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## Refugee Years

**I**T WAS ASIA MINOR in late August, 1922. The moonlit night was bleak and piercing, and the muddy road to the distant coast was already crowded with refugees.

Only hours earlier a communiqué had reached our village:

ABANDON THE PEOPLE — SAVE THE ARMY

I had just turned sixteen, and all that mattered to me now was how we could reach the seacoast and escape death.

We moved as fast as our legs could take us, but after the first few kilometers of our marathon my knees buckled, and I collapsed. I felt hands picking me up and wiping the cold mud off my face, then I was laid back. Moments later I snapped out of my lethargy as I was heaved up from where I lay, then dropped heavily. Jolted joints protesting, head swimming in pain, I found myself staring at half a dozen converging spokes just centimeters from my face.

The oxcart wheel started to turn slowly. My father and my younger brother, Yiorgos (George), plodded speechlessly alongside the overloaded oxcart as Mr. Silvas, the kindly neighbor who had come to my rescue, looked back to see how I was doing. Wrapped in heavy blankets, I huddled stiffly against the tailboard beside my mourning mother, her strong loving arms cradling my newborn baby sister, Evangelia. I was sweating and shivering from my fever. Worse yet, I feared Turkish soldiers might now be combing our village, Balya, seeking to capture *genç çocuk*

(young lad)—a name the Turks had branded me with ever since I organized the Balya Scouts Corps in 1920.

And capture me they would. Only recently had some fist-clenching neighboring Turks vowed to “flay çocuk alive.” Just before we learned that the first Greek line of defense was about to crumble, two dozen scouts, aged twelve to twenty-four, had proudly marched behind me down the main street of Balya and through its narrow alleys, carrying flags and banners, shouting slogans, and singing patriotic songs. Windows were flung open, blue-and-white flags were unfurled, and a good number of young and old joined our march. Our excitement carried us past the limits of our neighborhood and well into the predominantly Turkish sector of the district. Surely those irate Turks would now go an extra kilometer—just for me.

It was now Friday, August 25, 1922 before dawn. The few kilometers we had covered were no distance at



Panos as a scout in 1922 at 16

all for the horse-riding Turks who could suddenly charge out of the dark spreading merciless death. Like thousands of other refugees, we were trying to reach the coastal town of Akçay and from there sail across to Mytilini (Lesbos), a Greek island off the Turkish seacoast, my father’s native land. Days and nights of agony and fear awaited us in the more than 80 kilometers (50 miles) that lay ahead. And even if we ever did reach the shore, the Turks might be there, waiting.

FLEEING to the seacoast was more than a dreadful dream, more than a haunting fear; it was the resurrection of the terror and horror of yesterday. The paradox of each present moment passed with nightmarish slowness, for we had already experienced once before the agony of running away from the Turks.

That was in 1914, at the onslaught of a draconian expatriation of hundreds of thousands of Greeks who had been forced to abandon their hearths in Asia Minor and had sought refuge in Greece. Then, too, we had to flee to the seacoast—fortunately on a train from the French mining company in Balikesir (Palaiokastro) where my father had been working as a bookkeeper. But the expatriation, meant to be an exchange of the Greek Orthodox people in Asia Minor for the Moslem Turks in Greece, was seized by the Turks as an opportunity to persecute and slaughter the Greeks and the Armenians. Their Mehmet soldiers systematically massacred the old men, women and children, and captured all males between ages sixteen and fifty and drove them en masse to labor camps or executed them. Such must have been the fate of many friends and loved ones left behind, for we never heard from them again.

Ours seemed a better lot, for we had made it to the island in one piece—my father, Terpandros, and my mother, Terpsihori; my five-year-old brother, Yiorgos; and my three-year-old sister, Elli. There we found refuge among my uncles and aunts, who provided shelter and shared their meager bread with us.

But in our survival, irony set her impartial eyes coldly upon us. After we had bartered our last pieces of clothing, furniture and jewelry for anything we could put into our stomachs, our blue-eyed, dark-haired Elli, already a victim of an epidemic of influenza, complained of “funny noises” in her tummy—hunger pangs familiar to us all. A high fever, exacerbated by lack of medication and nourishment, dealt a fatal blow to our Elli. Our little angel breathed her last that cold night as she lay in my mother’s arms.

That same night I realized that our greatest enemy was not the Turks—from them we had escaped. I realized, too, that life offered no guarantee, just itself. That which I had considered our most precious possession—our life—was not altogether ours; for cold death, hauntingly vigilant, was always waiting.

BUT more fearful than death now was the merciless Turks. At the first light of day loud cries and awful screams reached my ears. I managed to raise my eyes over the tailboard to see. The biting cold cut into my face sending a shiver throughout my body. Fronted on the surrounding foothills I saw the silhouette of an endless column of people, young and old, some riding on mud-splattering cattle, others trudging along with heavy loads on their backs. The cries were coming from cold, hungry babies, and the anguish-filled screams from agonized mothers whose children had fallen off animal-drawn carts in the dark and been trampled to death. Every painful scream was the scream of my mother, every desperate call the call of my father and my brother, every helpless cry the cry of our baby. I had to help.

As I attempted to get up, my mother, bereaved by the recent loss of her brother who was killed in action, stretched her arm toward me and placed her hand heavily on my shoulder, tears streaming from her eyes. She pleaded with me to remember that only hours earlier I had done all I could to save our village even at the risk of my own life when, still bed-ridden with a high fever, I ran from house to house to make sure every neighbor had heeded the warning. Her voice filled with pain, she told me to pray to Saint George to become my patron saint, then begged me again to stay. And when she let go of my shoulder and leaned over the baby, I could see her hand going up and down making the sign of the cross, the bun on the back of her neck moving with every sob. I loved her so much.

My eyes opened again at noon when the oxcart rolled to a halt near a well. We needed water and so did the hundreds of people and animals around the well.

I felt uneasy. We were losing time.

After what seemed like an eternity, my father, walking tall and poised as usual, returned carrying a bucket of water. He raised the bucket over the side of the oxcart and held it to my mother's lips, his pensive eyes fixed on hers.

"I've just been informed that Dukas with your sister Androniki and their daughter are a bit ahead of us," he said tersely, his fingers stroking his thick black mustache.

"Thank you, my Virgin Panayia!" my religious mother said and burst into tears, her hand making the sign of the cross.

Finally the rusty oxcart wheels resumed their monotonous squeak, a welcome sign at last that we were moving again.

We had barely covered 20 kilometers altogether, just a quarter of the way. I figured it would probably be Sunday afternoon before we could reach Akçay.

Ominous clouds hung low over our heads by late afternoon. I looked at our baby and remembered how desperately my mother's tireless arms had held little Elli on the cold night she died. Instantly I was filled with a sense of desolation and pessimism. "She's just another Elli," I muttered. "It's a vicious circle, only this time the Turks will mercilessly slaughter my parents and the baby and they'll make Yiorgos kill the Greeks and the *giaours*."\*

Suddenly the stream of people pressing onward began to move faster. In an instant there was an outbreak of confusion and hysteria, panicky women and children screaming and running like mad and families being scattered. That dreadful moment had apparently come.

"Run! Run, my son—run!" my distraught mother screamed. "They'll spare us—you run!"

\* Turkish *giaour*, an infidel, especially a Christian.

I sprang on my feet and jumped down. My father—I had never seen him cry like that before—hurriedly took off his heavy black coat and flung it over my shoulders.

“I’ll find you later, okay?” I said and took to the nearby foothills along with hundreds of panicky souls.

Not sure whether I was being followed by friends or chased by foes, I headed for the distant hills. As far as my breath could take me, I ran, hiding behind trees and ducking under bushes to avoid being spotted by Turkish farmers and shepherds who would shoot at anything that moved.

Clouds covered the skies and the night fell hard, bringing blustering winds and ear-shattering thunder and lightning. Cold and frightened, I crouched beneath a sheltering rock.

Overwhelmed by the awesome powers that rent the heavens at blinding speeds, I wondered if I should dare ask for the intervention of a higher power. “God,” I finally whispered, “if you do exist, do spare me and my family. Spare all my scouts and my friends and all the boys and girls of our village.”

I marveled then that my lips had uttered such words so earnestly, so spontaneously. But I wondered whether I should have prayed to Saint George instead.

At the first light of the dawn I set out to search for my family. After climbing rocky hills and fording the cold waters of a river, I found myself staring at three young Turks just meters away. Two were sitting on a boulder, one with a musket between his knees, barrel against the shoulder, with the youngest holding a shepherd’s staff and sporting a fez.

A chette band! I thought with apprehension. Trying not to look alarmed, I managed a silly smile. My appearance seemed to amuse them—feet covered with mud, pajamas rolled high, coat over the shoulder, boots dangling around my neck—or they might have shot me on the spot. Then the

oldest one, perched atop the boulder, stood up, and hefting his long gun, challenged me to identify myself in Turkish.

Quickly I dashed for the river, my head down. I heard a shot as I tripped and went tumbling down the rocky bank, wondering if I had been hit. I got up and jumped into the cold water hoping to reach the rocks near the other side before they could shoot again.

Knee-deep, I hid behind a boulder. The trio started throwing rocks and challenging me to come out. Better frozen than shot, I figured, so I clung onto the boulder for dear life and hoping the three would not brave the freezing water.

What an hour of icy waiting did not accomplish, a sweeping thunderstorm finally did. That chapter of my ordeal thus ended as suddenly as it had begun.

My limbs were numb and slow to obey as I pulled myself up among the shrub and trees. Barefoot, I climbed sharp ledges and cut through thorny bushes. By late afternoon I reached an open area from which I could see the stream of refugees moving westward. I climbed down the last slope and got back on the road, but not before devouring some watermelons and figs to stave off my hunger.

THERE was nothing moving on wheels anymore. The Greek army had destroyed every bridge. Treasures went up in smoke as refugees desperately dumped their wagons and carts by the rivers, setting dowries and valuables on fire and leaving “nothing for the Turks to defile.”

I figured that if my folks were still alive, they would probably be over a dozen kilometers ahead. I plowed through the crowds, but soon another cold, murky night set in. So I went on plodding blindly along with the streams of people and hoping that morning would come soon.

THE exciting sight of the ocean the next day gave hope to my spirit and wings to my battered feet. I had run through the crowds since daybreak looking at every woman holding

a baby, every man wearing a black suit, every young boy. And as my ribs heaved and my legs protested, I spotted a lean silver-haired man taking laborious steps.

“Mr. Silvas!” I called.

The old man stopped. “By George! It’s you, ma’ boy!”

“What happened, Mr. Silvas?”

“Over there, ma’ boy,” he said in his quivering voice, pointing toward the sea. “Maybe a couple of kilometers.”

My heart pounded with excitement. “But what happened, Mr. Silvas? Did the Turks—?”

“False alarms, you know. That’s how we got separated—in the confusion. But you go on, ma’ boy. Your folks—they need you very bad—”

“But ... Mr. Silvas—”

“You go on, ma’ boy,” he insisted. “Your poor mom—she’s got to see your face, you know. She thinks you’re gone!”

IT WAS the most unforgettable moment of my life when I sighted my family that Sunday afternoon. To prevent shocking my mother, I stood back a short distance and whistled in a familiar manner. Immediately they stopped and looked back.

“Panos?” my father called out.

“It’s Panos!” my brother shouted and ran to meet me.

I hugged and kissed my brother and my father, tears streaming down our faces. My mother meanwhile went into an uncontrollable spell of sobbing, unable to speak. She looked haggard and spent, and so did my father, who now took the baby from her arms. Then I held my mother close and kissed her face again and again.

“Take a look at my new shoes, Mom,” I said excitedly by way of distracting her. That seemed to break the spell. She looked down at my encrusted feet and perceived my mischief.

“My son—my boy!” she was finally able to cry out, and threw her arms around my neck. And so she took comfort

from me until my nearness calmed her enough to become aware that I was still alive.

THE quayside of Akçay was another rendezvous with fear and agony, for a formidable stampede of refugees surged around the scores of rowboats hoping to reach the ships waiting offshore. But the men in charge had orders to rescue first the army then the civilians. A soldier—it turned out to be one of the many women disguised in military uniform—helped my mother with the baby, the rest of us jostling and pushing forward until somehow we managed to get into the same rowboat.

Once again we found ourselves aboard a rescuing ship and amid thousands of other refugees, only this time as atrociously desperate and destitute as they. We had nothing in our possession other than the shredded, filthy rags that clung to our freezing bodies. Even so, we were grateful, for we were together again—and alive. And, together, we had the will to live.

But the physical exhaustion, agony, and cold, sleepless nights we suffered were no match for the shuddering atrocities happening at Smyrna. The predominantly Greek city, with its 43,000 Greek homes, 1,000 Greek shops, 117 Greek schools, and many Greek Orthodox churches was completely destroyed. The Greek and Armenian quarters had been turned into a huge ball of fire. Only the Jewish and Turkish quarters remained. Hundreds of thousands of Greeks, young and old, with mothers holding their babies in their arms, were being ruthlessly beaten and driven with clubs and knives like animals toward the sea. And there, crowded along the pier beyond capacity, those desperate, hopeless souls flung themselves into their watery graves.

THE sun was about to set. I looked at the golden shores that had been the settlements of the Aeolian and Ionian Greeks of antiquity, my aching heart telling me I was never to see my homeland again. The civilization that had culminated among the Athenians—the kinsmen of the

Ionians—was born there. It was part of the conquests of Alexander the Great and the land of the Byzantine Empire that had existed for eleven centuries before it succumbed under the yataghan of the Ottoman Turk. And now Hellenic Smyrna was dead. Greek Orthodox Smyrna, too, was dead. That part of Greece where Hellenism had thrived for over thirty centuries was to be no more, its noble accomplishments and contributions alive only in history. Asia Minor had been lost to the Turks. I had to accept the bitter reality.

For a homeland and a home, I now had to look across the sea.

