

“It’s not my nature to join in hating, but in loving.”

Kathleen Carlson

5/03/07

I have just finished re-reading a book I had read many years ago, *Eleni*, by Nicholas Gage. I had seen the movie first, a couple of times, and been so moved by it as to purchase the book. Reading it again, many years later, I appreciate it even more.

The book is about Niccolás’ mother, Eleni Gatzoyiannis, who was tortured and executed in 1949, near the end of the Greek civil war between Communist guerillas and government troops following the German occupation and World War II. More specifically, it was about Nicholas’ search as an adult for the story of his mother’s death, and the people who were responsible for it. In so doing, he constructed, through extensive, exhaustive research, the story of her life and that of her family beginning in about 1940, against the backdrop of historic and military events which affected the life of their mountain village of Lia.

He writes about the many sufferings and deaths of the Greek people throughout that period and about the Communist movement’s quick descent from a group of people with lofty ideals to a vicious, brutal, vindictive force. He describes how the petty jealousies and gossips of the small town were turned into informing and testifying against neighbors, eventually costing the lives of the five civilians of Lia executed by a firing squad that August day.

He journeys throughout Greece and a number of Communist bloc countries, speaking to former guerillas and townspeople in search of those most responsible for his mother’s death. He vows revenge.

Finally, after hundreds of interviews, corroborating every detail with additional testimony, he decides that the only surviving person who had the most responsibility for his mother’s death is the investigative magistrate at her trial. Known to most people as Katis (the judge), he gathered the “information” against Eleni, centered mainly on her “traitorous” efforts to plan the escape of her children to live with their father in America. Officially, the information was forwarded to Koliyiannis, the political commissar for the Epiros Command, who sent the order for execution to the local judges, who would then conduct a mock public trial, the outcome of which had already been decided. The trial was for propaganda purposes and would entail bringing one’s own

neighbors to testify before the group, in order to discredit the accused and demonstrate the justice of the Democratic Army. In Eleni's case the propaganda part went awry. After a few weak testimonies had been presented, several people of the community, including Communist sympathizers, stood up to say that she had done nothing wrong and should not be put to death. Still, the judges pretended to confer for a few moments, and handed down the verdicts.

One of the three judges at the trial was so shaken by the evident propaganda failure of the trial that he initially refused to sign the execution order, and went to the office of the chief of staff in the town of Babouri to express his concerns. Koliyiannis was aware of the impending defeat of the guerilla army and their plan to retreat into Albania, taking with them all the remaining villagers of the Mougana region, along with their animals and provisions.

"If no one is punished...do you think the villagers...will follow us meekly or rush over to join the fascists?" Koliyiannis asked. "Whether the villagers follow us out of loyalty or fear doesn't matter, as long as they understand the consequences of defying us."

The doubting judge realized his own survival was at stake and reluctantly signed the execution order, a move which he told others he regretted for the rest of his life.

Nicholas waited to confront Katis until he had conducted his extensive research, confirmed beyond the shadow of a doubt the culpability of the man whose real name was Achilleas Lykas. Finally, he hunted him down and confronted him. Meanwhile, Nicholas had obtained a gun.

The first time, Katis was at his lovely retirement home in the mountains, with his wife by his side and his married daughter upstairs. The conversation began calmly, but erupted into anger, as Katis denied all that Nicholas knew to be true. Shots might have been fired, if Katis had lunged at him, and certainly if the wife and daughter had not been around, but Nicholas left, kicking himself for his lack of nerve to carry out the deserved revenge.

Four months later, Nicholas hunted him down again, at a seaside apartment rented for the summer. Waiting until he saw the rest of the family leave for the beach, Nicholas entered the apartment where they had their final confrontation. He knew that he wanted to kill the old man, but he did not.

Afterwards, he reflected. His mother's last words had not been vindictive against her captors. Before the shots were fired she shouted "My

children!” in a voice that was heard by others not at the scene. It was love for her children that had led her to her death, and she never uttered a word of hatred or bitterness to those who testified against her to save their own skins.

The book ends with this beautiful passage:

Unlike Hecuba, my mother did not spend the last of her strength cursing her tormentors, but, like Antigone, she found the courage to face death because she had done her duty to those she loved. Sophocles’ Antigone tells the man who has condemned her to death, her uncle and king, “It’s not my nature to join in hating, but in loving.”

That was Eleni Gatzoyiannis’ nature as well, and Katis had not been able to destroy it by killing her. Like the mulberry tree in our yard, which still stands after the house has fallen into ruins, that love has taken root in us, her children, and spread to her grandchildren as well.

If I killed Katis, I would have to uproot that love in myself and become like him, purging myself as he did of all humanity or compassion. Just as he had abandoned his baby daughter and wife to become a killer for the guerillas, I would have to put aside thoughts of what I was doing to my children’s lives. My mother had done everything out of love for her own children.

Killing Katis would give me relief from the pain that had filled me for so many years. But as much as I want that satisfaction, I’ve learned that I can’t do it. My mother’s love, the primary impulse of her life, still binds us together, often surrounding me like a tangible presence. Summoning the hate necessary to kill Katis would sever that bridge connecting us and destroy the part of me that is most like Eleni.