

“God bless America!”

Nicholas Gage went to America after his mother's brutal death during the Greek Civil War (1946-1949).



1 “God bless America!” was the refrain that concluded every anecdote my father ever told me about his life. Not until I became an adult did I understand his
5 complicated feelings for his adopted country and the reasons why he didn't bring us there to join him. As a child it had seemed to me natural that my father lived in America and we lived in Lia. When, at the age of nine, I finally met
10 him for the first time, I had come to the conclusion that he had abandoned us. Only later did I realize that given the times and his nature, it was the only thing he could do.

To every immigrant America was the promised land, where hard work was rewarded with gold. As my father labored sixteen hours a day at two
15 jobs, however, he quickly learned that America was also filled with traps for the innocent and the unwary. He saw fellow Greek immigrants, released from the bonds of village morality and poverty, quickly ruined by women, alcohol and gambling.

When he married and had children, he decided that the United States was
20 far too treacherous a place to raise a family, especially four daughters. Working long hours, he could not supervise them properly and his wife would be cut off from the support system of relatives and neighbors she had in Lia. In the village, wives and daughters knew exactly how to conduct themselves; the strict ethos¹ permitted no lapses, but America was full of fallen women.
25 Furthermore, his modest income allowed him to make his family the wealthiest in Lia, at the pinnacle² of the social ladder, but if we ever came to Massachusetts, we would find ourselves children of a struggling vegetable peddler. Worse, we would see him treated with the scorn that rich Yankees displayed toward the immigrants who served them. Instead, when my father
30 returned to Lia on his periodical sabbaticals³, his wife and children considered him a sophisticated and successful American tycoon.

He loved passing long days of luxurious idleness in the *cafenions*, basking in the adulation of family and friends, but he also had become accustomed to the conveniences of America: fine clothes, weekly baths — and
35 no relatives to answer to. That was the other side of the coin: my father had been seduced by American comforts and the bachelor life he created among other immigrant men in Worcester.

While he never became perfectly American, my father absorbed the country's optimism and naïveté. Greek peasants at home were the opposite, profoundly suspicious of their neighbors, proud of their williness. They have a
40 disparaging term for people like my father: *Amerikanaki* — “little American” — implying a wide-eyed innocent, eager to be duped. My father had come to America at seventeen and stayed away from the village too long...

1. ethos : *éthique, morale*
2. pinnacle : *pinacle, sommet*
3. sabbaticals : *congés*

Nicholas GAGE, *Eleni* (1983)

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