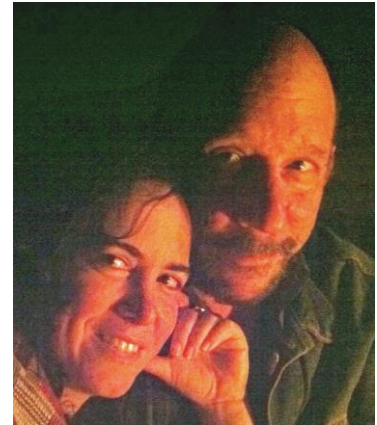


Dear Friends,

In 2011 my brother Adam married Christina Lazaridi (right), a professor of screenwriting, who although long settled in New York is unquestionably Greek. She comes from an old and distinguished family, established in Constantinople but living since the 1930s in Thessaloniki, Greece's second city. I had met her mother but not her brother or the other members of her family; I had never seen the place she grew up, which was important now not only to her but to my brother and to their young daughter (my niece Arianna), who is Greek enough to speak that fearsomely difficult language. Also I had never been to Greece (except once to the airport in 1981 on my way



to Israel). So I arranged to go there and visit them at Christmas time, when Adam and Christina and Arianna would all be there, and to do some tourism in Athens first. When my brother Christopher heard of this plan he wanted to come too – he had been there a couple of times already, but why not again? And then Adam's son, my nephew Noah, who had been living in Israel but was ready for a change, decided to come as well. So it was shaping up as a Big Fat Greek-Jewish family party. On December 7 I went to the airport and flew away to Greece, planning to continue on to Cyprus and return on the second of January.<sup>1</sup>



When I changed planes in Athens in 1981, Greece (beautiful flag at left, arms at right) became country #27\*, the asterisk like a scarlet letter to show that while technically I could *count* it, I couldn't truly *claim* it.<sup>2</sup> But coming into Athens in a taxi on December 8, 2015, I



was really in Greece by anyone's reckoning.

**Athens** The Greek capital is a busy place. A lot of the architecture is modern, but redeemed somehow from banality by the balconies that appear on every floor of nearly every high-rise (right), which don't really rise all that high. The balconies, with their individual freight of awnings and furniture and plants and bicycles and sometimes laundry, make the building surfaces varied and particular, quite different from the flat and alienating uniformity of



<sup>1</sup> “For the goodman is not at home, he is gone a long journey: he hath taken a bag of money with him, and will come home at the day appointed.” Proverbs 7:19-20.

<sup>2</sup> A scarlet [grapheme](#), really, or maybe a [glyph](#). I actually *was* in Greece in 1981 – if I had swiped a candy bar from an airport kiosk, the Greek police would have brought me to a Greek jail. But it was only a technicality. “For the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” 2 Corinthians 3:6.

similar streets in, for example, Miami. Passing down an ordinary street in downtown Athens makes a person feel pleasantly like a goldfish swimming between reefs.

That doesn't mean there are not plenty of distinguished buildings in Athens. Many lovely Beaux Arts mansions are now converted to consulates or museums or fancy offices. Some are in superb condition (below left: the Benakis Museum) and some are in a romantic state of decay (below center). Athens also has some very dramatic Greek Revival structures, like the National Library (below right).



I was the first to arrive at the modest but unfortunately named Hotel Phaedra. Phaedra, grand-daughter of the Sun and half-sister of the Minotaur, was married to the Greek hero Theseus of Athens, but developed an uncontrollable passion for his son Hippolytus. She told Theseus, falsely, that Hippolytus had raped her, and Hippolytus was killed, either by his father or by a sea-monster depending on whom you believe. Phaedra then committed suicide out of remorse. If I had a hotel I wouldn't name it to recall this gloomy story. Right: *Phaedra*, by Alexandre Cabanel (1880).



Our stay at the Phaedra was considerably more cheerful. A couple of days after I arrived Noah flew in from Tel Aviv, and my brothers came a week later. The hotel was in a very old quarter of Athens called the Plaka, just below the Acropolis, largely pedestrian streets (left) with some small restaurants. On the little street next to the hotel stands the [Choragic Monument of Lysicrates](#), from the 4th century BC<sup>3</sup>; at the end of the street, where you go to look for a taxi, is what remains of the Roman [Arch of Hadrian](#)

<sup>3</sup> A monument to Lysicrates as a sponsor of Greek choral performances. There used to be lots of these monuments on this street, which led to the Theatre of Dionysios.

(second century AD). So it was a picturesque neighborhood, helped along by the giant mass of the Acropolis, with its massive retaining wall, hanging just above.

Noah and I had almost a week in Athens before my brothers got there, and we spent them in intensive tourism. The thing I most wanted to see in Athens was of course the Acropolis, site of the remains of the Parthenon and one of the great bucket-list sights of the world. On the sound principle that you should see first the thing you want to see most, because who knows what will happen, we went there the day after Noah arrived. We took a taxi as far as a taxi could take us, but then it became a matter of climbing flight after flight of dangerously uneven stone steps – the supposed disabled lift was said to be itself disabled. Whether I believed that or not, I still couldn't use it, so it was clamber, rest, and clamber some more until I finally made it, panting and amazed, to the top.<sup>4</sup>



It certainly was thrilling to be there right in front of the very building I had heard about all my life, had studied in school, etc. But it was not as thrilling as I wanted it to be. It has to be said that the Acropolis, and the Parthenon, have seen much better days. It would have been better, for example, if the Turks had not used it as a ammunition magazine, and if the Venetians had not (perhaps deliberately) ignited the ammunition by lobbing a shell into it in 1687, when the structure was already well over 2000 years old.<sup>5</sup> Large portions

are fallen or ruined, there is almost no white marble left (just weathered yellow stone), a lot of the decoration has been removed to the New Parthenon Museum (or to England), and the interior of what is left of the building is now occupied by a huge crane and other construction equipment used in the ongoing restoration.

It wasn't until Noah and I went up *another* hill (Mount Lycabettus, more than a mile away as the crow flies) that we were able to see the Parthenon and the Acropolis in its true setting, all the damage veiled by distance, still dominating a city now extending far beyond anything Pericles could have imagined.<sup>6</sup> We stayed quite a while on Mount

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<sup>4</sup> “God is my strength and power: and he maketh my way perfect. He maketh my feet like hinds’ feet: and setteth me upon ... high places.” 2 Samuel 22:34-35.

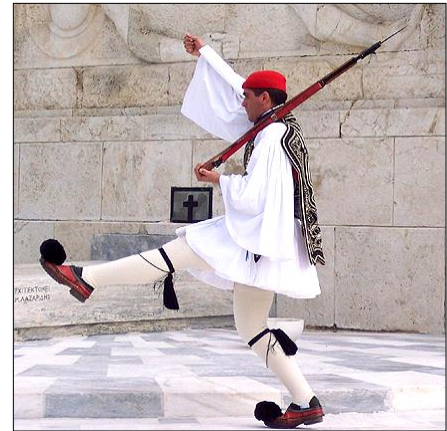
<sup>5</sup> The Parthenon was built (437-432 BC) where the old Temple of Athena had stood until the Persians destroyed it in 480. The Athenians swore not to rebuild the temples of the Acropolis, but changed their minds at the urging of the charismatic Pericles.

<sup>6</sup> There was a funicular railway called the *Teleferik* going up this hill, so I didn't have to climb it leg over leg as I had with the Acropolis.

Lycabettus, taking in the view (below). It seems a bit strange to be more thrilled by an ancient monument a mile away than right in front of it, but there it was.



There was plenty more to see in Athens. One of the best sights was the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in front of the Parliament House in Syntagma Square. They do this every day, but on Sunday mornings they do a special blowout called the *Grand Change*, with the entire unit present, and a military band. The soldiers, called *evzones*, wear an elaborate uniform including a kilt (the *foustANELLA*) with 400 pleats to represent the 400 years of Turkish occupation. The uniform is based on the costume of the *klephts*, irregular forces who played an important role in the 19th century War of Independence. Their shoes, loaded with metal nails to make a snapping sound on the pavement, weigh 3½ pounds each. The stylized movements of the *evzones*, more a dance than a military drill, made a brilliant sight – see a video clip [here](#).<sup>7</sup>



We went to lots of museums, also. The Athens City Museum is in the small palace once occupied by King Otto, the first king of the newly established Greek Kingdom, who was run out of town in 1862. His throne room was a good place to meditate on how fleeting is power, how are the mighty fallen, etc. The National Historical Museum was full of images of *klepht* chieftains and other heroes of the War of Independence (below: Dimitrios Makris); there also was the original chamber of the first Greek Parliament, with

<sup>7</sup>

The clip is not of the Grand Change, and does not show the white ceremonial uniform with its richly embroidered tunic, but does give an idea of what their movement looks like. For details of the elements of the ceremonial uniform, look [here](#).



a dramatic painting of the parliamentary leaders of the time, assembled by the artist with not a face hidden, all dead now and mostly all forgotten.<sup>8</sup>

The Heraklion Archaeological Museum had a remarkable exhibition recreating the mechanical inventions of ancient Greek engineering. Most of them were used only for frivolous purposes like pouring wine – a notable example is the steam engine of Hero of Alexandria (right), which was only used for opening the doors of a temple. But it

would not have taken much more engineering for it to have been applied to serious industrial purposes, including transportation. If Alexander the Great had had a working steam engine, for example, he would not have had to withdraw from the borders of India, but could have provided his armies with regular rotations and reliable supply by steamship or even land cruiser. They would then probably not have mutinied, and we might still have a Hellenistic world state today.<sup>9</sup>



The Numismatic Museum was also worth remembering. Not only did it have one of the greatest collections in the world, beautifully presented, but it was housed in the grand mansion that Heinrich Schliemann, the discoverer of Troy, built for himself in 1878-80 (left).<sup>10</sup> Similarly memorable was the Cycladic Museum, with its collection



of ancient sculptures (right) that look like they were created by Modigliani or Brancusi.<sup>11</sup> And there was a lot more I could have seen if I'd had another few days. But now it was time to start our road trip if we were going to be in Thessaloniki for Christmas week.

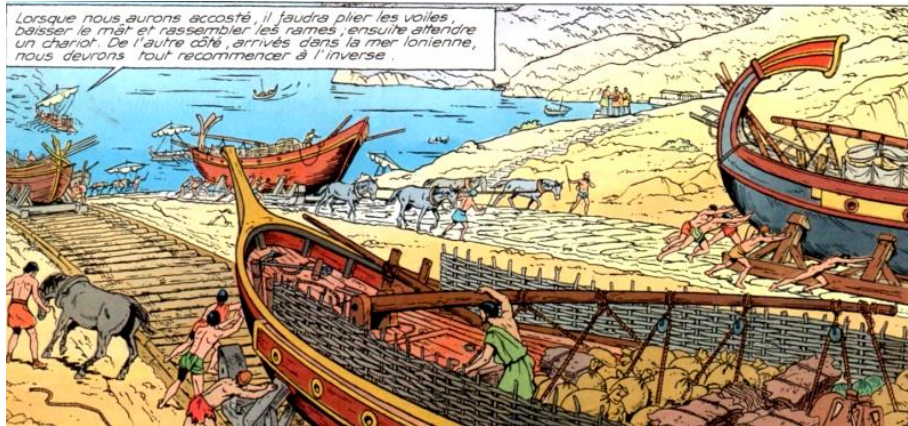
<sup>8</sup> “Howl, fir tree; for the cedar is fallen; because the mighty are spoiled: howl, O ye oaks of Bashan; for the forest of the vintage is come down.” Zechariah 11:2.

<sup>9</sup> I leave it to others to decide whether that would have been a good idea, or not. The illustration is not of the model at the Heraklion.

<sup>10</sup> He called it the *Iliou Melathron* – Palace of Troy.

<sup>11</sup> This one is dated between 2800 and 2300 BC.

**The Road Trip** So we piled into the largest car Avis could offer us, plugged in the GPS, and set off. Even the largest car was a squeeze, but Noah masterfully shoe-horned four sets of luggage into the trunk.<sup>12</sup> Our first stop was Corinth, where I wanted to see the famous canal. Corinth was built on a narrow isthmus connecting Attica in mainland Greece with the Peloponnesus. In ancient times, the barrier this posed to sea commerce prompted efforts to cut a canal through the isthmus, but that proved too hard to do. So instead the ancients (starting around 600 BC) built a paved highway called the *Diolkos* to



bring their ships over the mountain ridge (3½ miles; apex at 259 feet) and down the other side. They used log rollers, but also cut a track through a stone pavement for wheeled ship carriages, much like a modern railway. The

ships were unloaded first and stripped of cargo and fittings, which were sent separately over the mountain on rollers or by pack train.<sup>13</sup>

In the 19th century, though, determined Greek statesmen managed to cut the canal. It was completed in 1893, but the debt to finance the project bankrupted the Greek state.<sup>14</sup> The canal itself proved impractical due to instability of the canal walls, and it is now used mainly for cruise ships and tour boats (like the one just out of the picture at right). I wanted to go on one of those tour boats, but they don't run in the wintertime.



<sup>12</sup> It was a good thing none of us brought along our skis.

<sup>13</sup> Drawing by Jacques Martin. For more of his remarkable images of the ancient world, begin looking [here](#). For a stunningly beautiful animated recreation of the *Diolkos* and its use, begin [here](#).

<sup>14</sup> It was not all due to the canal – there was also a drastic reparation to pay after Greece lost the [Greco-Turkish War](#) of 1897. An International Financial Commission was instituted to supervise repayment of the Greek debt, a situation that resonates with the current unhappy Greek debt crisis. The Commission kept control of customs revenues, tobacco taxes, and monopolies on items like salt, oil and matches, well into the 1930s.

After Corinth, the next stop was lunch. We were sort of wandering around, having missed our turnoff, when Noah took the conn and led us without hesitation to a small local restaurant on a narrow secluded street facing the water. It was the kind of place where, rather than have us order from the menu, the lady in charge took us back into the kitchen to show us what she had on hand – fresh fish, for example, and fresh vegetables, and olives grown on the property. As she served us, her husband came in from making wine out in the garden (from his own grapes); the gray-green Gulf of Corinth sloshed right outside the glass doors of the dining room.<sup>15</sup> We took what she offered us, and it kept coming, and was all delicious, and cost hardly anything by American standards. After that we always made Noah choose the restaurant, and he never failed us.<sup>16</sup>



Greek is a language so difficult as to be almost impossible for ordinary people. It was fortunate for us that Christopher could speak Greek, because no one else in our party could.<sup>17</sup> We knew the alphabet, so we could more or less sound out words on signs, except where *mp* stood for *b* and *y* became *f* and even sounding out became treacherous. But the real problem was that even when sounded out correctly, the words were still in Greek, so we couldn't understand them. Here's what Greek looks like, in a passage from "Ithaka," by Constantine Cavafy (1911).

<p>Σὰ βγεῖς στὸν πηγαῖμὸ γιὰ τὴν Ἰθάκη,  νὰ εὔχῃσαι νᾶναι μακρὺς ὁ δρόμος,  γεμάτος περιπέτειες, γεμάτος γνώσεις.  Τοὺς Λαιστρυγῶνας καὶ τοὺς Κύκλωπας,  τὸ θυμωμένο Ποσειδῶνα μὴ φοβάσαι.</p>	<p>When you depart for Ithaca,  wish for the road to be long,  full of adventure, full of knowledge.  Don't fear the Laistrygonians and the Cyclops,  the angry Poseidon.</p>
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For the sound of Greek, [here](#) is George Barbanis (author of the translation) reading some of the same poem in the original. For a remarkable animation, giving the impression that Cavafy himself is reciting this terrific poem aloud in English, look [here](#).

<sup>15</sup> I went out there to powder my nose and got drenched by the salt spray; when I opened the door the wind from the Gulf blew the rugs right across the room.

<sup>16</sup> The food was delicious, and abundant, and reasonably priced, just about everywhere we went in Greece. *Taramasalata* (fish roe dip) with pita. Eggplant salad. Cucumbers and onions and tomatoes and olives. Lamb. Fish. Stuffed grape leaves. Special bean soup. *Moussaka*. Unimaginable country sausages. And flaky pastries full of honey. I wish I had some right now. And licorice-tasting *ouzo*, cloudy like Pernod. After this trip I now think Greek food is the best in the world. Of course when I'm in Italy I think *theirs* is the best in the world, too, but there is so much *more* of it in Greece, and they never seem to miss.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher insists that he cannot really speak Greek, a claim that would be a lot more convincing if (1) we hadn't seen him do it, and (2) he didn't say the same thing about eight or nine other languages he can also speak, enough to get by anyway.

The next stop was Delphi, at the foot of Mount Parnassus, in antiquity the site of the most famous oracle in Greece. In the Temple of Apollo a priestess called the *Pythia* (sometimes in English the *Pythoness*) sat on a tripod over a cleft in the earth.<sup>18</sup> Inhaling the fumes from this cleft, she spoke from a reverie or frenzy to answer questions put to her, one special day a month, after receiving substantial fees.<sup>19</sup> Her answers were often obscure, like riddles, and subject to many interpretations – we now call such utterances *delphic*.<sup>20</sup> People, and official embassies, came from all over the Greek world to consult Apollo by questioning the *Pythia*; it was not uncommon for a favorable answer to be given to the delegation that paid the largest bribe.



There is not much left of the ancient site. The main surviving structure has only three columns standing. This was not the Temple of Apollo but a much smaller round building called the Tholos, dedicated to Athena.<sup>21</sup> There is a mournful quality to Delphi, ruined as it is – the oracle has been out of business since 395 AD. The site is quite steep and I was prepared to skip it, but they had a brand

new golf cart just for creaky old visitors like me. It had just been delivered the day before, and I became its proto-geezer.

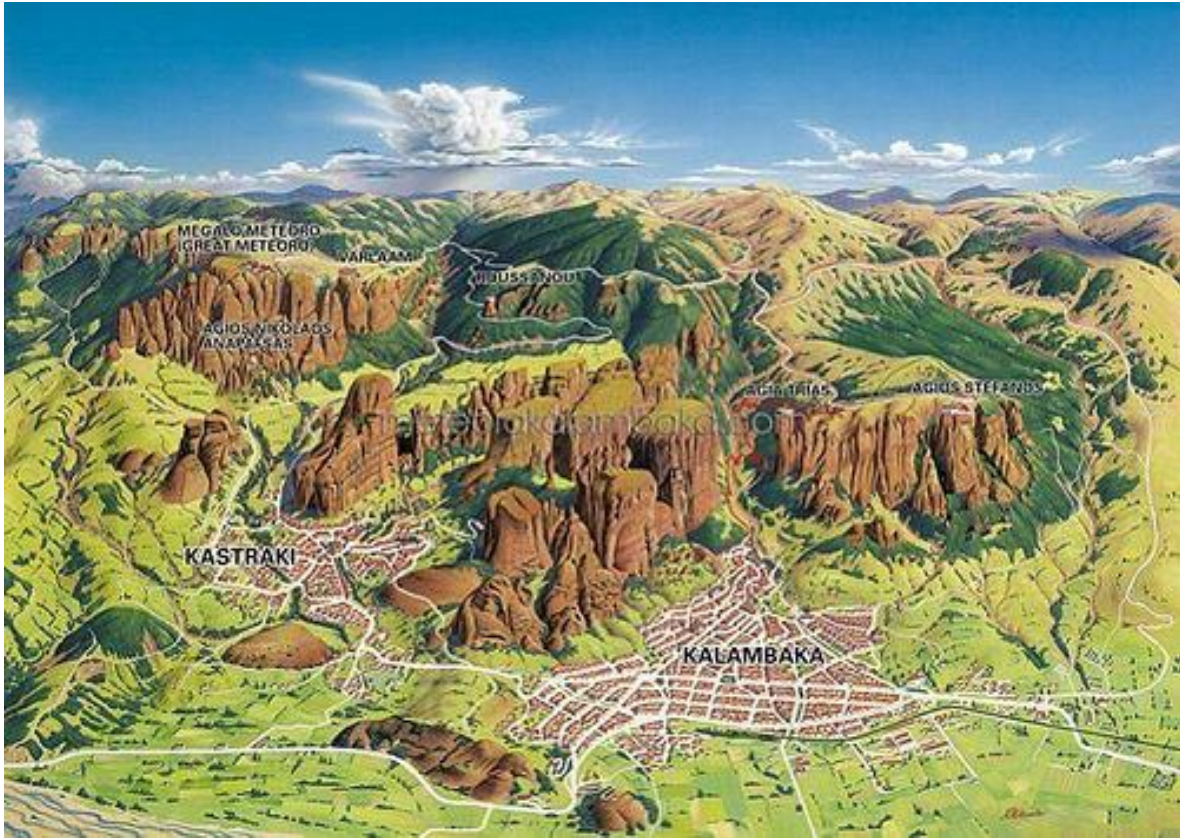
After Delphi, and another epic lunch, we headed for the monastic district of Metéora. There six monasteries, mostly of medieval foundation, survivors of more than twenty, cling to the tops of sandstone pinnacles. Below are a map and a representative view.

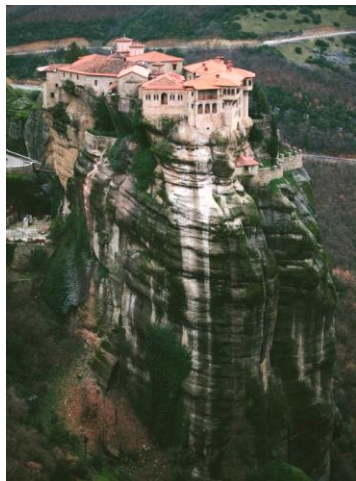
<sup>18</sup> She was called the *Pythia* after the old name of the site, where Apollo slew the serpent Python and took his earth-power. Python was a child of the earth-goddess Gaia, whose shrine Delphi used to be. This legend may reflect the capture by the invading Greeks of a holy place of the pre-Hellenic religion. There were several oracles on this site before it became Apollo's. Today's python snakes take their name from Gaia's Python.

<sup>19</sup> Theories about the fumes and the frenzy include ethylene gas from a fault in the earth, burning oleander, and pure showmanship.

<sup>20</sup> For a partial list of oracular responses from Delphi, preserved from antiquity, look [here](#).

<sup>21</sup> The *omphalos* was at Delphi, too. This was the center of the world in the old Greek religion. But there is also one in Jerusalem. How many centers can the world have? When I was coming up the center of the world was at the Plaza Hotel on 59th Street.





Metéora means *in the middle of the air*, and indeed that is how they seem. In past times the only access was by precarious rope ladders (which could be withdrawn if necessary) and wicker baskets raised on pulleys. It is said that the monks did not replace the ropes until God allowed them to



break. This policy discouraged casual (or hostile) access. Now there are stone steps, and a paved but winding road leads near to the remaining monasteries. There are also gondolas on cables, restricted to monks and workmen. There are more tourists than monks these days. There was only one monastery that could be reached without clambering, and the path to it was closed the day we went. But as with the Acropolis, distant views were more rewarding than close ones. Metéora was not only the most remarkable and memorable place I saw in Greece, I think it is one of the peak sights of the whole world.

As we left the Metéora district we stopped at an icon emporium, which had icons of every Eastern saint anyone had ever heard of, and then drove for a while on some agreeably isolated back roads. But we needed to be in Thessaloniki by evening, and as night fell we turned the car over to the GPS and lit out for the city. It was a great experience for us all to travel together like this; our four outsized personalities managed to spend three days squished tightly into a car without a hint of disharmony. Left: the



journey, shown in yellow, with a few other places noted too. Below: Christopher, David and Noah (Adam took the picture).



**Thessaloniki** We arrived at our spare but comfortable downtown hotel after dark. We had intended to keep the car for the whole next week, but the narrow streets of the *Symprotévousa* [second capital] were so clogged with cars and motorcycles that this plan evaporated on the spot.

There was a lot to see in Thessaloniki, which has been an important place politically, culturally and economically since it was founded in 315 BC. There are ancient monuments and Byzantine churches, a magnificent waterfront, a dramatic Ottoman tower where prisoners for life were kept, and plenty more. It had been a vital junction on the Via Egnatia, the ancient military and commercial road connecting what is now Albanian

Durrës on the Adriatic with Constantinople. Paul's epistles to the Thessalonians were written to the church there. Thessaloniki was the capital of its own kingdom under the 13th century Latin Empire, and for 400 years (from about 1500) the city was the largest Jewish population center in the world. But most of old Thessaloniki was destroyed by a fire in 1917. Left: a print celebrating the Greek seizure of parts of Macedonia, including Thessaloniki, from the Ottoman Empire in 1912.<sup>22</sup>



I didn't get to see much of the city, though, because the focus of our time there was the visit with Christina's family, now our family too. Christina's mother Ioanna Manoledaki



(left) is the *grande dame*. She is a distinguished set and costume designer for theatre and opera, and has lived for more than 50 years in a rambling apartment in a pleasant quarter, full of half-hidden rooms packed with works of art and mannequins and maquettes, and easy chairs and books and work tables and



cabinets and ancestral portraits.<sup>23</sup> Just across the hall lives her son, Christina's brother, George-Emmanuel Lazaridis (right), a composer and concert pianist of worldwide reputation (for sample performances, look [here](#) and [here](#)).<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> In the First Balkan War. Greece did not reach its present extent until 1947.

<sup>23</sup> Facing as you enter the front door are two mannequins wearing costumes she designed for Puccini's *Turandot*.

We spent considerable time in Ioanna's apartment on King George Avenue, which felt like an old building on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, visiting with her and George, and Christina and Arianna (almost four), and other relatives and friends. We were very thoughtfully and generously entertained all week long, and not only by their company. There were two long lunches, amazingly bountiful and delicious – the food kept coming, and we kept saying we couldn't possibly eat another bite, but then when the next bites were served they looked too good to miss, and so on with the bites that came after those. There was a concert by a youth orchestra, organized to foster peace between Greece and Turkey – George organized that, and presented it in the concert hall complex he directs called the Megaron, and performed as soloist in Saint-Saëns' fantasia *Africa*.<sup>25</sup> Another night, in another building in the same complex, there was a circus – fabulous juggling, and trampolines, and acrobats, and a trick bicyclist, and a contortionist seemingly made of rubber. Ioanna's assistant and protégé Sakis took us to an opera for children (*The Snow Prince*) that he was presenting in a movie theatre; it has run to the children's shrieking approval for two years. We watched it with delight from the balcony, where Sakis was running the lights.

With such a program there was not time for much tourism, but we did get out one day with Sakis, after the opera, to see the famous Rotunda. The Rotunda was built by the tetrarch Galerius in 306 AD, as a tomb or maybe a temple – no one knows quite why.<sup>26</sup> It is a cylindrical structure with a dome on top – at one time this dome had an open *oculus* in the center, like the Pantheon in Rome.<sup>27</sup> It was turned into a Christian church by Constantine in 326 (some call it the oldest Christian church in the world), and later into a mosque – below left you can see the apse the Christians added (causing part of the



<sup>24</sup> There are many more on YouTube.

<sup>25</sup> The Megaron is skillfully named – in the palaces of Minoan and Mycenaean times the [\*megaron\*](#) was the great hall, surrounded by smaller rooms used for different purposes.

<sup>26</sup> The tetrarchs were the subordinate rulers of parts of the Roman Empire after it was administratively divided into four parts by Diocletian in 293. Galerius ruled the part that included Greece and the Balkans. The four-part system didn't last long, and the empire was reunited by Constantine in 324.

<sup>27</sup> This was before they discovered how to put a round dome onto a rectangular base, as in Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.

building to collapse), and also the minaret. Above right is a detail of the mosaic that runs around the inside of the dome. It is in bad shape now, but gives an eerie impression of the ancient city (or at least of how the ancients saw their city).

The climax of the visit came on Christmas Eve, with a final blowout party at Ioanna's. We ate and schmoozed (in English), and ate some more and schmoozed some more. George gave a private concert in his apartment, playing Beethoven and Chopin with deep feeling and absolute mastery. Then, with feeling already deep anyway, he played a song he wrote for his girlfriend, the lovely Ilim Baturalp of Istanbul, and they announced their engagement! I was very glad to have been there for that. Then we went back to Ioanna's and ate some more, and schmoozed some more, and exchanged presents. I was well-prepared in the present department, having brought along a briefcase full of mint copies of my book *The Double Eagle* (one size fits all).<sup>28</sup>

It was terrific to feel my family enlarged, and by such interesting and congenial people, who welcomed me so warmly! As much as I have traveled in various parts of the world, I never felt like anything but a foreigner. But with Christina and Ioanna and George, I began to feel at least a little bit Greek.<sup>29</sup> *Ekharisto, mishpucha!*<sup>30</sup>

And then we scattered. Adam and Noah went to Lesbos to work on migrant relief. He and Christina and Arianna are back in New York now, but Noah is still on Lesbos, blogging about the migrant project at <http://www.betterdaysformoria.com/blog>. Christopher went to the Netherlands to rest up on a houseboat, and I flew off to Cyprus.

**Cyprus** Why Cyprus? I had always wanted to visit Cyprus. Well, OK, that's not true. The real reason was that Cyprus is very easy to get to from Greece, which allowed me to check off another country. And also it is a divided country, the northern third calling itself the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), which would be yet *another* country, two for the price of one. But act fast while supplies last! I had heard that Cyprus, divided since 1974, might be reunited in the spring of 2016. Better go there while the getting was good.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *The Double Eagle* was not completely unsuitable for giving away in Greece, as the heraldic image of an eagle with two heads is the emblem of the Greek Church and Army and is familiar to everyone there. Copies are [still available](#)! Or you could write to me and ask for one.

<sup>29</sup> "For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him." Romans 10:12.

<sup>30</sup> Meaning *Thank you* (in Greek) *family* (in Yiddish).

<sup>31</sup> One of my abiding sorrows in life is that when I was in Morocco in 1963, I was within a few miles of what was then the Spanish colonial enclave of [Ifni](#), but didn't get there, and then in 1969 Ifni was ceded to Morocco and vanished from the map. I was 18 at the time, and other people who weren't interested in Ifni controlled the car. But it taught me to snap up such places (like [Portuguese Macau](#), #25, in 1976) whenever I could.

What is this thing with accumulating countries by the numbers? What am I trying to accomplish? Is it a way of marking territory, until I have marked the whole world?<sup>32</sup> I don't know, quite, but I do enjoy checking off entries on that list I have kept updated in my mind since at least around 1950, when I was given a map of the world and memorized it.<sup>33</sup> It has brought me to a lot of interesting places I would not otherwise have thought to visit. But whatever the motive (and that's enough psychology for now), I stepped off the plane in Larnaca, Cyprus, and that was country #79.



Cyprus (boring and poorly balanced flag at left) is an island in the Mediterranean just south of Turkey. It is about the size of Puerto Rico (or Mendocino County, California). It has been inhabited since prehistoric times; colonized from Mycenae



in deep antiquity, it was subjected to one ancient and medieval empire after another. Cyprus was finally wrested from the Venetians by the Ottomans in 1571, from the Ottomans by the British in 1878, and from the British by the Cypriots themselves in 1960, after a distressingly violent independence struggle.

But the majority Greek population of Cyprus had *enosis* (union with Greece) as one of its principal national goals on independence. The substantial Turkish minority would not stand for that and demanded *taksim* (partition). The independence accords provided a complex and rickety accommodation to both communities, but after independence the Greek-dominated government of Archbishop Makarios (right), began to unravel those arrangements.<sup>34</sup> The Turkish Cypriots did not accept the changes, intercommunal violence increased, and UN peacekeeping was not enough to keep a lid on the problem. Turkish Cypriots stopped participating in the government (partly voluntarily and partly not), and began retreating to separate enclaves. The Greek Cypriot response was not reassuring.



Makarios tried hard to keep Cyprus together, but when the colonels took over Greece in 1967 they supported the extreme pro-*enosis* faction, and Makarios was deposed in a *coup d'état* in 1974. Turkey responded by invading Cyprus (which finished the colonels), and established a Turkish state in the north, which no nation but Turkey recognizes. The country was partitioned *de facto* by a Green Line and a UN buffer zone, and a rather brutal process of population exchange and expropriation of property followed. For a long

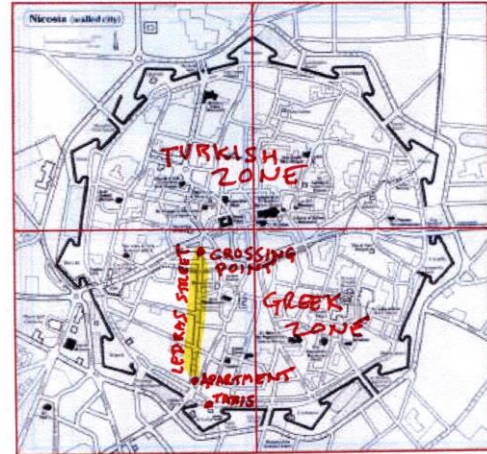
<sup>32</sup> “Hast thou perceived the breadth of the earth? Declare if thou knowest it all.” Job 38:18.

<sup>33</sup> See Chapter 5 of my Autobiography: “[Geography, Maps and Boundaries](#).”

<sup>34</sup> Makarios, who as archbishop was also the ethnarch (national leader) of the Greek community of Cyprus, looked a lot like Fidel Castro. He died in 1977.

time it was scarcely possible to cross from one side to the other, but that situation has since eased, which led to my riding in a taxi toward a short-term apartment on Ledras Street in Nicosia, the capital, chosen because it was a few blocks from the main pedestrian crossing point in the city.

The old city of Nicosia (locally called Lefkosia) is confined within the circle of its 16th-century Venetian walls. On the map at right I show Ledras Street in yellow. It is a pedestrian street, and a pedestrian quarter around it is filled with small restaurants and modern shops, not all of them focusing on souvenirs. There are 11 bastions, but the city emblem reduces them to eight (below left, with the dove from the national arms). Also shown: the city emblems of Athens (with Athena, below center) and Thessaloniki (a portrait coin of Alexander, below right).<sup>35</sup>



After I settled into my rather uncomfortable Nicosia apartment, with its high narrow *faux-tigerskin* chairs, the first thing I did was go down into Ledras Street and stroll under the Christmas lights, past the McDonald's and the Starbucks and the KFC, about three blocks north to the checkpoint. The Greek Cypriot officers waved me through, saying that I was in the European Union where everyone had freedom of movement. Then I passed through the buffer zone, its cross-streets barred by sinister high metal gates, until I reached the Turkish checkpoint, guarded by officers wearing insignia with the flag of the TRNC (right). They waved me through too, after I waited on line and presented my passport for solemn review, and then there I was in country #80. At this point Ledras Street was suddenly a lot shabbier. There were no souvenir shops (I would have bought something for sure). Euros were accepted (1:3 against the Turkish lira), but unlike in the Greek sector nothing much was open. I did not feel it was prudent to go exploring narrow alleyways after dark, so after soaking up atmosphere for a while I turned around and walked back through the checkpoints and home.



<sup>35</sup> Emphasizing that Thessaloniki is the capital of Greek Macedonia, even though Alexander died before the city was founded. The coin is on the city flag as well as on its seal.

I asked the owners of my Nicosia apartment if they could recommend a driver to take me around Nicosia, and engaged the man they suggested. Nicosia is a pleasant enough town, and I duly registered the old city gates, and the former British law courts, and some venerable Orthodox churches, and the Archbishopric where Makarios had lived, and some other sights. Nicosia seemed like small beer after Athens, but I was interested in seeing more of the Turkish Zone, so the next day we crossed the line in the same taxicab and took the highway for the port city of Kyrenia (now called *Girne* in Turkish). We stopped at a ruined castle named after St. Hilarion, the monk on whose hermitage site it was built. I admired the romantic view (below left) but skipped the perilous ascent to the top. We passed an enormous TRNC flag constructed on a hillside out of painted stones (below right) and ended up at the picturesque harbor of Kyrenia, full of pleasure boats and café tables and British tourists (below, second row). I sat by the waterfront on my folding cane chair and soaked up more atmosphere.



We spent the rest of the day in the northern zone, including a drive (and a walk) in the Turkish zone of Nicosia. Despite some pretty views, it was not a pleasant experience, and only partly because of the dazzlingly ugly half-finished graffiti-covered bare boxy third-world concrete-slab structures strewn almost randomly around the countryside. They didn't help, but the main problem was the pervasive sense of violent appropriation and

usurpation presented by the complete Turkification of the zone (all the names had been changed to Turkish). In the Greek zone you could see Turkish (and English) signage, and there were mosques and Turkish neighborhoods, but in the Turkish zone, as far as I could see anyway, there seemed to be no recognition that Greek people had ever lived there. The TRNC gave off a dead-end Third World vibe, which Greek Cyprus did not. I am not anti-Turkish and am not taking sides here – there was certainly enough beastliness on

both sides during the events that led up to partition. But I had listened with some sympathy to the Greek complaints about expropriation and confiscation and despoliation during the invasion and afterward. I could not help their coloring my perceptions, and I was glad to get back to the Greek area.

The next day I headed out in a rented car. Cyprus is very small and I could have gone almost anywhere.<sup>36</sup> The trip from Larnaca airport on the southern coast to Nicosia in the center of the island had taken only 45 minutes. But people who had been to Cyprus told me the Troodos Mountains was the place to see, so that's where I headed. At first it was flat cultivated land, with stony fields like in Ireland, and small rocky villages, but then the roads got narrower and more winding, and the hills grew steeper. Olive trees gave way to pine and cypress and cedar and laurel, evergreen but with occasional bare trees and piles of bright fallen leaves. The higher I got the more dramatic the scenery became, but also the colder it became, and there was a menace of snow in the air.<sup>37</sup>



I was aiming for the famous monastery of Kykkos, founded in 1090, where Makarios retired and near which he is buried. Kykkos is thriving as a monastery; the present buildings are relatively new. After seeing so many old churches, all shadowy and dark, the paintings and decoration blackened and obscured by centuries of candle-smoke, it was exhilarating to see the arches and ceilings of the Kykkos monastery church bright and shining, the gilded mosaics gleaming like new. The surrounding cloister was covered

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<sup>36</sup> In the southern zone – to go north I would have needed both special insurance, and the will to go there.

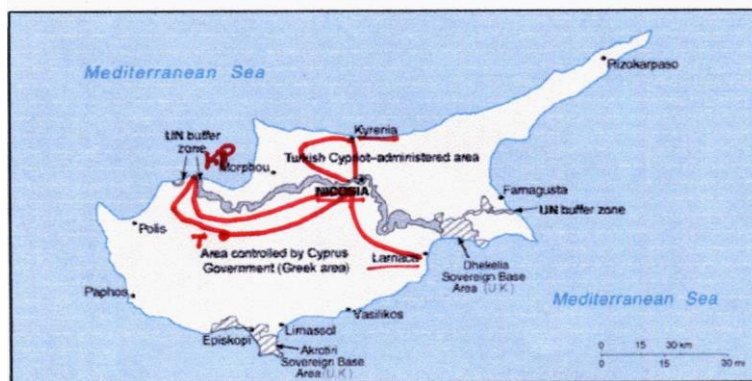
<sup>37</sup> The Troodos Mountains are the largest of the two mountain ranges on the island; I had already been to the Kyrenia Range, the smaller one.

with murals of historical and religious scenes, painted in a conservative but distinctly modern idiom. Below: two details from the cloister.



I did go to Makarios' tomb a short distance away at Throni, and gawped at the colossal bronze statue of him there. Then I continued west, aiming for an ancient shrine of Aphrodite on the northwestern corner of the island.<sup>38</sup> But the roads through the Troodos Mountains were so narrow and twisting that it was not safe to drive more than about 20 miles an hour, plus it was raining and threatening to snow as the temperature neared freezing. So as it grew dark and I was still in the mountains, I decided to scrub the shrine of Aphrodite and take what refuge I could find.<sup>39</sup> And, providentially, when I emerged from my narrow mountain byway onto the coastal road, I was directly in front of the Tylos Beach Hotel and Fish Restaurant in Kato Pyrgos. The manager (an avatar of Aphrodite?) was waiting outside to welcome me as her only guest. Good food, a lovely view of the harbor, and a snug retreat (once I negotiated turning on the heat).

The next day (New Year's Eve) I headed back to Nicosia, along more mountain roads (the direct lowland route would have taken me into the Turkish zone, for which I still did not have the right insurance). Here is a map showing my travels in Cyprus.



<sup>38</sup> Aphrodite was supposed to have arisen from the foam of the sea and come ashore on Cyprus. This foam was churned up when Cronus, leader of the Titans, cut off the genitals of his father Uranus, the sky-god, and threw them into the water. This story may be doubted.

<sup>39</sup> Aphrodite is a relaxed, indulgent goddess. She tolerates in good humor anything but preferring another. In the circumstances I feared Her anger less than I feared skidding off a dark, wet road into a mountain chasm.

The trip back to Nicosia was even more scenic than the trip out, as this time the views extended out to the sea. I passed through some more mountain villages (right). Although I was glad to see all this, I was more than ready to go home. After one more night in Ledras Street I took a taxi back to Larnaca, flew to Athens, holed up overnight in an airport hotel, and the next morning started my long journey home. It was a great adventure, but as always I was relieved to close my front door behind me, and hear again the beat of the Pacific surf.<sup>40</sup>



David

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A SILVER COIN OF ANCIENT ATHENS. THE OWL, A FAMILIAR OF ATHENA, IS A SYMBOL OF WISDOM BECAUSE IT CAN SEE IN THE DARK.

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<sup>40</sup> "David returned to bless his house." 1 Chronicles 16:43.