overwhelming experience and/or by choosing not to pass on their stories and the feeling enmeshed around them to their descendants, often out of the paranoid belief that they can thereby protect them from a forever-looming adversity. Clinical studies on Holocaust survivors have even reported a 'psychic closing off': a state when the ability to access one's feelings and by the same token, to bond with one's children is lost.¹ This may explain why I learnt late in my life that during the war my grandfather had undertaken to supply regularly ELAS partisans in the mountains of Macedonia with provisions. One day, on his way back from one such perilous mission, in his village of Agios Athanassios, Germans arrested him along with two cousins. All three were killed on the spot in an act of collective punishment. A villager had informed on them. In a village overwhelmingly Right-wing, such acts of denunciation were the rule, not the exception and my grandfather was well aware of the high risk he was taking. Their bodies were never found and there are one or two gruesome stories about what might have happened to them. My grandmother became

a widow at the age of thirty and perforce remained in the village. Quietly she hid her pain and tried to make herself as inconspicuous as she could as if an ineradicable stigma hung over her head. She breathed the hostile atmosphere of the village for long years, knowing full well that she lived in close proximity of the man who had been responsible for her husband's killing. I was fifteen years old when I saw Z, Costa Gavras' cinematographic rendition of the murder of Grigorios Lambrakis. Most of its complex historical and political implications eluded me. Yet it was an ineluctable and emotional overflowing of the past into the present, of a past that as time rolled by, ripened into an imperious order. By some felicitous juggling of fortune, it felt as if I had just been offered Ariadne's thread, the means to escape the labyrinth and peel off the layers of mystery that shrouded my petty existence. The movie became an important point of reference, a fundamental part of my political and intellectual scaffolding. It gave me my first comforting hint that my pulverized self was actually part of something bigger and it helped me to forge my hitherto poorly crafted identity. It fed a hunger for belonging and relatedness that I, a second generation Greek exile living in the cosmopolitan and liberal milieu of Parisian society, could not admit to without the fear of committing a *faux pas*.

When I started research on this book, I was dismayed to discover how little Greeks - especially the younger generations born after 1980 - knew about Grigorios Lambrakis. How could an iconic figure like him, a man whose life and death were so intimately linked to the fight for democracy in this land, almost drop from collective memory? Had the Greeks lapsed into such bottomless complacency since the *metapolitefsi* - the restoration of democratic rule after the Colonels' dictatorship? Had they been so content all these years as to take democracy for granted and be oblivious of its horrible travails in the 1960's? Should this apparent dulling of the political sense induced by relative prosperity in the 1980's and 1990's be an occasion for rejoicing or bemoaning? All this seems to change now. With a severe economic and political crisis upon us, and a prevalent feeling that the *external factor* under the shape the TROIKA restricts our finances and dictates our domestic affairs, concern for infringement of our constitutional norm and for an unprecedented democratic deficit has sadly reappeared with a vengeance. This situation is compounded by the moralizing crusade some European leaders and media launched against Greece. The captious campaign to lampoon it as a 'childish' nation or an economic pariah, bereft of discipline, industriousness and decency, in need of harsh punishment, has gingered up the feeling of nationalist indignation and led to a spectacular re-opening of old wounds. Sensitive questions put

on the back burner, six decades ago, like the never-claimed Occupation loan and the mostly relinquished wartime reparations following the 1953-Allied agreement in London, endorsed also by Greece, to write off over 60% of Germany's debt, have been pushed back on the agenda. Behind the revival of these questions, oftentimes casually dismissed as a sleight of hand of an incorrigible people dead set against changing or paying its debt, and however ill-timed it may be from a tactical point of view, lies a grief of bewildering magnitude. Worse still, Fascism, against which Lambrakis and so many of his contemporaries fought with sacrificial solidarity, has reared its ugly head again. Niall Ferguson put once his finger on something important, albeit well known among historians, when he said that economic volatility begets political extremism and violence. With the pauperisation of Greek society imposed by the TROIKA austerity programme, we witness a frightening regression into past and quite primitive behavioural patterns. The primitive reflex to blame the current situation on foreigners or individuals considered incompatible with a rigid definition of 'Greekness' is noticeable again and not only among individuals belonging to the Far-Right. The neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party, which used to be the standard joke of most Greeks, has eighteen deputies in Parliament since June 2012.

Even more baffling is the fact that this party managed to get hundreds of votes in the villages of Kalavrita and Distomo where Germans had carried appalling civilian massacres on 13 December and 10 June 1944. Elias Panagiotaros of Golden Dawn proclaimed with frightening jubilation the coming of a new civil war opposing Greek nationalists against all others: those who in his opinion have betrayed the country.ⁱⁱ Crises are rarely good counsellors though and usually inspire questionable comparisons and telescoped judgments. Hence, along with a new nostalgia for the dictatorship, sometimes voiced with a tongue-in-cheek humour, and other times in a more serious disposition, one also witnesses a tendency to reject an entire generation, namely that generation Grigorios Lambrakis with his life and death galvanized into a formidable movement of resistance. It is blamed for conspiring in the building of a deeply corrupt and clientelist society during the *Metapolitefsi* whose ultimate collapse with all the dire consequences was foretellable. It is quite unnerving to watch twentieth first century Greek society being tempted once again by a Right-wing extremism, which in the past led it into the horror, suffering and inanities of a seven-year dictatorship. The pairing of Golden Dawn with the period 1967-1974 is pertinent since the former was founded in 1985, presumably after its leader Nikolaos Michaloliakos, during a brief sojourn in jail in 1976, met with Georgios Papadopoulos, the number one

of the dictatorship.ⁱⁱⁱ The impression of *plus ça change, plus c' est la meme chose* gripped me with a mixture of both incredulity and horror when in the May 2012 elections, my eyes caught the name of Alexandros Giosmas, running as a candidate in the First Periphery of Salonica, and listed first on the ballot papers of LAOS, (Popular Orthodox Rally), the ultra-nationalist party led by Georgios Karatzaferis. In the past, Karatzaferis had made repeated and generous overtures to Golden Dawn inviting them to form a credible anti-Left front. As for Alexandros Giosmas, he has joined - by his own admission - the ranks of Golden Dawn since. Alexandros is by no means a fortuitous nationalist. He is the son of Xenophon Giosmas, the former Nazi sympathizer, collaborator and abettor of Grigorios Lambrakis' assassination.

This political murder - the most important in the post-war history of Greece, has the status of 'a past that won't pass' to paraphrase the German Ernst Nolte, as this was exemplified in a most surreal way, when in 2010 the Rescue Society of Historical Archives in Salonica found the bloodstained and torn clothes of Lambrakis. This material, which served as evidence for the trial, had lain buried in the basement of the Court building. When the Appeals Council of October 2008 decided to reduce space congestion, it was saved miraculously from destruction along with other seminal case files. But this status is also illustrated by a book called *Who Did Not Kill Lambrakis* written by Archimidis Stabolidis, the son-in-law of Xenophon Giosmas. Dedicated to the "lofty obligation" to "rehabilitate Giosmas' memory" and all of those who were "unfairly accused, mistreated and slandered" the book is despite its claims to the contrary, a libellous harangue, which by insulting and taunting in every direction, ends up being a hymn to the "glorious and honourable Right; the *nationalist-minded* faction composed of the Gendarmerie and the Security Bodies which rescued the nation from the "Slav traitors, slayers, and bandits".^{iv}

If we exclude some hagiographic works, the literature on Lambrakis is surprisingly sparse, perhaps indicative of a general feeling that the contours of his life are familiar, at least to the Greeks. Yet, even this assumption can be challenged as sometimes heroization blurs or simplifies the truth. In English, however, to the best of my knowledge, nothing has been written. Important activists such as Bertrand Russell or Peggy Duff, who were intensely involved in the campaign for nuclear disarmament and chose to use the CND platform to mobilize interest in Greece's democratic deficit, have occasionally mentioned him. But no work in the English language focuses on his life and the political consequences of his mysterious assassination on 22 May 1963. This book is an attempt to fill

the gap. Part biography, part history, it sets his example against a larger domestic and international backdrop. It examines the events and people that shaped his character and political sensibility, the obscure circumstances surrounding his untimely death, the shadow forces that orchestrated his assassination in May 1963, the catalytic effects it had on the political life and finally the grave democratic deficit that plagued Greece throughout the post-Civil War period. It also explores in depth how the imperative to fight the Cold War put a brake on the punishment of Greek collaborators and justified a phenomenon of paramilitarism and a degree of foreign intrusion thoroughly incompatible with normal definitions of Western legality and democracy. It delves into the anomie of the 1960's, the debasement of the policing, governmental and judicial organs which his murder exposed in a devastating manner, and the short-sightedness of party leaders who wasted opportunities for a meaningful dialogue and an earlier return to democratic legality and stability, thereby offering to the Junta the occasion it had been waiting for to take over in April 1967. In short, through the prism of Lambrakis' life and death, it provides a dramatic window into the period prior to the Colonels' dictatorship.

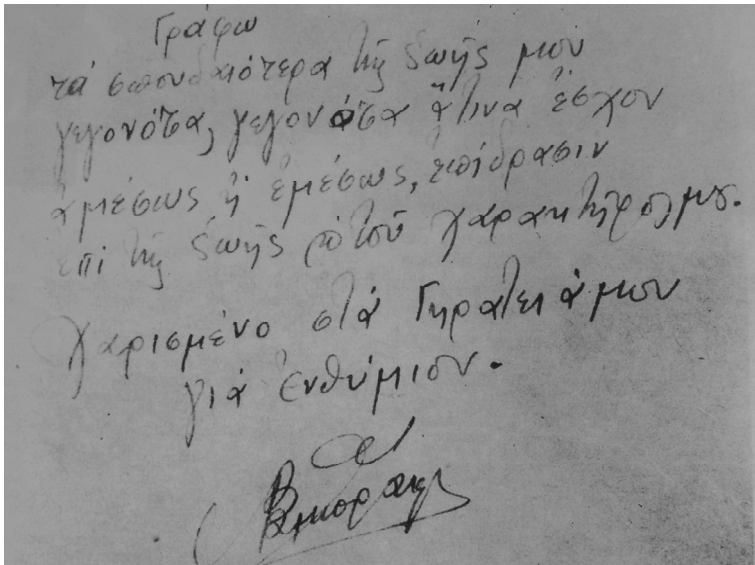
Of the seven existing studies in Greek on Lambrakis' life, four proved important for this book. The first one was published in 1966 and received a prize for the "most exhaustive coverage" of the Affair Lambrakis. It was used extensively during the trial of Lambrakis' murderers, notably by Pavlos Delaportas, the Leading Prosecutor, who called it 'the Koran' to praise its accuracy. Written by Ioannis Voultepsis (1923-2010), a journalist from *Avgi*, who together with two others, Georgios Romaios and Georgios Bertzos, carried out the investigation in lieu of the police, it has undeniable value as a document of its genre of docudrama. With a fictionalized style, there for dramatic purposes, it is a day-to-day description of the events leading up to and following Lambrakis' murder. Voultepsis openly distances himself from the 'official truth' of the Communist Party in his 1997 prologue, and provides us with important clues as to how the government, the press, and the police sought to cover up important facts by presenting the murder as an accident. He also divulges how, before the dictatorship, his book was stopped from having a wide circulation because "it collided with the literally brutal and 'inimical' reaction of the Communist-led editorial mechanism of EDA".^v Apparently, the Communist censors sought to impress upon the minds of the Greek people that the Karamanlis Government was responsible for Lambrakis' murder, and that it was pointless to search for 'impartial justice' in a 'bourgeois state.' According to Voultepsis' account, EDA tried to

control the writing process. His refusal to comply with their covert injunction was not forgotten: when, in May 1967, Voultepsis asked Panagiotis Katerinis, the Party Secretary of the *Avgi* journalists, for protection, the latter declined on the grounds that "he [Voultepsis] alone was responsible for all he did. He was not acting in our [EDA's] name."^{vi} The second book to address Lambrakis' murder, *Dolofonia Lambraki* (Assassination Lambrakis), is based on a close analysis of the primary documents from the official investigation and trial that took place between October and December 1966. The author is Pavlos Pretridis (1947-2000), a professor in the faculty of law at the University of Salonica and a peace activist himself.^{vii} The third book, *Grigorios Lambrakis: O Andreiomenos* (Lambrakis: the Defiant) is a traditional cradle to grave biography written immediately after his death. Although it does not aspire to be analytical, nor does it provide the reader with any substantial historical background, it shows Lambrakis' multi-faceted personality and his early social and political activism at key junctures of Greece's national history; i.e. - during the Axis Occupation and the December fight of 1944. It was presented by the author himself, in front of the newly founded *Democratic Youth Movement - Grigorios Lambrakis* in 1963.^{viii} Last but not least, is *Z*, a work of fiction written by Vassileos Vassilikos in 1966, which owes much to Voultepsis' book and served as a basis for a memorable political thriller film directed by Costa Gavras in 1969.^{ix} Both the novel and the film used multiple narrative techniques, compellingly rendering the political instability and confusion of the 1960's. In addition to the use of primary sources, this book also relies on the comprehensive coverage in the Press of the Trial of Lambrakis' murderers and the exposure of the deep state, especially as it was revealed by Georgios Bertzos' and Charalambos Loukakis' Official Reports. Indeed, both reports found arresting evidence of its complex operation and the anti-Communist campaign under way at least since 1958. The Centrist *Eleftheria* and the main Salonica newspaper, *Makedonia*, contained verbatim recording of the Trial's proceedings, of the Reports and the heated debates they provoked in Parliament.

CHAPTER ONE

“NOT INTERESTED IN POLITICS - ONLY ATHLETICS AND SCIENCE!”

“I am writing the most significant events of my life, those events that directly or indirectly shaped my life and my character. It will be a memento and a gift for my old self.” These are the first words my hungry researcher’s eyes read and my heart quickens with emotion. The flowing pen strokes and the round and neatly shaped letters of this confident handwriting are those of Grigorios Lambrakis; the most genial and exceptional personality of the last quarter of the turbulent 20th century in Greece, and this is how his diary starts. The date is 27 December 1936. He is twenty-four years old. By then he is already a medical student and a Balkan athletic champion.



Γράφω
τα βασικότερα της ζωής μου
γεγονότα, γεγονότα ή/και έχον
αξίως ή επείως, ενδιαφέρον
στη ζωή μου του παρελθόντος.
Χρησιμεύει ως ημερολόγιό μου
για ενθύμιον.
Γ. Λαμπράκης

Figure 1: The opening lines of GL's diary in his own handwriting (12/36).

The calm conviction that he has embarked on a personal odyssey worthy of being told, and the optimistic resolution to leave his mark on this world, regardless of the hurdles can be gleaned between the lines. Yet for whoever knows how his bright life was cut short, a life he had squandered with so much generosity for the welfare of his fellow-countrymen, freedom, democracy and world peace, there is a special poignancy in this opening statement since history had in store for this valuable material another purpose. It served not as a memento to reminisce a life rich in experiences, joys and accomplishments in his old days, which never came, but as a pious treatise on his youth he was never able to bring to light with his own hands. His journal, evidence of so much promise halted prematurely, became also a symbol of what documentary director Stylianos Charalambopoulos called the *Unfinished Spring*¹; the grand hopes of a generation Grigorios kindled with his defiance of the powers that be, but which were dashed by his murder, the political crisis of July 1965 and the Colonels' coup of 1967. Grigorios was born in Kerasitsa, a small village in the mountainous region of Arcadia in the Peloponnese on 3 April 1912. Cordoned off from the sea, nestled in the fertile plains of ancient Tegeas, at the foothill of Mount Parmonas, protected from the humming and bustle of the city of Tripolis situated ten kilometres away, the village is an Eden, tranquil and beguiling. It is surrounded by farm holdings and is replete with apple, pear, and sweet and sour cherry orchards. Springtime there holds an absolute delight for all the senses. The lush fields of red poppies stretch as far as the eye can see. The beautiful violet shades of lilac and the purple bougainvillea adorn the stone houses and give off their desirable scent. The warm and delicate fragrance of thyme and honey ever-present in the air titillates one's appetite. The blossoms of fruit trees glow with white and pink lights, and the sounds of water springs and rivulets gushing in and around the fields are like a soothing caress lulling one into a state of contented peace. Its name *Kerasitsa* only increases this feeling of mellifluous harmony, since it is a diminutive of *kerasos* - the ancient Greek word for 'cherry'. This halcyonic atmosphere makes the visitors almost forget how much Tripolis and the surrounding region suffered in the hands of the Axis powers during World War II, when many Arcadians, joined the Resistance, either by leaving for the mountains to seek refuge and organize guerrilla warfare or by secretly helping the partisans from within the city. The German administration, which set its headquarters in Tripolis, was ruthless when it came to suppressing spontaneous displays of civilian defiance or neutralizing resistance activity. Among the countless brutal reprisals that stand out in local memory are the hanging of ten men from balconies and

traffic light columns along the street of Taxiarchon on 15 January 1944, the execution of thirty-six men at the Church of Saint Athanassios by the collaborationist Security Battalions of the Southern Peloponnese, led by Col. Dionysios Papadongonas, at dawn of May Day 1944, or the execution of 212 men who had been held in the prison of Tripolis, at Vigles, on 23 February 1944. The physical perpetrators of the horrendous crimes at Saint Athanassios were not Germans, but Greeks with a certain amount of cold-blooded shrewdness who judged that their sabotage of the war of liberation was necessary in order to undercut the hegemonic presence of Communism inside the Resistance and society at large. Sometimes rationalized as political expediency or as an impulse to protect civilians from the violent propensities of the ELAS guerrillas, which at times appeared morally unperturbed by the consequences of their actions, collaborationism becomes harder to fit into these explanations when it is observed over a longer time span. For there is a persistent undercurrent of anti-Communism and Philo-Nazism running through Greece's history from at least the 1930's down to 1967, one that is retrievable by observing the clandestine dialogue conducted between individuals of the deep state and representatives of the official state. Certainly, for Col. Papadongonas, something more than stern calculation must have lain at the bottom of his extremism if we give credence to the many chilling reports of his gruesome crimes by both well-known politicians and simple folk. He was so keen to assist the Wehrmacht that Hitler felt impelled to send him a letter of gratitude.² After the Liberation, Kerasitsa, like other villages of Tegeas, was drained completely of its inhabitants. Dire poverty and the raw memories of brutality, fear, and hunger pushed many to emigrate to America, Australia and Canada. But the experience of uprooting was also a sequel of the Civil War (1947-49) as villagers feeling dreadfully exposed to the violence of both sides sought refuge in the big cities or were dragooned to do so by a paranoid government which believed that the fewer people in the villages, the less support the Communist rebels would have.

Before the calamity of those conflicts that left deep emotional scars on the collective psyche, Grigorios' father, Georgios Christos, had presided with dedication over a large family. He married first Demetra with whom he had seven children. Theodoros, the youngest, was just nine months old when his mother died. Luckily, his father who was reputed for his meek disposition, hard work and stamina, married again, this time with Panagiota, with whom he had another seven children. In the village, 'Uncle Georgios' was a man for all jobs: farmer, carpenter and shopkeeper. Grigorios was the fourth child of that second marriage. Before

him came his sister Efstathoula, his brother Dimitrios, his sister Athena, after him a sibling who died at birth, and another two sisters, Fani and Marigo. From these two marriages, fourteen children were born, most of them girls. The first two sons with wife Demetra, Constantine and Antonios, still very young, boarded an ocean liner one early morning, and sailed to North America where an uncertain future awaited them. Miraculously, both did well there and Antonios, the one blessed with the most remarkable physical looks, even earned the sobriquet of 'handsome Anthony' among the community of the Hellenic Diaspora. In those days, women were seen as 'outstanding bills' because the men of the family had a duty to ensure that they married well and were given to their future husbands with sizeable dowries. When the son next in line Christos passed away at the young age of thirty, Theodoros took over the responsibility of building up dowries and providing for the welfare of his sisters. It was not a light burden. When Theodoros married Aristeia Souvaliotou, it was the turn of Grigorios to look after the last hitherto unbetrothed sister, Fani.



Figure 2: GL with mother Panagiota and father Georgios.

Grigorios had no reason to envy his half-brother Antonios for he too was a delight to the eyes. He had a physique few women could resist. Tall (6 feet and 1.22 inches), athletic, with a lissome and broad-shouldered carriage, he was a dignified blend of strength and grace. He had eager and penetrating dark eyes, a large and smooth forehead, sculpted cheekbones, a square and determined chin, and a fine jaw line that sometimes relaxed into a warm and playful smile. His hands were sinewy and ended in long, anxious and delicate fingers. This man exuded charm, *joie de vivre* and a certain intensity. Still Grigorios' natural elegance came really from within. Those who have met him remembered his personable manners, his outsized almost boyish enthusiasm, and his steadiness of character, which right away gave one the feeling of being in safe company. He was always ready to offer his charitable help, both practical and financial, to those in need, so much so that his nearest and dearest remember him as having a perpetual leak in his wallet. Prone to spontaneous outbursts of familiarity and friendliness that shined through the way he patted others heartily on their back, gave firm and lingering two-handed handshakes, lay a gentle hand on their shoulder, listened to their troubles with patient solicitude, he made a point of showing that people mattered to him a great deal. He had a largeness of heart, an ability to empathize, to hold another person's experience and feelings inside him. He was a 'door-less heart' as his old companion Manolis Glezos said. He had little inhibition and he spoke with disarming candour and above all no trace of political correctness. He lacked the 'sieves of cheap calculation' of those well-seasoned and cynical politicians who are after promoting their own narrow interests primarily. The young Grigorios attended primary school in his village (1919), then secondary school in the provincial town of Tegeas (1924) and high school in the city of Tripolis (1927)³ excelling each step of the way and singling himself out for his natural propensity to learn quickly and well but also for displaying a certain unplumbable and irreducible restiveness. After he passed his gymnasium certificate, in 1931 he enrolled as a student at the Business and Accounting School of Panagiotopoulos in Piraeus. This choice was his father's wish, which he did not dream of opposing, who wanted him to lend a hand at home and in the future take charge of the family shop. His eldest half-brother, Theodoros, was already a fully trained doctor and surgeon in Piraeus. A man who early on had decided that the harsh demands of farming and the monotonous pace of pastoral life did not match his idiosyncrasy, he was happy to assist whoever dreamed of bigger goals. At first, Grigorios felt a deep moral obligation not to disappoint his father's expectations. When he finished accounting school, he tried hard to infuse in himself some genuine excitement, but in

vain. With affection and guilt, he remembers: “My father was happy because his successor would be a real businessman.” Yet Grigorios’ heart longed for the high open skies, for a life of scientific exploration and challenge, however hard he tried to silence it even from himself. “I had not taken any definitive decision,” he tells us. A summer’s day of June 1932, he headed back to Kerasitsa feeling “some calm satisfaction” at the idea that he was now ready to assume responsibility for the bookkeeping of the family shop: “I arrived all joyful and clamorous. How enthusiastic I was then. A deeper part of me though could not help noticing that my enthusiasm was evaporating like thin air seemingly against my will. More and more my thoughts turned to Piraeus.” His father saw him “serious, withdrawn and lost in deep thoughts.” He sensed that he was different from his other children and “his soul ached”. One morning while he was weaving garlic, outside the hutch overlooking the church, “truly moved and pained” he told his queerly pensive offspring: “My son, I am sorry to put you in the mud.” This aphorism on the grinding toil of a village life became suddenly a means to Grigorios’ breakthrough, setting him free and provoking a marvellous transformation: “Well, that was it. This was the spark that lit the candle of my obsession to steer in the dark alleys of success and overcome so many obstacles I encountered later in order to study,” he writes with the melodramatic tone of youth.

I thank my father for this sentence. If he had not uttered it, I would never have dared to tell him that I wanted to become a doctor and leave behind farming and the village. I kept thinking what would happen to our house if I left and my soul was in constant agony, yet I also wanted to become a doctor. I wanted to have my cake and eat it too. I wanted and the house with Grigorios there and Piraeus with Grigorios there too.⁴

Still, his father did not overcome his personal disappointment and apprehensions overnight. As for Grigorios, he could not help but describe with loving patience, his father’s colossal inner conflict: “But my son, all is good and holy, my poor old man would say. I know what you want to do and I endorse your decision. But what will happen to the house when I am dead? And all the farmland I have acquired with honest but abundant sweat? Besides, it will take you six years to study medicine, and you need 50.000 drachmas yearly. I have your sisters to look after and I am getting old and tired.” As a teenager, Grigorios was highly intelligent and headstrong, with what is more a naughty sense of humour, which he used sometimes to get his way. Constantine Dimopoulos, a former schoolmate, told, how one day, after having exhausted all sensible arguments, he decided to play a funny if a little nasty prank on his parents. He took an

old muzzle-loading rifle, which he overstuffed with gunpowder and paper and fired once in the sky. A deafening thud reverberated through the air, filling it with fumes and burnt paper. His mother ran to him in a state of complete panic, but found him safe and sound, carrying on his face a silly and roguish smile. With the threat that next time they would have to deal with his real suicide, his parents finally relented on his desire to study medicine. Fortunately, Theodoros like *a deus ex machina* gave the practical solution: “If I were to take charge of Grigorios’ studies, father, then surely you would not need to hover around busily in your old days? So if you still insist on educating him, I happily accept, but on the condition that you do not give a single penny out of your pocket and let me die poor on a mat.” After the problem was solved, his mother showed her relief: “Have my blessing, my little child. May God’s love light your path and show you how to become a good man and save yourself from this tyranny.” But despite this fortunate turn of the situation, his father still faltered at the idea of his fast-approaching separation from his sole remaining son on the farm. “Go in peace my son. Make sure you become a good man. I, while I am still able, will look after the girls and work the fields and after that, well God is almighty and merciful,” he would say again and again as if to convince himself to swallow the pill. Even so, there were also a few bitter times when with the “livid face of disgruntlement” he murmured: “What a pity isn’t it? So much work, so much battle, and those who will enjoy the fruits will be the sons-in-laws.”

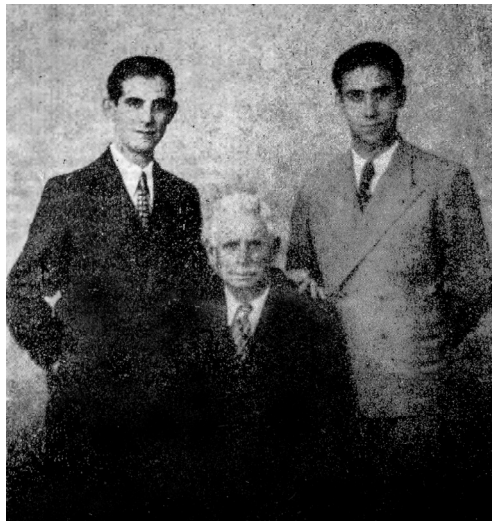


Figure 3: GL posing with his brother Theodoros and his father Georgios.

One cannot fail to be touched by the profound imprint this special moment left on Grigorios when his father showing magnanimity and wisdom chose to release him from the fetters of filial duty. For a man of his generation, who was quasi-illiterate, this was a manifestation of emotional intelligence wholly unusual; a coming to terms with his son's intrinsic difference and a proof of his unconditional love. Yet this vivid rendition of a generous soul in turmoil conveys also the mentality of the province, a province terrified of being abandoned to its own fate and fighting with tooth and claw to keep its children on the land. Greek society evinced then tenacious cleavages, not only ideological but also social, and the Capital with its peremptory opinions about a man's worth, fought with an equal passion to drive away the few bold ones like Grigorios who would not be disheartened by its rigidities. The concept of free education was not even conceivable as a wild dream then and the study of medicine reserved for the rich only, both as a matter of principle and for obvious financial reasons. Most of the time, the obstacles were insurmountable. Which young man of modest means could afford to see himself through university for undergraduate and graduate study for so many years without some revenue or scholarship? Moreover, what support could a poor student reasonably hope to receive if he dared to try obtaining his diploma on the sole strength of his abilities in a school where exams were passed on the absolute condition that one could exhibit a proof of purchase of the professor's textbook?⁵ Students like Grigorios were rare and what is more, a provocation for the bien-pensant gatekeepers of the status quo. In 1932, while Grigorios was still studying at the Panagiotopoulos School, an acquaintance persuaded him to enrol in the Piraeus Association, one of the oldest and most illustrious athletic clubs in Greece. As soon as he met Grigorios, the coach, Takis Sakellariou, sensed at once that he had in front of him a rare instance of an athlete, with remarkable jumping capabilities. He started to train him, believing firmly that he would grow into a wonderful jumper. Soon Grigorios was shortlisted in the national competition and joined the team, which was to represent Greece in the October 1933 Balkan track-and-field Championships, scheduled to take place in Athens at the Panathenaic Stadium. There, he distinguished himself for the first time by winning the third position at the triple jump. He gave four points to his country, which in the general ranking surpassed by a long way the other countries. Out of the twenty contests, the Greeks secured thirteen first victories and ten second ones.⁶

Grigorios grew up in a country that bore the hallmarks of political disunity and where democracy was already seriously troubled. In June 1933, around the time when he was preparing to sit the entrance exams for

the Faculty of Medicine, the country was convulsed by the news of an assassination attempt against the sixty-nine-year-old Eleftherios Venizelos; a leader of the national struggle against the Ottoman yoke, reputed for his defence of liberal-democratic principles and elected several times Prime Minister of Greece. The would-be mysterious assassins who chased Venizelos' car, and riddled it with bullets, caused the death of one security guard and the wounding of other passengers, including his wife Helena Schilizzi, who sustained light injuries. This attempt on his life was not the first. On 30 July 1920, two days after he signed the Treaty of Sèvres with the Ottoman Empire, a landmark in the realization of the *Megali Idea*, as was called the creation of a great state encompassing all the unredeemed areas with ethnic Greeks, Venizelos had survived another attack while he was on his way home at the Paris-Gare de Lyon. Quickly, the distorted news reached Athens on 31 July that Venizelos had died at the hands of his aggressors, firing the fury of Venizelist paramilitaries who destroyed newspaper offices and even looted houses of the Opposition. These reprisals reached a horrible climax with the actual murder of the intellectual and diplomat Ioannis ('Ion') Dragoumis (1878-1920), an erstwhile ardent supporter of Venizelos, who by his own admission changed sides when he noticed that traces of authoritarianism had seeped deeply into his hero's political makeup and national subservience to his policies had attained alarming proportions. The second attack on Venizelos was fundamentally the culmination of a long trail of hatred between Republicans and Royalists that for two decades had led to devious attacks on both sides, repeated military coups, the tolerance or even encouragement of political circles for that phenomenon and more generally contempt for constitutional legality. It was also a tit-for-tat action against the Republicans who, once they realized their loss of power at the General Elections of 5 March 1933, had staged a coup on the 6th. Still, in the autumn of 1933, Panagis Tsaldaris, a moderate and convinced parliamentarian, sought a compromise with Venizelos: he was prepared to amnesty the Republican politicians charged with complicity in the coup if Venizelos agreed to forget the Royalists involved in the attempt on his life.⁷ However, Venizelos refused to meet Tsaldaris half way because he was convinced that the Right's real objective was the destruction of the Republic and the setting up of a Royal dictatorship. In the meantime, refusing to heed all pressures, the Examining Magistrate, M. Tzortzakis, ordered the arrest of six people. Among them, were the Director of Public Security, Ioannis Polychronopoulos, his brother Nikolaos, who was driving the perpetrators' car, another high rank police officer, Athanassios Dikaïos, two other police officers, while a notorious bandit, going by the

name of Karathanassis, was also wanted. Eventually, the bandit was captured not by the police, which showed a flagrant dereliction of professional duty but by retired Venizelist officers. Given how the police seemed out of its depth or incapable to live up to a basic expectation for security, an ineradicable feeling of apprehensiveness lurked beneath the surface of society. Strangely, it was a behaviour that became a little too repetitious and tiresome down the decades. Serious allegations of abetment lingered also over two leaders of the pro-Monarchist People's Party, the Interior Minister, Ioannis Rallis, and the deputy Petros Mavromichalis. But the government majority in Parliament refused to proceed to the waiver of their immunity, which the judicial authorities demanded. In any case, Polychronopoulos' involvement caused serious gnashing at the governmental edifice because given his status as a high-ranking member of the ruling party and a man the government had chosen, it insinuated complicity and conspiracy at that level.⁸ Grigorios was not much interested in politics at the time. All the same, his family was imbued with authentic democratic feelings, and he had no reason himself to identify with the political faction that held the reins of power then. The attack on Venizelos carried out with the connivance of the state machinery could only shock him and plunge him in deep thoughts. In Piraeus, on Philhellenon Street, a crumbling mansion stood alone. It was close to Theodoros' house. As a youth, Grigorios happened one day to stumble upon its marble and broken stairs. With his curiosity piqued, he climbed them. There, a maid on duty - a refugee from Constantinople - welcomed him. In the local folklore, these women possessed the gift of clairvoyance. Winter had arrived and a coal fire was lit. The very instant he reached the top, the blazing coal in the grate splintered, giving off a small thunderous blast. For the maid, this was a sign! "You," she crooned in his ear "shall one day become a great man!" Whether Grigorios was a tad superstitious or whether the maid's dramatic ways when she uttered her prophecy made a profound impression on him is not said. What is sure is that this woman had in the twinkling of an eye divined that odd demon inside him that would give him no respite for his was a restless spirit, a spirit which desired to embody all qualities, be all things, and excel in all he tried. A diary entry of 27 December 1936 evinces strongly his drive to succeed, how unafraid he was to trace the twists and turns of his stream of consciousness and probe his emotional depths in order to find his most fundamental answers there:

My heart pounds with agitation and excitement while I am jotting these words down. Now I realize that all my preceding actions and musings were just a prelude to me - the impulse to commence a more challenging and utterly different voyage, no longer with my parents but forever apart from