

1996

Panayotis

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Recommended Citation

Valtinos, Thanasis; Stavros Deligiorgis; and Jane Assimakopoulos. "Panayotis." *The Iowa Review* 26.1 (1996): 30-32. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4490>

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by two men, as though they had been keeping her there in the wings for some time, ready for the performance. She smiled at me and slowly raised her hand in greeting. Then they took her away. I felt no emotion of any kind. My mind was merely recording things. The commandant went and closed the door himself. He avoided making any comments on my error. He simply said: "I'm sorry."

He must have been smart once. He went to the window, cut two leaves from the plants and rubbed them between his fingers. Then he smelled them. My gaze followed his movements. He sensed it. There he was, all of him, in that one gesture. A resigned, middle-aged man, probably with weight problems. He made an attempt to smile.

—Peppers. I take care of them myself. They remind me of the countryside.

For a fleeting moment I thought about returning his civility. I thought of telling him that as soon as I got out of there I would cultivate gorse. But I decided the metaphor was somewhat pompous, even if his knowledge of mythology was not that limited. It made no sense to ruin his mood. In the final analysis, there was something quite human about his hobby and his homesickness for the place he came from. He had not spoken of his "village," he said "the countryside."

I allowed myself to return his smile.

He stood there uneasily for a moment and then rang the bell for me to be taken away. Two clean-looking men came to get me. They took me directly to the room where I had been interrogated. The interrogators were still there waiting for me.

1971

PANAYOTIS

HE WAS BORN IN KYNOURIA, in the village of Karapoula. He was drafted in 1919. In the fall of 1920, after a year's delay, he was called up for duty in the army.

He was stationed in Nafplion, right after the November elections—the elections that Venizelos lost—in the regiment of the 8th infantry battalion. They kept him there for three months, taught him to use a machine-gun and sent him off, via Piraeus, to fight in Asia Minor.

There, between March and July of 1920, he took part in the fighting in Eski Sehir—and was decorated for it.

(The victorious Commander Konstantinos himself, “son of the Eagle,” paused before him in ancient Dorylaion and pinned the medal on his chest.)

Two weeks later, at the age of twenty-three, during army manoeuvres leading up to the decisive attack, he went across the Salt Desert; on an all-day, all-night, stinking, sweat-filled trek, with no water, but with excellent morale, all the way to Gordion. They were heading for the “Red Apple Tree” in the Turkish heartland.

When the front collapsed, in 1922, miles and miles away from the Sangarios river, in Ali Veran, he was taken prisoner along with General Trikoupis and the rest of the men from the 3rd Army Corps.

It was their final battle.

At the Ousak prison camp the survival rate was one out of three and, after hammering rocks down to pebbles for eighteen months, he found his way to Cilicia.

During the exchange of 1924, altogether unexpectedly, he was taken down to Smyrna with about 300 other men.

A Red Cross committee was waiting for them at the station at Basma Hane, and they were gathered en masse and loaded onto a steamship, the “Marika Toyia,” which was leaving from the Iron Steps of Pounta. As it set sail Panayotis, standing on the highest deck, watched the land behind him grow smaller.

Despite all the humiliation he had been through and despite the rags he was covered in, he continued to have an angelic quality about him.

It was much later that his illness first appeared, at the end of 1927. His right hand began to tremble, it was something like Parkinson’s disease. He also began to stutter. The doctors who examined him were of the opinion that it was due to the hardships of captivity.

An old war buddy of his, a party boss, urged him to apply for a pension. He helped him to fill out the papers. They sent them to the Ministry and waited. Nine months later he received a negative answer.

In the meantime his mother died and so did an older brother of his who had been supporting them both.

For a long time, to make ends meet, Panayotis ran errands for people. Then he was forced to start begging, which he did in his own peculiar way: he would gather dried herbs, like oregano or sage, and sell them, in minute quantities—just a pretext for maintaining whatever pride he still had left.

A seamstress from his neighborhood, a one-time childhood sweetheart of his, now married, felt sorry for him and sewed him up a set of calico bags, all with pleats at the top. He would fill them patiently, load them on his back and walk the streets with them. That was how he became known to practically everyone in the Peloponnesus: Panayotis.

Sometimes on the highways, in the heat of summer, some wise-guy truck drivers would stop and pick him up, let him ride next to them, and say the most awful things to him—just to have some fun during their trip.

Even the bums in the small towns where he stayed overnight would make fun of him. Sometimes they tied cans on him and sometimes bits of paper that they would set on fire.

He accepted it all, not like someone resigned to his fate, but good-naturedly. Perhaps deep down he, too, enjoyed it.

In 1957, on my way down from Macedonia, while on furlough, I ran into him in Argos, at a brothel. Trying to sell them fertility herbs. We were distant relatives through marriage and when he saw me he turned red with embarrassment. He must have been almost sixty then. In 1973 he retired permanently to his village. He was old by then, he was losing his eyesight, and his legs were no longer strong enough to carry him around like they used to. Some nieces of his took him in. They gave him his meals and one of them laundered his only change of underwear for him every other week. In return, he would take the two or three goats they kept in their cellar out to pasture.

He died that same year, in the month of August. He had taken the animals out to graze, felt thirsty and bent down to drink from some water hole, lost his balance—in only a few inches of water—and drowned.

1977