

The following is an excerpt from Connie Constant's forthcoming book, *American Kid*.

## **AMERICAN KID**

by Constance M. Constant

### AUTHOR'S PROLOGUE

"Where have all the young men gone? Gone to soldiers every one. When will they ever learn? ... Where have all the soldiers gone? Gone to graveyards, every one. When will they ever learn? When will they ever learn?" ~Pete Seeger and Joe Hickerson

These haunting lyrics, written in 1955 by Seeger and augmented by Hickerson in 1960 address the agony of war—tragically still taking place on our exquisite planet. Clearly, we haven't learned.

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was inundated with worldwide disasters. World War I (1914-1918), which technically and more diabolically changed warfare, witnessed uncountable numbers of soldiers disastrously maimed, poisoned with lethal gasses, psychologically wounded, and "gone to graveyards." Between World Wars I and II, Americans and much of the globe's community found themselves financially choking in a 1930s economic Depression. And by mid-1941—a mere nineteen years before "Where have All the Flowers Gone?" was penned—Adolph Hitler's insatiable greed for power had become temporarily successful; his troops violently occupied most of Europe. Following the December 7, 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii, the U.S. joined the conflict that became known as "World War II." Until war's end in 1945, soldiers were going to graveyards again – *en masse* – and so were innocent civilians. *American Kid* has its beginnings in Chicago in 1937, during the hardships of the Great Depression.

The majority of Americans had been afflicted by economic adversity for eight long years, when in January and February of 1937 the severely flooding Ohio and Mississippi Rivers in Ohio, Kentucky, and Illinois left one million more Depression-afflicted Americans – homeless. Simultaneously, residents of Oklahoma's panhandle and neighboring areas of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, and Texas were enduring the miseries of the brutal Dust Bowl. Vicious winds, carrying devastating black clouds saturated with farm soils, were relentlessly blowing American families, their farms, and their prairie homes out of existence. At the same time, banks had closed across the country, wiping out precious savings accounts; home mortgages were being foreclosed. Businesses continued going bankrupt. Jobs were scarce. U.S. unemployment hit almost 25%. Most Americans were struggling to put food on the table and pay rent or make mortgage payments for the roof over their heads.

In 1935, "average" Americans, bearing the yoke of "hard times," were barely noticing Benito Mussolini's arrogant invasion of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) in Africa. In 1936, a civil war began in Spain. The Empire of Japan invaded China in 1937; the Japanese military inflicted the worst of atrocities on the innocent civilians of Nanking that year. Hitler, and his ally Benito Mussolini, itchy for world domination by means of war were brandishing their brutal swords in Europe. Yet "Average Joe American," unaware that Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar, Germany was already operational in 1937, with more hideous plans in store for its use, saw Europe and Asia as too far away—thousands of miles across our cushioning oceans. Many Americans referred to Hitler's deadly incursions as "Europe's war." One of those Axis occupied countries

was Greece, on the southeastern edge of Europe. *Hellas*, as the Greeks refer to their homeland, is a nation peninsula surrounded by three notably gorgeous and sparkling, sapphire blue seas: the Aegean, the Ionian, and the Mediterranean.

Greece's heroic participation in the Second World War still remains a lesser-known history. The first Allied victory of WWII is credited to Greece's small army and courageous civilians who fought off powerful Italian armed forces in the winter of 1940-41. Italian dictator Mussolini (Hitler's ally in the war) had invaded at the Greek border with Albania in October of 1940. Where it took 43 days for powerful France to fall, it took 219 days for the Greeks to capitulate—from the start of the Italian troubles through to the German invasion. At one point the Greek military, civilians in the reserves, and the Greek women of Epirus in the north were simultaneously fighting off enemy Albanians, Italians, Germans, and Bulgarians: all Axis allies.

This astonishing "David and Goliath" struggle was exalted on the cover of *Life* magazine in 1940 and prompted U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt to remark: "Free people are deeply impressed by the courage and steadfastness of the Greek Nation ... which is defending itself so valiantly." But to save Mussolini's face from the shame of being defeated by small, less powerful Greece, Hitler was forced to help his Italian ally by sending German armies over Greece's border with Bulgaria to invade and subdue the feisty Greeks in April of 1941. Some historians suggest that WWII would have suffered a different ending if Greek resistance had not delayed the Nazis in Greece.

The six-week holdup in Hitler's secret plan to invade the Soviet Union was made more complicated for the German army by fearless retaliation from the people of Crete, and by the Greek underground's resistance tactics. Belligerent and intrepid Cretan women and men, in defense of their Greek island, slowed down German troops (Battle of Crete, May 1941). As a result, the Nazis did not arrive in Russia according to Hitler's original schedule. Heavy autumn rains turned the U.S.S.R.'s roads into impassable muddy bogs and the overwhelming Russian winter of 1941-42 caused worse delay—ultimately disabling Germany's mighty forces. The Germans were eventually defeated.

The people of Greece, scattered in cities, towns, and villages on the northern mainland, southern Peloponnesian peninsula, and throughout the Greek islands of their small, mountainous country, experienced the Italian and German occupations in verifiably different ways: some more brutal than others. Some cities and villages were occupied by Mussolini's armies and saw few German soldiers; in others it was the opposite. Mountain villages drew increased scrutiny from Germans due to the presence of guerrilla fighters hiding further up in the remote crags. Greek villages along the sea suffered different dilemmas. Each war experience was unique.

Most American, WWII-era civilians observed German soldiers on film, while watching black-and-white newsreels in American movie theaters. But John and his family, of *American Kid*, came face to face with them in full, living and dying color: this book relates what happened to an innocent, civilian family when Hitler's armies occupied Europe.

Yet, while *American Kid* focuses on one family, it is also the story of millions of families, regardless of location, trapped in war's violence: past and present. When John of this account writes that it was "the first time in my short life that I asked: 'Are we going to die today?'" he was posing a question no eight-year-old child, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or religion, should ever have to ask.

For eons, poets, balladeers, artists, and authors of every genre have chronicled human suffering as a result of wars. Yet, tragically, wars are still going on. Is the grasp of power so sweet for the greedy “few” that they cannot be out-swayed by the suffering “many?” With centuries of ethical and moral philosophy, human evolution, advancing civilization, and wide spread education under our belts, why haven’t we gained the knowledge, influence, and determination we need to proliferate and maintain peace? Why do children need to wonder if they will be alive at the end of a day? What have we missed that we still need to learn?

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