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Our City: Salonica

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/02d9z84x>

Journal

Places, 1(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1984-01-15

Peer reviewed

Our City: Salonica

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This could be the script of a short film.

It is the representation of a city from the inside. Most of the cast has lived in the city long enough to consider it "home." The following stories and discussions have been heard, or could have been heard, in Salonica sometime in the last 10 years.

Together with the echoes of the different voices, their surrounding settings came to my mind. I have tried to describe these because they represent the settings in which the people chose, or learned, to live. The various stories and characters came to my mind in a continuous, and perhaps arbitrary, sequence that I have maintained in this essay. Several of the stories are relevant to the city's history; others are less so, but I have included them, also. The fate of the city has been intertwined with the fate of its citizens and it is impossible to separate the two. Some aspects of the city's life have inevitably been left out.

In this way I want to show how an insider's story can be meaningful to outsiders interested in a city's history.

Episode One

[Downtown. A small apartment living room filled with books, drawings, and slides. Small, decorative folk-art pieces from different parts of Greece hang on the walls. Light and mid-day street noises enter through the half-open balcony door. A gentle man in his late sixties.]

"I was born in a small village near Yannena. I finished high school there. My uncle, who lived in Salonica, offered to help me through the university. I came, prepared for, and passed the entrance exams. I entered the school of philosophy. Then you could choose between classics and archaeology. I chose archaeology. I went to Pella, several summers, on excavations. I taught at the University of Yannena for a few years. Finally, we came to Salonica, and I taught at the university here. Then, it was time to leave. . . . I spent a semester at Princeton, at the Institute. Now I teach some of the summer courses in the Institute for Balkan Studies. I write a little bit for *Macedonian Life* . . . You know. . . ."

Episode Two

[Dining room in an apartment near the sea. The interior is dominated by two crystal cases and a round table, covered with a heavy velvet tablecloth. Most of the furniture, including the antique chandelier, seems too large for the modern apartment. It is still light out, but the shutters are pulled for privacy. Otherwise, the residents of the apartments across the narrow street could easily see inside. An elderly woman. Her graying hair is carefully combed. Her eyes are lightly made up.]

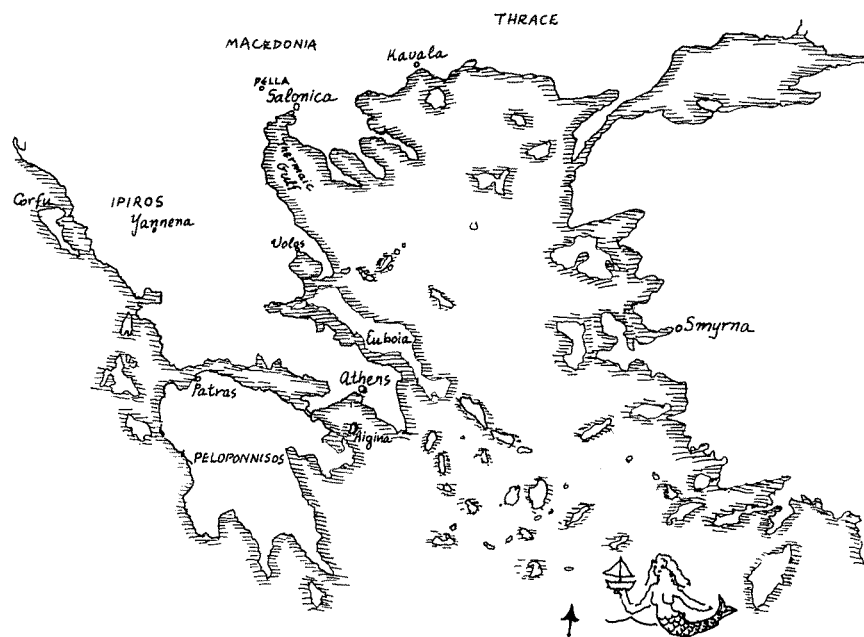
"Oh, I came from Smyrna in 1922, with the exchange of population. I was a little girl then. I was an only child for quite a while. My mother lost three children, all boys, all before they reached three. We were all shattered then.

"They had set fires in our houses in Smyrna while we were leaving. You could smell the ripe cheeses burning in the cellars. Finally, our turn came to get in a boat. It was going to Salonica. We carried a few things with us, the icon of St. Onoufrios, pray for us. . . . My mother's sister and her husband embarked on another boat. That one was going to Athens. You see, my uncle already had a good position in Smyrna. He worked for the railways. My father was a butcher. He had a shop with his brother. But he was so naive, he never managed to make any money. Well, we came to Salonica. The people here, oh, they were shepherds, really, peasants from the mountains. The new-comers would ask them a question and instead of an answer they would go, 'ah?'. My uncles remembered that. We came and showed them the ways, really. . . ."

"At first we lived in a nice house, with a yard. Your father remembers it, too. Mrs. Pappa lived next door. What a polite lady! They had a piano. Well, we had to move because my father's business was not doing well. We went to Raktivan, near St. Aikaterini's church. That house did not have a yard, but, you see, in those days, you didn't have all these apartment buildings all around. There was lots of open space and children could play outside all day if they wanted.

"Finally, when I got married I moved to your uncle's house. You remember that. Oh, all those dinners I gave there. My neighbors, those that are still left, remember. Madame Fernandez and her

husband lived next door. They were Jewish, you know. But what nice people! They spoke in French to each other, so that others could not tell they were Jewish, but anyone could tell, from their accent in Greek, anyway. They slightly, ever so slightly, elongated the words. I had become so fluent in French all those years we lived next door. . . . Then the war came. There they went, with all the other thousands and thousands of Jews. We offered to hide them. But, poor people, they didn't know what was awaiting them. . . . After they left, the government started selling their properties. Very cheap, really. But your uncle did not want to get involved. What if they come back, he'd say. . . .



“At that time I had Costis, my first child, born while the Germans were bombarding the city. People said: ‘Oh, they are not going to bomb the hospital!’ But who was to stop them? We had to go down to the basement, your father carried Costis under his coat—it was winter then, you see. . . .

“We moved here, oh, 20 years ago.”

Episode Three

[Art gallery, downtown. Like most galleries in the city, this, too, is in a remodelled shop basement. Large canvases hang on the walls. They depict people on the *paralia*—the city's broad promenade by the sea—one moment after the sun has set. The silhouettes virtually disappear in the vastness of the sky and the gray-tiled *paralia*. At a small table sits a young, bearded man.]



2

“I came from Serres. I have been running this gallery for almost 10 years now.

“You know this painter, don’t you? He lives in Euboia. He comes up here once in a while to paint. He had come years ago. You were still in high school.”

Episode Four

[Across from the church of St. Demetrios, in front of one of the few older houses in the area. Most others have already been replaced by apartment buildings. A young woman in dark clothes.]

“Of course I was born here. My mother was from an old, good family. She remembers when the refugees came from Smyrna. The women used to wear makeup and lipstick! You see, Smyrna was influenced then by the French.

“Our house was built around 1912. I found a pen drawing of the façade. I had a copy made for my sister. The upper two stories were added in the 30’s, I think. But it is becoming impossible to live here any more. Aghiou Dimitriou is just too noisy. It has become a major thoroughfare. Oh, yes, I have lived

away from home a lot. I studied in Athens, at the School of Fine Arts. Then I went to Paris and studied there for a while. I came back, taught in the high school. Went back to Paris, lived with Nikos, then we got married, we came back, he had to go to the army. . . . My sister, Iro, has moved to Athens.”

Episode Five

[This is filmed in the studio. Three university students are sitting at a café table. They are drinking ouzo and once in a while they have a bite of food. In the background a film is being projected. First we see several, imposing neoclassical buildings. Some are under restoration, a lot are abandoned, few have been restored. Then some views of the modern university town. The last part of the film takes us through the old town. Small cottages almost falling apart, old women peeking through their windows, girls carrying groceries.

Meanwhile, popular songs about Salonica are played in the background:

In your narrow paths,
I lived the best moments of my life

2 Salonica: Promenade (Paralia)

Drawn by the author from an old undated photograph.

3 Salonica: Arch of Galerios

Drawn by the author from an old undated photograph.



3

Oh, oh beautiful Salonica
Oh, oh how I miss your magical
evenings.

Slowly, the lights go out, the music
dies.]

Episode Six

[Downtown, in a delicatessen-type
store. Two middle-aged men work
behind the counter. The younger
looking one says:]

“Eh, here, all these years now. In
the sausages and the hams. With
my brother. A whole life in the
sausages. See, there opens the
General Store across the street.
Big store. Seven floors. They went
and turned the basement into a
supermarket. People don’t know
any better. They go to buy their
cassette tapes and their towels, they
go to the basement and they do
their food shopping as well. You
find everything there.

“Eh, we go for day-trips once in a
while, my sister and I. We go for
walks by the sea. Now that we
entered the Common Market, they
say we will close Saturdays, too.
What are people going to do? When
will they do their shopping? They’ll
have to run out Friday night and
shop for two days. . . .”

Episode Seven

[In the balcony of a five-story
apartment building. The
neighboring buildings are very
close; one can carry on a discussion
with neighbors from several
different apartments. A woman in
her forties sits out on a folding
canvas armchair, embroidering.]

“When I got married, I started
going for walks by the sea. When
my daughter was a baby, I would
take her, put her in the stroller and
go down to the *paralia*. Your heart
opens up when you see the water.
Out go the worries. We could see
the sea from our old house. But,
an old house is an old house no
matter what you do to it. You start
cleaning from one end, it gets dirty
again by the time you are through.
Let alone the heating costs. In
the heart of the winter we almost
needed a barrel of gasoline a week
for the stove.

“Not that apartments are perfect.
. . . You come out in the balcony
to enjoy your breakfast in the
morning, or your coffee in the
evening, and the ‘lady’ from
upstairs decides to clean her dust
pan on you! Or, she’ll remember to
water her plants, right then! I

remember when we got a television
set . . . right after the kid from the
store finished putting the antenna
up on the terrace she went and
called the police because, she said,
our antenna interfered with hers!
Well, she *is* crazy.

“One thing I don’t like in this city:
The approach. When you come
by train you have to cross all that
misery, by the train station. You
don’t want to be there alone at
night. Or, if you come by bus,
again, you have to go through the
workers’ housing and the military
quarters. Kavala, on the other
hand, has a beautiful approach.
You come in from high up on the
hills and the city appears suddenly,
down there, all in front of your
eyes. . . . That’s one thing Salonica
doesn’t have.

Episode Eight

[On a park bench, by the sea. The
sun has just set. Many Salonicans
are strolling along the *paralia*:
couples, families, visitors, holding
arms. Two older women are sitting
and talking to each other. One of
them says:]

“Of course, we have our sea and
our *paralia*. You can’t find one

like it no matter where you go. No other city in Europe, they say, has a *paralia* like ours. That's why all the foreigners come to enjoy our seas, our sun, to eat our fruits. And all those Germans who come in the spring. . . . What do you say about those? We are still in winter coats and they come to sunbathe. They don't even get nice suntans. They burn right from the first day. Let alone the Yugoslavians. Don't you see them flocking in every weekend? They come here to shop. They say that they go back and sell what they bought to others who cannot get visas easily. Who knows? I wonder if it is the same ones who come every weekend. . . . They have discovered all the bargain stores. They now go in the department stores, as well. See, now to become a salesgirl you have to speak Serbian. It used to be French, then English, now Serbian."

Episode Nine

[A very serene, spacious living room. Low lighting from two floor lamps. A few pieces of old furniture; bits of white lace here and there protect the sofa and the armchairs from getting dirty. A tall, composed woman in summer clothes.]

"Good evening. I am Martina Sofou and I teach history, Ancient Greek, Modern Greek, philosophy and logic in a private high school. Oh, yes, we do have to follow what the Ministry of Education says to the letter. I came from Thrace. I went to the university here and stayed here and made a nest. I have been teaching for 20 years now. I

like teaching bright students. They are all bright kids. We used to live here before this apartment building was built. The old house had three floors. We lived on the third, my sister-in-law lived downstairs. There was a bakery on the first floor. It caught fire one day, I remember, the big chimney of the bakery started burning from inside. We were sitting out on the balcony, the girl from downstairs and I, and we were talking. It was Sunday. Suddenly Maria said: 'Look, even on Sunday they bake! No respect!' Little we knew that the smell was coming from the inside of the chimney. All that fat that had accumulated with the years was slowly burning. The firetrucks came. I stayed in the kitchen making coffee for the firemen. . . . No, nothing was damaged, except for a glass the firemen broke. . . . After that we agreed to give the house to a contractor to demolish and build a new apartment building. In the meantime, we lived with my other sister-in-law, in the Analipsis area. We returned when the building was ready.

Now, why did my husband decide to install concealed lighting in the living room, I don't know. I hate those fluorescent lamps. I keep them off. He comes in, he puts them on. Anyway.

Sometimes, now that it is summer and I don't have school, I go for days without leaving the house. I'll go to get cigarettes once a day from Stelios who has a kiosk in the corner. They almost drafted him

in '74 with the episodes in Cyprus, but he got away without enlisting. He does well in his small kiosk. Very nice people, both Stelios and his wife. They come from Kavala.

In August we'll go to Aigina. We go to the same house every year. Every year more and more tourists there. Three, four, ten times the population of the island. What can the poor people do? They adjust.

Let me close the balcony door. It gets noisy here with all the cars going by. The noise gets trapped by the tall buildings on both sides of the street. They act as a funnel. It's impossible. You can hardly carry on a conversation. Only at about six in the morning do I find some serenity. I sit outside on the balcony and embroider.

[Same speaker, a later time. Standing by the balcony railing, looking down at the traffic in front of the church of Hagia Sophia.]

Rarely do I go in any more, even though it is two steps away. Sometimes I'll go in for a wedding. . . . After the earthquake they brought specialists from Italy to support the walls inside. They filled the place with scaffolding. Did you see it? It is like a forest. Of course I have always liked this church. Those greenish marbles on the walls, frescoes with the flowers make the interior so cool, like autumn. St. Demetrios' church, on the other hand, is like the summer, all warm reds and yellows. Of course they bastardized that church with the 'restoration,' no

question about that. Terrible, terrible. They went and put up those new, imitation capitals next to the sixth century ones. A mockery. The whole thing shows no respect. But I do like the church when it is full. We went there last Easter for the midnight celebration. People, people inside, people all over the courtyard, on the stairs, everywhere. We had to stand on the sidewalk. Of course we went 10 minutes before midnight. . . .”

Episode Ten

[An institutional canteen. Eating dinner with a young woman, a university student.]

“I remember arriving by train, from Athens, at 6:30 one morning. Vassilis came to pick me up. We went to eat *bougatsa* somewhere near the train station. But, how beautiful it was there! We went to a little corner store that sold milk, yogurt, and pastries. It was full of workers, eating their *bougatsa* quickly before they went to work. It was warm in that place. You see, the ‘high society’ was still asleep.”

Episode Eleven

[Street corner, downtown. Mid-day. The shops are open and the streets are full of women shopping. Cars go by ceaselessly. An older, agile woman advertises her lottery tickets as she crochets mechanically.]

“What can I tell you? I sell lottery tickets here, in this corner. Years and years now. With them I raised my children. I married my daughter off. God willing, I will marry her

children off, too. Whenever I find time I crochet something for them. They are still young.

“Here, take a ticket. They are lucky.”

Episode Twelve

[Early evening. Walking by the sea with a young man who has just returned from the army. Once again, the Salonicians are strolling up and down. Small vendors try to attract attention to their merchandise: roasted nuts, popcorn, roasted corn on the cob, and, occasionally, cotton candy. It is hard to see all this activity in the evening. The electric lights are few and high above. When one of them is out, a large pool of shade interrupts the expanse of the *paralia*. The vendors set up small gas lamps on their improvised stalls. Our friend comments:]

“There is a park in front of my old high school. Calithea’s Park. It has two marble statues of some heroes of the War of Independence. We used to climb up a small wall behind those statues and then we’d hit the back of their necks. Lightly. You know how you hit another kid who has just gotten a haircut. Otherwise we used them as markers when we played soccer. Occasionally the city would send someone to clean them of all the bird droppings.”

[Standing in front of an equestrian statue, flooded with lights.]

“Somehow, this statue of Alexander they put in the *paralia*, I never quite

liked it. There is something odd about it. Too pompous. The horse seems too small, doesn’t it? They made it in Italy. It has only been here five or six years.”

Episode Thirteen

[Sitting in the same crowded dining room with the round table and the antique furniture of the second episode, talking to the woman from Smyrna. Once again her hair is carefully combed. A pair of earrings follows the frequent movements of her head.]

“My brother—your father—still remembers playing in those empty lots back then. We had earthquakes then, too. Was it ’33 or ’34 that we had a strong one? But people were not scared as they are now because Salonica then was not built up. There were lots of empty spaces to play in and any time a tremor came you could run out in the open. You weren’t afraid of getting buried under some apartment building. . . . All the houses then were low, two, three stories high at the most. Now, if anyone gets stuck in an elevator during an earthquake. . . . God save us. So, what was I saying? My son, too, well, now he is not a child anymore, he’s almost 35, but he was also telling me the other day: Where are those years, *πέ μάνα* [mother], when we used to play out on the dirt-roads. . . . Ah, they ruined her, our city, our Salonica, where the hell could children play today? Remember we used to play, he told me, on the creek, in front of our house. . . . Listen, I told him, you forget when the