

“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
40 suspicious of their neighbors, proud of their wiliness. They have a 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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Reprinted by Harvill 1989.

On the threshold of a new world

1 IN the galleries above, I was taken from room
to room and looked over rather carelessly. After
lifting my eyelids with a button hook¹, a young
man with a military bearing saw that I had no
5 trachoma². Someone else made me cough and
breathe. I had to take off my clothes and turn
around several times. In another room, a big
fat man asked if I could bend over. "Why?"
I asked in turn, thinking that the only reason he
10 wanted to know was because he himself would
never be able to do such a thing. "Is it that
everyone who comes to America has to be able
to bend over?"

"Yes," he said.

15 "What for?"

"Because when we sing our national anthem, we bend over. Now do it
or I'll send you back to Serbia."

"I don't come from Serbia," I protested.

"Exactly," he said. "But if I want to, I can ship you there, so you'd bet-
20 ter do as I tell you."

I bent over and was passed on to the next room.

There, a pretty woman with cold eyes asked me if I knew how to read
and write.

"Of course," I said.

25 "What languages?" she asked.

When I replied, "Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, German, and French — and
English, as you can see," she got very suspicious and asked me what I did
for a living.

30 "I write books," I said. Little did I know that in America no one ever
believes this. She looked at me the way one looks at a madman.

"What kind of books?" she asked sharply, closing one eye and squint-
ing with the other.

"Stories," I replied pompously, "essays, dissertations on Biblical poetry,
political science, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera."

35 "How can you make a living by doing this?" she inquired, with evident
disgust.

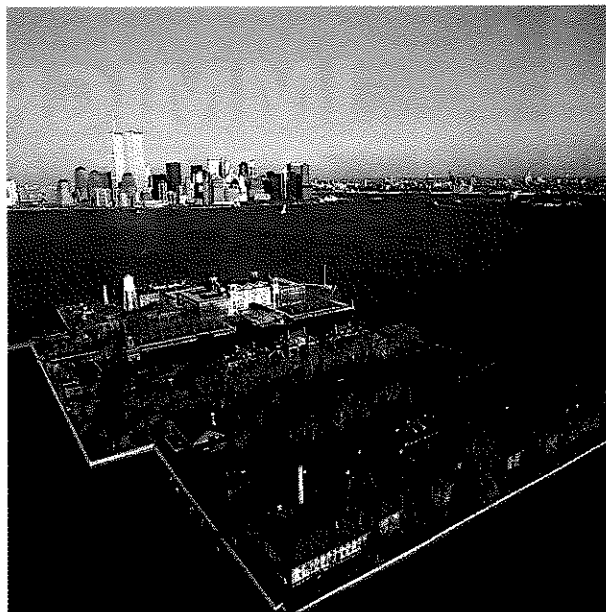
"That's very perceptive of you," I said with a broad smile. "I can't."

"Turn around," she commanded. She made a letter on my back with a
piece of chalk and motioned for me to leave. "Next!" she shouted.

40 "What's that for?" I asked, trying to see what she had written.

"Nothing," she said, and pushed me into the hall.

By this time I was elated. I imagined myself in a dressing gown, living
in a palace overlooking the forests of Manhattan (which I thought would
look like a cross between the Tyrol and the *Berner Oberland*³), married to
45 the Norwegian woman, after whom I was chasing as best I could. We would
be on the same ferry, I thought. The ferry would burst through the fog, and
there, in front of us, would be a magnificent island of fjords, meadows, and
castles...



1. button hook : tire-
bouton

2. trachoma : trachome
(maladie des yeux)

3. *Berner Oberland*:
Oberland bernois (région
montagneuse de Suisse)

Mark HELPRIN, *Ellis Island and Other Stories* (1976)

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