

Excerpt from Chapter 12, “My Village” of *The American Kid (Who Was Trapped in the War)*, a forthcoming book by Constance. M. Constant

The invasion of surly Nazi soldiers carrying weapons devastatingly altered life’s perennial rhythms for everyone in the village, from newborns to the elderly. Naïve at the start, we thought the appearance of German soldiers was a one shot deal; that they would go away forever when they didn’t find anything suspicious. Most of us were unaware the Germans were scheduling our Parnion, a remote, insignificant village in the mountains of southern Greece, into their regular surveillances; nor did we know German behavior would worsen as the war continued. So in the beginning months of my family’s return to the village, our “sure bet” place of safety after the Germans invaded Greece, my mother believed life would still remain somewhat normal and peaceful until the war was over. In fact, Mom still felt comfortable enough to allow me to enjoy boyish freedom and curiosity in familiarizing myself with her beloved birthplace on days when soldiers were absent.

Being a kid at the time, I don’t remember the date or even the year when enemy soldiers first showed up to terrorize us. We had no calendar; a calendar was a village rarity. Reminded by the church bell’s clanging and season of the year, the women of a family insightfully kept track of months, Sundays, other days of the week, church holidays, and fasting days without a piece of paper, tacked on the wall, announcing year and month.

Probably by 1942, my young memories of the U.S. had blurred. We left Chicago when my family lived sparsely to survive the economic Depression of the 1930s, so I didn’t miss or even remember the few conveniences we left behind. As an eight-year old, I was at a suitable age for adjusting to a rural existence and for enjoying the true down-to-earth delights of nature, as only a boy can know them when there are no books or electricity-dependent devices to keep him indoors. Even though I had lived in the second largest city in the U.S., I was young enough for village life to feel normal and acceptable to me.

Most villagers considered us “*xenoi*” (outsiders), yet Parnion was becoming my “hometown” more so than Chicago or my birthplace of Geneva, Illinois had ever been.

“*To Americanaki*” (the little American kid) no longer remembered the previous U.S. homes or cities where we had lived, didn’t know what “American” was supposed to feel like. Village people were so narrow-minded about our being “American” and *xenoi* they never understood the metaphysical link to Parnion that was fusing with my soul, even as foreign soldiers threatened our impoverished, primeval existence. I felt that Parnion was *my* village as much as it was *theirs*. Mother’s “*Americanaki*” was fascinated with her birthplace; an old movie of vivid village memories still plays pleasantly through my head.

At first, I was fearful of live chickens, men with weathered complexions and bushy mustaches (most American men were clean shaven in the 1930s), and village women who were dressed, head to toe, in black. Live domestic animals that roamed around the village at will and malicious, biting roosters unnerved me, too. I was even frightened by the daily sight of poor Panagiota sitting woefully on the bench near St. Nicholas Church, a stone’s throw away from Grandpa’s house. Shy, myself, I’d uncomfortably approach the harmless, retarded woman, with my head down, looking away when I passed. Poor, peaceful Panagiota scared me. Mother finally enlightened her timid son.

“Why don’t you try smiling at Panagiota, Johnny? She’s not scary. She’s harmless. Do *you* like being ignored? How would you like it if every time people passed you, they’d automatically turn their heads? Panagiota needs to feel that you like her. It will do good for both of you.” Next time I came within sight of Panagiota’s bench, I straightened up and flashed her a great big smile. I was startled but pleased when she lifted her head, looked me in the eyes and smiled back. Eventually, we even came to waving at each other.

Circumstances beyond our control forced my family to remain in Parnion. Yet living there afforded me a matchless learning experience that I never would have had as an eight-year old growing up in Chicago. Instead of shopping at a grocery store, I learned that most villagers grew their own food supplies, made bread on a weekly basis, and raised chickens and livestock for milk, eggs, meat, wool, and even leather. Donkeys and mules provided transport; I don’t remember any horse owners in Parnion. I, continuously, learned about *real life* from our potato field, Martha’s ewe, my mother’s garden, and the fruit trees in the *perivoli* (yard adjacent to our house). I came to appreciate that the soil we walked on produced food for us to eat and provided grazing land for animals. Like a kid growing up in rural America, I made the connection between human survival and animals, trees, grains, fruits and vegetables that are nourished by the earth.

Delighting in the freedom I enjoyed to roam the countryside around the village, I made fascinating discoveries about birds in the sky and the insects and rocks on terra firma. Seventy years ago, I gathered walnuts from trees growing in Parnion’s “boonies” that 21st century nutritionists tell us are vital for human health.

I witnessed swallows constructing their mud nests under the eaves of St. George’s Church and chased partridges down the village’s main road. Honing my ability to identify birds by their songs and looks, I remember the chubby, brownish-gray *tsihla* (thrush) whose beautiful song could be heard after the rain. Thrushes preferred to hang out in Parnion’s nearby woods, but in winter when they sought additional food, they spent more time pecking about in dormant fields, closer to town. On my forays into the hills, I looked forward to spotting the occasional eagle circling high above, giant wings spread into the heavens and sharp eyes searching ravine and mountains for prey. Most assuredly Mother had issued strict orders for me to obey. “Johnny, be alert. Your ears must act like twenty-four ears. Come home *immediately* if you hear trucks, cars and motorcycles coming toward the village. You know that means the Germans are on their way into town.”

Besides Nazi invaders, there were natural hazards in village life. I surely recall the prickly *pournaria* (holm-oaks), holly-like shrubs that cover the valleys and hillsides of the Peloponnesian landscape. In spring, their tender, bright-green leaves are gourmet munchies for goats but when *pournaria* leaves and branches dry and toughen in summer’s heat, they are as sharp as stilettos. Most animals instinctively stay away from *pournaria*. I painfully recall the countless times my sleeves, pants, and skin were caught and torn on their cutting protrusions.

Remembering *pournaria* brings to mind Parnion’s very early mornings when dawn slowly began wrapping the village’s dark green, holm-oak inundated ravine, surrounding hills, and red tile roofs with golden sunlight, a peaceful and gorgeous “special effect” that finally brought us illumination, after hours and hours of night’s blackness. With no electricity, villagers went to bed an hour or so after it got dark, cautious of wasting fuel in olive oil lamps to light rooms where one could not even read comfortably; reading was left for daylight hours. Roosters were our

natural alarms clocks; they introduced us to welcome, morning luminosity. Village roosters crowed at the first break of morning light, although sometimes they goofed up and we'd hear crowing at midnight.

Greek light has always been an extraordinary marvel. Surely, nature's light is a special blessing to all the earth's peoples, but most especially to those who live without electricity. The ancient Greeks believed that beginning at sunrise, Helios, their sun god, slowly drove his chariot carrying the sun across the sky to light the earth each day; as far as I know, there was no god of electricity, even though the word is derived from the ancient Greek word *elektron*. Since the beginning, earth's sun has most definitely been the "star" of Greek existence (pun intended).

I also remember how nightfall opened the sky's invisible curtain, exposing a free natural light show packed with shimmering stars that immersed me in the universe. Brilliant points of gleaming light emanated from twinkling stars and glowing planets, exquisitely beautifying the blackness above Parnion. On the clearest nights, the wide path of stars, known since ancient times as the "Milky Way," gloriously cut its swath high above me in Parnion's elegant night sky. Villagers, however, referred to the phenomenon as "The Jordan River" instead of "The Milky Way," no doubt replacing pagan mythology with a Biblical point of reference. Yet, I understand their analogy: staring up from my spot on the hard ground on a luminous Parnion night, I remember marveling at a concentrated Mississippi of stars, tattooed across the sky's "river bed." I have never forgotten the diamond-like excellence of a crystal-clear village night and have never experienced the dazzling phenomenon anywhere else. Nighttime clouds, alone, cancelled the show.

Surely, distinctions between Chicago living and life in Parnion were obvious to me at the start of our stay in Greece, when I was five. Live chickens didn't stroll Chicago's streets; they did in Parnion. Chicago homes had indoor running water and inside bathrooms with very useful fixtures called "toilets;" villages had rudimentary outhouses. Chicago enjoyed electricity; Parnion homes were illuminated with olive oil. The second largest U.S. metropolis was a city of wide streets and sidewalks. Its boulevards were full of fast-moving, gasoline-powered vehicles; automatic signals and stop signs regulated traffic. In the 30s, most Chicagoans traveled public transportation to visit friends and family, take in movie theaters, watch the Cubs play at Wrigley Field, romp in city parks, and shop in immense department stores. They boarded elevators to soar upward inside gargantuan buildings called "skyscrapers." Parnion had donkeys, mules, sheep, goats—and brilliant stars.