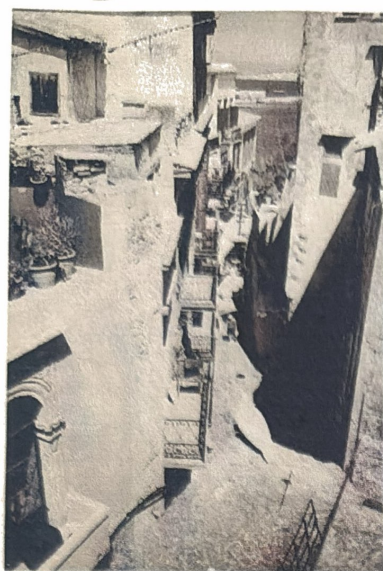




The view from the roof of the house in Hania, then and now.

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# My report to Greco

By Sherri Moshman Paganos

**A**ugust is Kazantzakis' favorite month, when the earth, he writes, is rich in figs and grapes and melons. When we came to Crete over twenty-five years ago, it was our honeymoon, our odyssey to rich and fertile land. Although you were not Greek, you couldn't imagine going anywhere else but Greece. Outside our basement room in Iraklion, came our first contact with the earth each morning. Every day the rattle-rattle of the mighty trucks awakened us and the setting up of crate after crate of melons, figs, grapes and peaches.

You carried your copy of Kazantzakis's *Report to Greco* that you had bought in New York before we left. The descriptions delighted me: the smell of the basil and jasmine in the courtyard, the sweet sound of the mother singing, the fierce look of the father, the touch of the sea, and most of all, the child reading aloud the saints' legends in the courtyard, as the neighbors gathered and listened, cleaning beans and crying as the suffering the saints endured.

The later passages, heavy with philosophy, made me impatient. But this was your favorite part. You noted passages that you especially liked, writing the page numbers neatly in the book after the table of contents, little notes such as "page 133, Chinese sage; page 290, flesh and spirit; page 292, the cry beyond the abyss." You read to me, "I loved my body and did not want it to perish; I loved my soul and did not want it to decay. I fought to reconcile these two antagonistic world-creating forces..." You

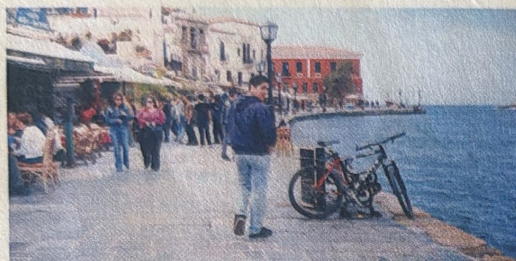
wanted to embrace the world but you just didn't know how. All around the island, we felt the richness of the earth and the warmth of the people. But you were troubled.

Back in New York, these questions: where have we come from, where are we going, how can we reach God, pale when the marriage gets down to more basic issues. Did you pay the phone bill? Clean the bird cage? Pay the rent?

The passage you noted in *Report to Greco* on imagination says "since we cannot change reality, let us change the eyes which we see reality." A Byzantine mystic wrote this, and you underlined it several times. But reality is too strong for us; we try changing our eyes but cannot.

When we finally separate, I take *Report to Greco* with me, even though I find your name in small neat letters near the front cover. I sense I will read the book sometime but not right now. So I set it on my bookcase where it seems to fit, between *Teach Yourself Modern Greek* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

I wander the city on foot and with my bicycle. It takes me everywhere from Chinatown to the upper west side, from the east river to the Hudson. In Central Park I lie on the grass and look up at the sky through the branches of the giant oak and maple trees. On Fifth Avenue, I battle taxi drivers, bus drivers. I gaze up at the skyscrapers; they have a desperate beauty in their ascent to the sky, but I prefer to burrow underground, spending hours in the lower



Sherri Moshman staking her claim to a bench with a view in Hania's old port. Top left with her son, Hania's lighthouse in the background.

depths of the Modern Museum of Art, watching films that are part of their foreign film series.

I seek peace, but it's not to be. Little by little, signs appear to leave the city: my treasured bicycle is stolen, I'm forced to give up my apartment, my teaching hours are reduced, close friends are mugged. Once again reality steps in: New York the idea is stronger than New York in actuality.

And so I leave the city, but not alone. Mole that I am, I come up from the earth at times. On one such time I meet my present husband who is Greek, oh delicious irony of life, and move to Greece, although he would really have preferred to stay in New York. Without understanding it, the seasons pass, summers of blue sea and clear nights studded with stars, and winters where each year the almond trees miraculously bloom. And with the seasons, my study of Greek waxes and wanes. Some days I shine, other days, darkness. My dictionary next to me, I struggle to read Kazantzakis in the original. It's hard going.

Many years later, I am in Iraklion, this time high above the city on my little hotel balcony. I look down at the port, wild blue waves hitting against the walkway of the castle. Chickens are clucking in the city, on a roof right across from me; an elderly lady tends them and waters her pots of basil and marjoram. *Report to Greco* is with me; I read all the philosophical passages in depth, but I still prefer the descriptions that awaken all my senses, the brightness of the stars, the

feel of the earth and especially the smells Kazantzakis describes, of sea, of soil and of human sweat.

In Knossos my family and I walk among the stately cypress trees. I stare at the graceful bull dancer, clutching the horns of the bull. It's not an antagonistic fight, but one full of grace. My son and daughter stand and stare a long time at the fresco of the dolphins, the flying fish, the graceful movement. As Kazantzakis writes, imagining the words of the great Cretan painter El Greco, to whom after all he is "reporting" in his book: "Reason is too constricting for me and so are the rules. Like the flying fish I leap out of safe, secure waters and enter a more ethereal atmosphere..." I can only hope my children's spirit will soar like these graceful dolphins and that nothing will hold them back, as if wings transform them.

I hike through the Samaria Gorge, now a national park, rediscover the caves of Matala, now an archaeological site, and nearly faint in the heat of Phaistos. All places we had explored so many years ago in the sweetness of our honeymoon. And in Hania, along the lovely old port, I pull out of my memory a tiny balcony where we had slept. Is that the one? I look up and wonder.

Will I ever know? It doesn't matter. My ties with Crete continue. In the same way Kazantzakis, even with all his world travels, constantly returns to Crete for strength, so the sea calls me on a voyage of return to Hania, to visit my son, now an engineering

student there. In August, when the grapes and figs ripen, the town is bursting. He lives in the old town in one of the marvelous old stone houses, near the port. The street draws tourists and tour guides. They stand and point out the Venetian architecture in English, French, Italian and German as I watch them from above, the tiny balcony of the house. The tourists point their cameras up at the cornices, the windows, the red geraniums in the niches, the cactus with their pink flowers. The pigeons flutter around, sitting in the windows, cooing and licking their wings. We take a walk along the old port, feel the breeze and smell of the sea, pass the restaurants and tavernas where the waiters are hanging around outside trying to lure tourists in with dinner specials.

For most of the visitors to Crete, if Kazantzakis is known at all, it is probably as the writer of *Zorba*. Is there anybody walking around carrying *Report to Greco* and making notes in the book about favorite philosophical or descriptive passages? Who knows.... One final expression from the book lingers with me as I go up to the roof of the house and look out and down at the cobblestones, the sea, and beyond at the 'pharos,' the magnificent Venetian lighthouse. No matter how often I gaze at the picture in front of me, I never tire of this view. I see it all with the 'elephant eye,' as Kazantzakis calls it, which is "to see everything as it is for the first time and greet it, see everything as it is for the last time and say farewell."

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