

INSTEAD OF A PROLOGUE

There have been countless accounts of World War II — stories and memoirs detailing the brutality it generated and the extent it took — a war that tortured entire populations for years, eventually exhausting them. Europe, where it all started, was traumatized by hunger and fear, torture, civil war, humiliation, the loss of all dignity, and, above all, by the massive loss of human life. It was a war of a dark age, a savage and absurd war, initiated by people who were blinded by fanaticism, a war that for many did not end in 1945 but persisted until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It was a war that left its indelible mark on countless families, a war that has gone down in history as the most destructive, and that will endure as a lesson to remind us of the devastating consequences of fanaticism and intolerance, things that future generations cannot afford to ignore or forget.¹

Every corner of Greece paid its own price during this terrible period. This narrative is a remembrance of

¹ History.com Editors, “Berlin Wall.” History, A&E Television Networks, 15 December 2009, <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/berlin-wall> [Accessed 26 Aug., 2020].

the painful days of the Occupation in and around the provincial city of Lamia. Its purpose is not only to restore the memory of the deceased, but also to convey to today's youth some awareness of this facet of the city's history; it is yet another attempt to pay tribute to all those who kept the flame of the struggle alit and by sacrificing their lives laid the foundations for a liberated homeland.

The history and events of this era should perhaps have been written years ago. But I wasn't ready. Maybe the reader cannot understand that, for me, Pavlos's story is not simply another war story; it also carries my own fury about what happened back then, events that ultimately took Pavlos from me too soon. Time may have soothed my rage somewhat, making the moment ripe for vindication now that my children — Christina, Harry, and Markella — are old enough and mature enough to analyze, understand, and appreciate the actions of their forebears. The best form of vindication is to be glorified and honored by one's descendants.

I have chosen to tell this story simply, to make it intelligible to all and to enlighten future generations. I have juxtaposed local events with the developments of the war that was unfolding around the globe at the same time.

It is important to make this story known — not only for my children, but also so that other young people may learn and not forget. Although memories are often painful, they do not cease, no matter how much they hurt, to make us proud.

It would be an omission not to thank all those who helped me write this manuscript.

Vagios Floros, who found himself at the right time in Xiriotissa²; I owe him boundless gratitude for rescuing Pavlos and, ultimately, for my existence.

Dr. Ioannis Papasiopoulos, who selflessly and tirelessly worked to help save Pavlos. Also, all those who dashed to help save him, even risking their own lives, each in their own way.

My aunt, Avgi Rizou, who was like a mother to me in difficult times and waited for the right moment to unravel the tapestry of memories and endless conversations she had had with Pavlos.

My cousin, Christos Diamantis, for his discreet support of my mother, his encouragement, and his valuable help in gathering material for this book.

My husband, George Syllantavos, for his undivided support and continuous backing throughout this research, which was incredibly emotionally charged.

It would be a grave omission not to thank the employees in the various institutions — such as the Registry offices, the Citizen Service Centers, the Greek State General Archives — for their attention and professional conscientiousness to plough through their archives of that period, especially considering that most of the research work took place during the Covid-19 era.

² At that time, it was the area's designated execution location, now a cemetery.

I

Pavlos's story is well known in the Fthiotida region of Central Greece. It was narrated and written down by many. I will communicate it to you as Pavlos conveyed it to me so that it may not be forgotten with the passing years. But I wish to relay not just the facts themselves, but describe the evil that one human being can inflict on another. Today I understand that Pavlos represented the hope for continuity, for the establishment of good, the need to erase the memory of evil, and to give birth to something new. If my father had died that morning, there would be no continuity: I would not exist, neither would my children. Many souls have not had this good fortune and that is sad, but humanity continues to persist, and the struggle of each and every Pavlos shows us that we must fight for this very thing: life and continuity.

So, this is the story of Pavlos, my Pavlos.

My Pavlos was tall, sturdy and dark with thick, wavy hair, big brown eyes and a broad smile.

My Pavlos used to make me feel confident and secure every time he gave me his strong, firm hand to hold, with its large, decisive fingers.

My Pavlos had a tactful sense of humor and sought the

congenial company of friends. As far as my mother, aunt and friends remember, he revered life, and he reveled in it. He loved to travel, go out with friends, smoke and dance, have fun and show it with his easy laugh. How he appreciated life's simple pleasures! He enjoyed his work — and he really worked hard. Many were the times when he would forget himself at his office at the National Bank of Greece, and my mother and I would have to deliver a late dinner to him there. But even though he was buried under a pile of paperwork, he would sneak out to give me a kiss, and then hurry back in to lose himself again in his accounts.

My Pavlos lived every day to the fullest as it was offered to him.

My Pavlos had the scars of two bullet wounds on his face — one on his left cheek, which looked like a deep dimple, and an even deeper one on his right temple. At some point years later — without knowing why, and without my mother being able to quite explain it — he stopped going out with friends and preferred to spend time alone, taking walks through the Zappeion Park and on Philopappou Hill or, when weather permitted, fishing with a rod on his favorite rock in Faliro Bay. Even though he would come back with a modest catch, he would always smile at me. His face lit up with happiness.

My Pavlos used to wake me up on Sundays with the sound and songs by Sotos Panagopoulos, Vasilis Tsitsanis³,

³ V. Tsitsanis's favorite song, which always started his performances, was titled "Sinefiasmeni Kyriaki" [Cloudy Sunday].

Grigoris Bithikotsis and Dean Martin. I loved listening to music with him, curled up in his favorite armchair.

He always wanted the dining table to be set as if it were a celebration and always enjoyed the food, no matter what was served.

My Pavlos used to help me with arithmetic, even when his temples would pound from one of his continuous headaches. Even though he was in pain, he used to pretend that I was magically making the pain vanish when I would place my hand on his forehead to soothe him.

My Pavlos used to tell me bedtime stories. And I liked it when he squeezed me tight in his arms — a hug that gave me a sense of confidence and security, as I felt he had the power to keep me safe from anything evil and wicked that could harm me.

It has taken me half a century to fully understand Pavlos. And I'm so sorry that I can't say to him, "Father, I really understand you now."

Roughly translated, it goes like this:
Cloudy Sunday,
you resemble my heart
that is always cloudy,
Christ and Mother Mary.
It is a day like this one,
that I lost my joy.
Cloudy Sunday,
you make my heart bleed,
when I see you rainy,
Not a moment can I be still,
you blacken my life and I deeply sigh.

I really don't remember much more because he left too soon when I was still very young. We didn't have time to express and share much more with each other. He left early and abruptly. He left with honor and dignity — the same way that he lived. He collapsed right before my mother's eyes, his heroine, and died, as if shot by a bullet like the one that had shot him some years earlier, only this time "its mission was accomplished."

2

The Sperchios is a river with mentions reaching as far back as Greek mythology. It's a river that was once worshipped as a god. According to myth and as Homer mentions in the *Iliad*, the kingdom of Achilles extended to the Sperchios (Spercheius) River.

*Spercheius, in vain did my father vow to you that
when I came home there to my native land
I would cut my hair to you and offer a holy hecatomb,
and would sacrifice fifty rams, males without blemish,
into your waters on the spot where is your precinct and your
fragrant altar.⁴*

In later years it was also called Alamana.⁵ Its source is on Mount Tymphristos (Velouhi) and crosses the valley that stretches between the mountains of Oeti and Othrys,

⁴ Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 23, lines 144-147. Translated by A. T. Murray, Loeb Classical Library, 1925.

⁵ Location of the famous Battle of Alamana on April 23, 1821, where 1,500 Greeks, under Athanasios Diakos, Ioannis Divouniotis and Dimitrios Panourgias bravely fought against 8,000 Turks and lost during the Greek War of Independence.

which bears its name (the Sperchios Valley). It rushes through the fir forest, carrying with it history, snowy winters, lovely, serene summers, indeed, the very life of the people of the region, and when it finally reaches the plain of Lamia, the river calms down and bestows life to the region and fruit to the earth. With its continuous meanders, the river quenches the thirst of the soil, making the entire area that it crosses fertile, until it eventually flows into the Maliakos Bay.

Its banks, from its source to its estuary, are the backdrop of the lives of the people in its vicinity. The people of the Sperchios were made like it: impulsive, hardy, strong, and proud.

The variegated landscape is magical. Below the fir trees you find willow trees, plane trees, chestnut and walnut trees, oaks, and maples. And when the river reaches the valley, it widens and spreads with tributaries that slither along the ground, with poplars singing on their banks, while further on it pools, forming small marshes thick with reeds and rushes. In the spring, the valley fills with daisies, clover, poppies, and chamomile, and in the summer the whole plain abounds with fruit and corn.

The silt from the Sperchios has made the soil around it very fertile — all kinds of vegetables, grains and fruit trees thrive there. It is a vast and hospitable plain, a plain that lovingly embraces residents and passers-by and fosters life. The landscape — cherry orchards, almond groves, apricot, mulberry and peach trees, fields of tomatoes, and vineyards, embodying all the wealth of this fertile land

— is enchanting. Around the river, all that meets the eye is fruitful. Everything here is interwoven with life: the color of the sky, the sunlight, the birds, the butterflies and cicadas in summer, the fresh air, the voices of the inhabitants, the laughter of the children, the flute heard from afar, the tinkling sheep bells, the smell of fresh bread and pies baking in the wood ovens, everything is redolent of life. In times of peace, the earth flourishes and bequeaths a livelihood to its people, who in turn worship and serve it with their sweat; nature offers them its harmony and they feel blessed. However, there came a time when death was lurking.

In this magnificent landscape on the left bank of the Sperchios is where the village of Komma is located. Up until 1898, the settlement was on the right bank of the river, but after floods destroyed it, the village was rebuilt on the left bank, which was considered safer. That is how the place got its name — from (apo)komma meaning “snippet”, a piece snipped off by the Sperchios.

Komma lies just five kilometers from the city of Lamia. From afar you can see the poplars and cypresses that line the road connecting them. During the Occupation, and for several years afterwards, this was the starting point of the Athens-Lamia Old National Road, a highway that connected the southern part of the country with northern Greece, a fundamental link between Greece and the rest of Europe. For its time, the road was relatively well built, completely paved. In 1941 this road together with Sperchios River constituted what was known as the

“second inter-allied defensive line”. It was crossed by the German army during their descent towards Athens following the capitulation of Yorgos Tsolakoglou, the Greek military officer who became the first Prime Minister of the Greek collaborationist government during the Axis Occupation in 1941–1942.

This is the village where Pavlos’s family took root, and where he was born on May 1, 1926 — the youngest child of the comparatively well-off family of Constantinos and Panagioula Diamantis.

The Diamantis clan was a large family that, after the liberation from the Turks, moved south around 1830 from Thessaly and acquired land in the area.⁶ They bought “pairs of fields”⁷, fertile land where cotton, tobacco, wheat, and rice could be grown. Wheat production gave great value to this land. Later, Constantinos, one of the family’s four brothers, married Panagioula, the daughter of a wealthy family from the town of Amfissa. After the wedding, with his savings and the portion of land in his ownership along with funds from his bride’s dowry, Constantinos set up his household and built their house in Komma. The house, a stone structure, was spacious for the standards of the time and region and dominated the main street, being located next to the church of Saint Athanasios and the village’s large square.

⁶ G. Kordatos, *Great History of Greece, Volume III and History of the Greek Nation, Volume XI*, Athens Publishing.

⁷ A pair of fields was an area of about 200 stremmata (about 50 acres), the amount of land a farmer could plough with a pair of oxen.

One could see the house from afar. It looked stately and as neat as a pin.

Constantinos Diamantis was a perfect gentleman, and his house was open to the traveler. It was common knowledge that every passerby could find shelter and work there, a corner to sleep in and a plate of warm food.

The entrance to the house was on the main road. One would enter from the big courtyard and walk past the house on the right side, about five meters away. Facing east, the hallway had three large windows: one on the east side, two on the north. The living room, facing southwards, was on the same level and also had three windows, one on the east, two on the south. Two fireplaces, one in each room, kept the rooms warm during cold winter days. There were built-in cabinets for crockery, food, and other items, and one wall was covered by a bookcase full of books. Between the two rooms was a spacious hallway, which led to a third room with a window to the west and could be seen from the main street. To enter the house you climbed up some stone steps and, if you stood on the patio next to the entrance, you had a good view of the main road in the distance with its trees, as the house was set higher than its neighbors. The front door, imposing and heavy, was held by large iron hinges decorated with the same artistry as the window grilles. The balcony, wooden, large, and covered, provided shade and coolness on hot summer nights. The house had wooden floors and a large wooden staircase that led to the basement, which was as large as the ground floor. Foodstuffs of all kinds

were stored there; wine (in large barrels), flour, olives, cheeses, butter, fruit, nuts, noodles, *trahanas* (traditional Greek pasta), and anything else your heart desired. The basement was shady and cool, which helped preserve the supplies.

There was also a second basement, where Constantinos stored less perishable foods for emergencies. The thick stone walls kept the basement temperatures cool. The foundations of all the other constructions were stone as well.

The barn was located to the left of the large courtyard. It was large and square. A wooden staircase led to a loft, a small room with loosely fitted planks that allowed the sun and air, but not the rain, to penetrate. The orientation of the barn was easterly, welcoming the sun and the cool breeze from the Maliakos Bay. That is where they laid out the corn and any other crops that needed to dry, before storage. It also served as the summer's most enjoyable hiding place, a fabulous place for an undisturbed siesta in the shade, caressed by a refreshing breeze.

On the north side there was a relatively low building, called the scullery, entered from the south. When you went in, you could see, behind a partition, the spot where the cooking fire was burning. Large cupboards held the platters and all the kitchen equipment: the clay pots, mortars, pans, deep bowls, spoons and forks, while beyond stood the large basket where the loaves of bread were kept. In the back was the big sink for washing the dishes. Outside the scullery there was a large stone well

with a pump. The water flowed from a drain pipe into a small, built-in cistern, where the animals could drink, and from there, through a gutter, it watered the garden. The water in the well was brackish, and people did not drink from it, nor was it used for washing clothes as soap did mix well with it. For drinking water, river water was carried to the house in special containers. Women, of course, would hoist the jugs onto their shoulders, or if a large quantity was needed, pack animals would share the burden.

A second partition created another room with a fireplace, the dining room with a large, rectangular table in the middle around which twenty people could sit comfortably, or more if they squeezed together. Two large windows, one south and one east, helped illuminate and ventilate the room.

Near the scullery was a large raised oven for baking bread and certain foods. There was also a separate place for the Dutch oven and for the cauldron used for washing.

Next to that there was a separate space with simple divans where the workers who worked on the estates could rest. Adjacent to that was the laundry room, covered and spacious, with its washing tubs, soaps, lye—a widely used whitening agent at the time—and everything else needed for washing clothes. A garden spread out in front of these buildings, part orchard, part vegetable garden. All kinds of trees occupied about a quarter of it — pomegranate, quince, and plum trees of various types — while a natural hedge of artichoke bushes created a protective

border for tomatoes, eggplants, cabbages and other vegetables. A long courtyard shaded by a vine-covered pergola connected the first courtyard with the stables. Many animals lived there: horses, donkeys, lambs, goats, pigs, and hens. For transport there were two-wheeled vehicles: a cart drawn by one horse and a four-wheeled carriage drawn by two. These helped with the transport of people, crops, firewood from the mountains, stone for construction and anything else needed by the large family.

Between the south wall of the house and the first stable a special room was built for Grandma's weaving loom, a huge contraption with all the accessories — spindles, shuttles, needles and baskets of thread. This was where Grandma spent endless hours weaving, immersed in her thoughts and feelings. For the various household tasks, she had a nursemaid for the children, other women for cooking, cleaning and the laundry. For the estate itself, there were workers who labored in the fields and stables, following orders from Grandpa. The caretaker, a dynamic, hard-working man, was Constantinos's right-hand man, overseeing all the jobs and assisting him in every endeavor. When the hard times came, he stood by his side as a friend, assistant, and supporter.

If you crossed the two gardens behind the house, you could reach the church of Saint Athanasios and from there proceed to the Sperchios River, whose water level swelled and fell according to the season.

The family of Constantinos and Panagioula Diamantis

began to grow. Their first child was a girl, and they named her Katina, after her grandmother. But the infant died after a year. Christos followed in 1903. They named him after Christ in hopes that he would survive; and he did. Then another boy was born, Efthymios — named after Grandma's brother — but he also died an infant. Then another boy was born, Savvas, who also died an infant. In 1906, a daughter, Meropi, was born. In 1912, Maria was born, whom they called Marigo. Then in early 1914 a boy was born, Theodoros, who was named after his great-grandfather; and he survived. Towards the end of 1914 came a second Efthymios, known to relatives and friends as Thymios because it was Grandma's favorite name, reminding her of her brother who had passed away without leaving a family behind. After Efthymios came Katina, in 1919. In 1920, Thanasis was born.

The family continued to grow even more! Meanwhile, the first children had grown up. After finishing his schooling in the village, Christos became involved in agriculture, always assisted by the group of workers who already lived with the family. Meropi also finished the village's four-year primary school and, because she was an excellent student and very much wanted to become a teacher, she was sent to the Girls' School in Lamia. This school was housed in the large stone building that is today the 6th High School of Lamia.

In 1924 Yorgos was born and in 1926 the last son, Pavlos, came into the world: the last child, the most beloved of all.

Efthymios and Thanasis were by then attending high school in Lamia and lived there. Their younger sister Katina used to visit them, taking care of the two boys in the absence of their mother.

From a young age, Katina was incredibly beautiful. Her parents were so proud of her that they didn't send her to work in the fields, as was the case with Meropi. On the other hand, Marigo was a lively, sturdy, dark-blond beauty with curly hair that could only be tamed by braiding it. She loved to work, thought nothing of the cold, the heat, the fatigue from working in the fields, and she especially liked to take care of the garden and the animals. She was clever, capable and had a straightforward, strong, and independent character. Marigo did not tolerate objections and too much chatter. But like everyone else, she always obeyed and respected her elder brother Christos.

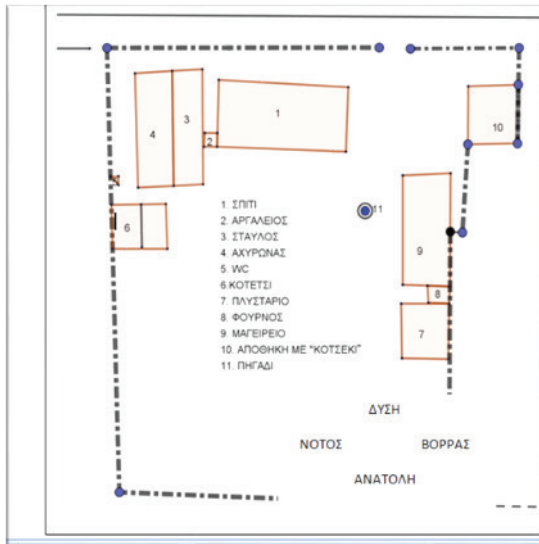
All three girls had the training and education they needed, as did the boys. The family's rationale was that everyone should be educated, not an easy task in those times. They viewed education as a social obligation, the means to compose their inner world, acquire values and become complete as a human being and useful to society. So, they taught their children to learn, think, investigate, and seek the truth.

Christos was very dynamic and active. He stood out for his perseverance and integrity. He had pioneering ideas, which he applied to his work and had no regrets as his efforts were crowned with success. He loved his land and knew how to take care of it; and the land

generously returned the favor. After 1930, cotton began to be cultivated in the Fthiotida area, and Christos was one of the first and most successful growers. The cotton producers in the area elected him as their representative. In addition, he also produced the best quality wheat in the region, which led him to participate in the Thessaloniki

International Fair. He received the silver farmer's national award twice: in 1935 and 1937. "Silver Agriculture Prize" was inscribed on the yellowed paper with the depiction of the goddess Demeter, which accompanied the medal. The award was framed and hung on the wall in the front hall, making the family very proud.

Efthymios was a smart, hard-working, exceptional student in high school, and he loved the land and its people. In fact, all the family children had been taught to love their homeland and its people. He was sent to the University of Thessaloniki to study agronomy. Constantinos strove in every way possible to provide an education to his children. "Education is the best and most useful tool," he used to say.



1. Main house
2. Loom
3. Stable
4. Barn
5. Outhouse

6. Chicken coop
7. Laundry
8. Wood oven
9. Scullery
10. Pantry
11. Well