



From Moscow to Athens through Scandinavia by Train



John Vlachopoulos

Russian proverb

Москва - третий Рим, четвертого не будет

*(Moscow is the third Rome,
and there won't be a fourth)*

From Pericles' Funeral Oration

τοῖς τε νῦν καὶ τοῖς ἔπειτα θαυματούμεθα

*(Future ages will wonder at us,
as the present age wonders at us now)*

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PROLOGUE

The title of this historical travelogue was inspired by a real journey I undertook in June and July of 1977. I flew from Toronto to Montreal on Air Canada, and from there boarded an Aeroflot Ilyushin jetliner. Our first stop was in Paris, France, but without disembarking, we continued on to Moscow. After staying there for a few days, I flew to what was then called Leningrad, as it was difficult to purchase a train ticket from Canada.

From Leningrad, I took a train to Helsinki, then a ferry to Stockholm, followed by a train to Copenhagen, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Marseille, and St. Raphaël (Fréjus), finally taking a bus for the short ride to Saint-Tropez. From there, I traveled by train to Rome and then to Brindisi in southern Italy. The next leg was a ferry ride to Patras, Greece, and then a train journey to Athens.

In this travelogue, I have not included Copenhagen, Marseille, or Saint-Tropez, as they were covered in my earlier work *In the Footsteps of Pytheas*. Paris is also omitted here, having been described in *In the Footsteps of Lafcadio Hearn*. However, I do include reflections on other European cities and locations I visited either before or after the 1977 trip.

Upon arriving in Athens, I felt as though I had "walked" across the entire European continent in just a few weeks. Naturally, I found myself comparing the scarcity of consumer goods in the Soviet Union with the abundance found in the West. I vividly remember struggling to find anything for breakfast at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport. In stark contrast, vendor stands at Athens's bus terminal—located in the relatively modest Liosion neighborhood—were overflowing with treats.

So, it came as no surprise to me when Soviet communism collapsed a dozen years later following Gorbachev's reforms. On the other hand, I was deeply impressed by China's economic transformation, which I touch upon in my travelogue *Travels to the Far East and the Pacific*. Deng Xiaoping's policies of reform and opening-up proved that capitalism and a free-market economy can indeed thrive under a communist government.

John Vlachopoulos

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MOSCOW I, RUSSIA



In the words of Winston Churchill, “Russia is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.” So, I decided to visit Soviet Russia to discover what it was really like firsthand. Soon after my arrival in Moscow, I went to **Red Square**. **Saint Basil’s Cathedral** was built on the orders of Ivan Grosny (usually mistranslated as “Ivan the Terrible,” but it really means “Ivan the Awe-Inspiring”) between 1555 and 1561. Ivan’s paternal grandmother, Zoe (later known as Sophia) Palaiologina, was a niece of the last Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Emperor, Constantine XI Palaiologos. The title “Czar” (derived from Caesar) was first used by Ivan Grosny’s grandfather, Ivan III (1440-1505). A few years after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453, he made the double-headed eagle Russia’s coat of arms and introduced the saying Москва - третий Рим, четвертого не будет (Moscow is the third Rome, and there won’t be a fourth).

Behind St. Basil’s is Lenin’s Mausoleum, shown in the bottom picture, which I did not visit because I had no patience to queue for more than a kilometer. Close to the mausoleum, there was an open gate to the **Kremlin**. There were no guards and no “no entry” sign, so I walked inside for about 5-10 minutes. There was nothing interesting to see and hardly anyone else walking around, except for a dozen men in suits entering the main entrance to a building.

Across from the mausoleum is the GUM department store. The acronym stands for Government Universal Magazine. I had read about “the large GUM store where everything is in abundance” in the Greek leftist newspaper Avgi. This was very far from the truth. The goods sold at GUM, whether clothes or electrical appliances, were of inferior quality and looked like what you might find in a pawnshop. There was a shortage of just about everything.

I stayed at the 34-story Hotel Ukraina (renamed Radisson Collection Hotel in 2019), which was built in the 1950s in Stalin-era architectural style. The room was large with just the basics, but the rate was about the same as what I paid at the Hilton on 6th Avenue in New York a few months later in 1977. For breakfast, which was plentiful, I exchanged vouchers that I had received upon arrival. However, having lunch or dinner was problematic. I would arrive at the main restaurant and be told by several standing waiters: “Niet Mesta” (no place). I would answer: “Mnoga Mest” (lots of places) as I saw a few hundred empty tables. They would respond: “Delegatsiya” (delegation), meaning a large delegation was expected to arrive. I never saw any large delegation; the government-employed waiters just did not want to be bothered to serve a single guest. I would then utter a few more words in Russian, asking for the “manager” or “director” before they would agree to let me sit down. Whatever Russian I could master was very useful because very few people could speak any other language.

MOSCOW II



When I started planning my trip to Moscow, I asked my travel agent about getting permission to visit a polymer rheology laboratory, where I knew the director, **Professor Georgi V. Vinogradov**. They explained to me that it takes at least three months for the Embassy to issue such a permit, so I decided not to pursue this matter.

Soon after my arrival at my hotel in Moscow, I thought it would be a good idea to find Professor Vinogradov's personal phone number, call him, and arrange a private meeting. I asked for a telephone directory from the hotel reception. They gave me something like the Moscow version of the Yellow Pages, which was less than half the thickness of the Yellow Pages from my home city of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada (population 500,000). I tried to explain that I wanted a telephone book of individuals, not businesses or government listings. I even said it in Russian, “телефонная книга,” but I was told unequivocally that such a directory was not available. I also asked a couple of Russians I met in the lobby lounge and received the same answer.

It was hard to believe that in the capital of the country that had sent the first satellite (Sputnik) into orbit in 1957 and the first man in space in 1961 (Yuri Gagarin, whom I saw when he visited Athens), there was no telephone directory in 1977. Just before writing these lines, I searched the internet and found a scholarly article (Baltic Worlds BW 1 2012, pages 18-23) on this subject. Here's what I read: “An interesting event was the publication of the four-volume directory of Moscow telephone subscribers in 1971—1972. From the very outset, this telephone book was a collector's item: the official edition was 50,000 copies for approximately 600,000 telephone subscribers among 8 million inhabitants.”

I knew that Professor Georgi Vinogradov was a very important person in the Soviet Union, not only due to his numerous scientific publications but also because he was allowed to travel abroad. I had met and talked with him at International Congresses on Rheology in Lyon, France, in 1972, and again in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 1976. After my return to Canada, I discovered that his father, Vladimir, had been Stalin's personal physician.

Here is part of Vladimir Vinogradov's obituary published in the New York Times on July 31, 1964: “Dr. Vladimir N. Vinogradov was accused of being a party to the so-called Doctors' Plot during the **Stalin regime**. He was one of 15 leading Soviet physicians arrested in November 1952, on charges of plotting to kill Soviet Government and military figures by improper medical treatment. Five months later, shortly after Stalin's death, the charges were said to have been falsified and the physicians were exonerated. He was awarded the title of Hero of Socialist Labor, the Soviet Union's highest civilian award, on his 75th birthday in 1957.” If Stalin had not died, as Georgi confided to some fellow rheologists, his father would have been shot and his family sent into exile.

LENINGRAD (SAINT PETERSBURG) I



After spending a few days in Moscow, I boarded a flight to what was then Leningrad (in 1977). The plane was an old TU-104, like the one shown in the picture. While waiting for departure, I saw one of the pilots exiting through the emergency door and walking on top of the right wing, holding a hammer. He then started hammering one of the flaps. It was not comforting, to say the least. But I can't argue with success; the one-hour flight was problem-free.

Upon arrival, I headed to the **Hotel Astoria**, which the travel agent had booked for me. I didn't think much of this old, drab hotel, built in 1912, with furniture that appeared pretty much unchanged since then. The room key was heavy, probably half a kilogram, with the name Астория engraved on it. Years later, I saw a documentary about **Czar Nicholas II** and Czarina Alexandra and realized that the Astoria is one of the world's most historic hotels. It was built to house guests of the Imperial family for the celebrations of 300 years of the **Romanov** dynasty on the throne (1613-1913).

The Russian aristocracy threw lavish parties in the hotel's ballrooms. Rasputin used to stay there with his upper-crust lady friends. **Rasputin** was an unwashed religious mystic presumably capable of stopping the bleeding of young Prince Alexei, who had hemophilia. It is believed that the healing provided by Rasputin was due to stopping the administration of aspirin to Alexei, which was used as a cure-all drug at that time. Aspirin's anti-clotting effects were not known until the 1950s.

According to some historians, the conspiracy to kill Rasputin was concocted at the Astoria to protect the czar and czarina from his malevolent influence. Rasputin was shot three times by Prince **Felix Yusupov** and one of his co-conspirators at the Yusupov Moika Palace, less than a ten-minute walk from the Astoria, in December 1916. Yusupov married a niece of Czar Nicholas II, and they had a daughter, Irina. She lived in Paris, France, but moved to Athens, Greece, for a climate better suited to her tuberculosis-ailing husband. Their daughter, Xenia, married Ilias Sfiris and lives in Athens and Paris. Xenia's daughter, Tatiana Sfiris, is the only great-grandchild of Felix Yusupov.

Through further research, I discovered that Lenin had also stayed at the Astoria and delivered a speech from a balcony in 1919. It was also an abode of spies and counterintelligence agents during World War I. In World War II, Hitler planned to hold a victory banquet there and had invitations printed in advance. Of course, Leningrad survived a horrendous 900-day siege (with over one million Russians killed, a couple of million injured, and over half a million Germans killed or captured). The Astoria has been fully renovated recently, and the pictures on the internet bear little resemblance to what I saw in 1977. Romanov descendants gathered at the Astoria in 1998 for the reburial of Czar Nicholas II, Czarina Alexandra, and their children at the Peter and Paul Cathedral.

LENINGRAD (SAINT PETERSBURG) II



The weather was wonderful during my visit to St. Petersburg in June of 1977. I had the opportunity to walk along the famous **Nevsky Prospect** and visit many noteworthy places on foot. It was the peak of the "**white nights**," with round-the-clock daylight. Nevsky Avenue leads to the Hermitage Museum, which has the world's largest collection of paintings. The Hermitage was originally the Winter Palace of the Romanov dynasty that ruled Russia from 1613 to 1917.

Ivan the Terrible had no direct descendants, so the ruling feudal lords chose Michael Romanov, whose great-aunt Anastasia was the first wife of Ivan. **Peter the Great** (1672-1725) moved the capital from Moscow to Saint Petersburg in 1712. The Romanovs were absolute monarchs "by the grace of God." Most of the peasants were serfs, bound to hereditary plots of land owned by feudal landlords. The exploitation of the serfs by the nobles led to several uprisings. Czar **Alexander II** had planned to abolish serfdom, but he was assassinated in 1881. **Alexander III** did not follow his father's liberalization policies and instead imposed repressive measures. Aleksandr Ilyich Ulyanov, the elder brother of **Vladimir Ilyich Lenin**, was implicated in an assassination attempt against Alexander III and was hanged in 1887.

Nicholas II ascended to the throne at the age of 26. His reign was marred by bad omens from the day of his coronation in Moscow in 1896. Small gifts were given to the populace wrapped in handkerchiefs. Although 400,000 people were expected, over a million showed up. In their attempt to get one of the gifts, 1,379 people were crushed or trampled to death.

I took a picture of the **Cruiser Aurora** because, according to official Soviet history "At 9:40 PM on October 25, 1917 (Old Style; November 7, New Style), a blank shot from her forecandle gun signaled the start of the assault on the **Winter Palace**, marking the beginning of the October Revolution." In reality, the **October 1917** uprising was not the heroic revolution implied by the writing beneath the red flags in the picture (JUBILEE- GREAT OCTOBER). Nobody was killed during the assault. Film director Sergei Eisenstein, who made "October: Ten Days That Shook the World," said that more people were injured during the filming (in 1927) than during the actual assault on the Winter Palace. Pictures from the movie were often mistaken for images from the uprising. However, during the **February/March 1917** revolution, about 1,500 people were killed, and Czar Nicholas II was forced to abdicate. In October, the Bolsheviks took over from the weak Kerensky provisional government with little opposition.

Czar Nicholas II, Czarina Alexandra, their four daughters, son **Alexei**, their personal physician, and three members of the household staff were brutally executed on July 17, 1918. The Czar's mother, Maria Feodorovna (Dagmar of Denmark, sister of King George I of Greece), and his sisters Xenia and Olga escaped. Olga moved to Canada and died in Toronto in 1960. Her granddaughter, Olga Kulikovsky, was a student at McMaster University (Bachelor's, MBA) and married a former student of mine, Jose Cordeiro.

HELSINKI, FINLAND



I left Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) on June 30, 1977, by train from **Finland Station**, heading to Helsinki. It was late in the evening, but in late June, there is so much daylight that artificial light isn't needed for most outdoor activities. The noted author Michel de Grèce wrote a historical fiction titled 'La Nuit Blanche de Saint-Pétersbourg' (The White Night of St. Petersburg), which I highly recommend to French speakers. Finland Station is historically significant because it was where Lenin arrived in April 1917. A locomotive of the same model as the original is still on display there today. For me, the 400 km train ride to Helsinki was slow but comfortable.

Finland was part of the Swedish kingdom from the 13th century. The peasantry spoke Finnish, a Uralic language (like Estonian and Hungarian), while the nobles, administrators, and educators spoke Swedish, an Indo-European language. Helsinki was founded by the Swedish King Gustav Vasa in 1555. During the Napoleonic wars (1809), Finland became part of Russia as an autonomous "Grand Duchy of Finland" until it declared independence after the Bolshevik revolution on December 6, 1917.

Stalin launched an attack against Finland on **November 30, 1939**, expecting an easy victory. Although the Soviets had resources, they lacked leadership, as most of their generals had been purged by Stalin, and each military unit had a commissar to ensure obedience to political doctrine. The Finns had significantly fewer troops and were poorly equipped, but they had excellent knowledge of their territory and knew how to fight in extremely cold weather (-40°C). Their commander-in-chief, Carl Gustav Mannerheim, had served in the Imperial Russian cavalry before Finnish independence and was well-acquainted with Russian military thinking.

The **Molotov cocktail** was invented by the Finns as an improvised weapon against Soviet tanks. Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov, in one of his speeches, described a bombing of Helsinki as an "airborne food delivery." The Finns jokingly named their incendiary fuel-in-a-bottle bomb "a drink to go with Molotov's food parcels." The war ended with an agreement signed on March 12, 1940. Finland ceded 9% of its territory to the USSR. Nikita Khrushchev, in his memoirs, wrote that Russia lost one million men, but this is an exaggeration. Finland suffered 25,904 dead, while the USSR lost about 150,000.

My second visit to Helsinki was in June 1991, when I presented a week-long rheology course at the research center of a large petrochemical corporation in **Porvoo**, near Helsinki. On my first night at the hotel, I didn't close the curtains tightly enough for the total blackout I was used to for uninterrupted sleep. As a result, shortly after 3:00 AM, I was awakened by an unusually large sun shining through. A few days later, in **Tampere**, further north, I found the sun appeared even larger and stronger when I went to give a lecture at the university. Midsummer (June 21st) is an ancient pagan festival still celebrated today by hordes of young people in the streets and public squares of Nordic countries.

STOCKHOLM I, SWEDEN



After my visits to Helsinki in 1977 and 1991, I left by ferry to Stockholm, a journey of about 18 hours. I have visited Sweden approximately 20 times since 1976, for various reasons: lectures at KTH (Royal Institute of Technology), scientific conferences, corporate presentations, and personal visits.

During one of my most memorable trips, after presenting a week-long course at KTH, my late friend Professor Jan-Fredrik Jansson and his wife invited me to sail in the Stockholm Archipelago. Their sailboat was large, with sleeping quarters for six people. We stopped at an island for lunch and spent the night at the Royal Swedish Yacht Club on **Sandhamn Island**.

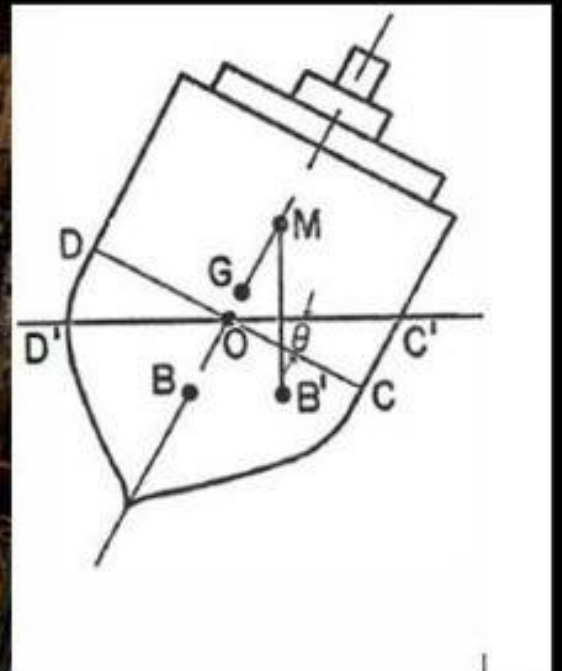
The archipelago, consisting of over 34,000 islands, is perfect for sailing, boating, or kayaking, as there are no tides, currents, or large waves to worry about. Stockholm itself is built on 14 islands within this archipelago, which is why it's often referred to as the "Venice of the North." I suspect that the need to explore these islands was what motivated the Scandinavians to become expert seafarers centuries ago.

The extreme weather events in Europe during 535-537 AD were likely caused by volcanic eruptions, probably in Iceland. Byzantine historian Procopius wrote that "the sun seemed to be in eclipse," while Roman statesman Cassiodorus noted that "the sun's rays were weak," "people cast no shadows," and "the summer had no heat." This cooling of the climate led to famine and death in several regions, including Scandinavia (modern-day Sweden, Norway, and Denmark). A militarized class emerged, with many sailing south in search of a better life and fortune. These fierce, blond-haired raiders became known as **Vikings**, who brought fear and terror to the British Isles and Western Europe. In Scotland, it is still considered bad luck for a blond-haired person to be the first to enter a household on New Year's Day.

The Vikings who navigated the rivers of Eastern Europe were known as **Varangians**. They merged with the Slavs and founded **Kievan Rus**, a state that stretched from the White Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south. The term "Rus" is derived from an old Norse word meaning "men who row," and it is the origin of the name "Russia." The Varangians raided Constantinople, the capital of the **Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire**, several times. Though they were ultimately defeated, their bravery and military prowess impressed the Byzantines. In 988, Emperor Basil II offered his sister, Anna Porphyrogenita, in marriage to Vladimir I of Kiev in exchange for military assistance to suppress an internal uprising. Vladimir sent 6,000 troops, who formed the Varangian Guard, and the Kievan Rus were subsequently Christianized.

The Varangians became stalwart defenders of the Byzantine emperors, fighting valiantly in numerous battles, including Manzikert (1071) against the Seljuk Turks, where all the Varangians escorting the emperor were killed, and Romanos IV was captured. After the sacking of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204, the Varangians lost their privileges and influence.

STOCKHOLM II



Sweden has not been involved in a war since 1814, following a policy of "non-alignment in peacetime and neutrality in wartime," as stated by the Swedish Government long before the country joined NATO in 2024. But how has Sweden managed to avoid war for over 200 years?

The story of modern Sweden begins after the dissolution of the so-called 'Kalmar' union of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden ruled by Danish monarchs. **Gustav Vasa**, who reigned from 1523 to 1560, is often credited as the founder of modern Sweden. After a brief two-week war in 1814, Norway was ceded to Sweden but later gained recognition as an independent country in 1905.

Gustav Vasa's legendary journey from Mora to Norway, fleeing Danish troops, inspired the 90 km **Vasaloppet** cross-country ski race. Held annually since 1922, it takes place on the first Sunday of March, from Sälen to Mora in the Dalarna region, northwest of Stockholm. In 2024, around 16,000 skiers participated, with the winner completing the race in 3 hours and 43 minutes.

The name Vasa (or sometimes Wasa) is also associated with a tragic warship that sank in 1628, less than a nautical mile into its maiden voyage, taking 30 lives out of the 150 aboard. Thousands of spectators witnessed the sinking. The Vasa was salvaged in 1961 and is now housed in the **Vasa Museum**, located on an island across from downtown Stockholm, which attracts over a million visitors annually.

King Gustavus Adolphus, who ordered the ship's construction, wanted a vessel with too many heavy guns on two decks, but the ship's stability was poorly understood at the time. For an explanation I use a figure from a textbook that I wrote, titled "Fundamentals of Fluid Mechanics", which is downloadable from www.researchgate.com and macsphere.mcmaster.ca. Essentially, the ship was too top-heavy; the center of gravity (G) was above the center of buoyancy (B). As the hull tilted due to the wind, the center of buoyancy shifted to B'. For the ship to remain stable, the forces and moments of inertia should have been able to return it to the original position, but they weren't. What we know and can calculate now, was not known back in the 1600s.

Nearby, I visited an old Soviet Whiskey-class submarine, which was bought after the dissolution of the USSR, and is used as a museum. The cramped quarters are not for the claustrophobic. A similar submarine ran aground in southern Sweden near a large naval base in October 1981. There's considerable evidence suggesting it was carrying nuclear weapons. During interrogation, the captain claimed the incident was due to a navigation error, leading to the sarcastic nickname "whiskey on the rocks."

The **Nobel Prize** award ceremony takes place at the Stockholm Concert Hall on December 10, the anniversary of Alfred Nobel's death. The ceremony is followed by a banquet for over a thousand guests at Stockholm City Hall, located on the waterfront. One of my former students from my 1979 fluid mechanics class, Donna Strickland, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2018.

COLOGNE (Köln), GERMANY



Most of my trips to and from Stockholm were by plane, but in July 1977, I took the train south through Denmark to Germany. In Helsingborg, Sweden, the train entered a ferry with tracks in the center for transport to Helsingør, Denmark. This route lost its popularity after the construction of the Øresund Bridge and tunnel, which connect Malmö to Copenhagen. I wrote about this experience in my travelogue, *In the Footsteps of Pytheas*.

Although I did not visit Cologne in 1977, I had spent the summer of 1963 in nearby **Gelsenkirchen** as an intern under the auspices of the International Association for the Exchange of Students for Technical Experience (IAESTE). I worked at a chemical laboratory of a coal mining company. The steel and coal industries of the Ruhr area (Ruhrgebiet) were at the center of **Germany's economic miracle** in the 1950s and 1960s.

I visited **Düsseldorf** in the Ruhrgebiet numerous times for the gigantic Kunststoffe (Plastics Industry K-Show), which takes place every three years, and as an expert witness for patent litigation at the Oberlandesgericht (Higher Regional Court). However, Cologne has always held more cultural appeal for me. The **Cologne Cathedral**, a renowned monument of Gothic architecture, began construction in 1248 and was completed 632 years later, in 1880. Although it was badly damaged by aerial bombing during World War II, it remained standing amidst the completely flattened city.

In the Church of St. Pantaleon lies the grave of **Empress Theophano** (Ger. Theophanu; Gr. Θεοφανώ). Otto I (the Great) had unified the German tribes into a single kingdom and expanded his rule to Italy. He was crowned Holy Roman Emperor (Kaiser) by the Pope. To legitimize his title, he sent a delegation to Constantinople to bring back a royal princess for his son, Otto II. Theophano was not considered “royal enough”—she was not the daughter, but rather a niece by marriage, of Emperor Ioannis I Tzimiskes, who had usurped the throne. Despite the discovery of the deception soon after her arrival, Theophano and Otto II were married in Rome in 972 when she was probably 14 years old. Their son, Otto III, was crowned emperor at the age of three, soon after his father died.

Theophano ruled the Holy Roman Empire for about seven years until her death in 991. She is often referred to as “Kaiserin Theophanu: the most powerful woman of the West.” She is also credited with introducing forks to Western Europe. Theophano was disliked by the German nobles, who referred to her as “that Greek woman who bathes more than once a day and uses a golden double-prong to bring food to her mouth instead of using her hands.”

Since 2020, the **Empress Theophano Prize** has been awarded at the Rotunda in Thessaloniki to individuals and organizations for outstanding contributions to understanding and strengthening the European idea of bridging East and West. The winners thus far are EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (2020), vaccine developers Dr. Uğur Şahin and Dr. Özlem Türeci (2021), pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim (2022), United Nations (2023), and Special Olympics (Timothy Shriver, October 23, 2024).

MUNICH (München)



Munich (München in German) has more neo-classical buildings than Athens. These structures were commissioned by **Ludwig I** (1786–1868), who was the King of Bavaria from 1825 to 1848. Ludwig was a lover of art, architecture, and beautiful women. He was an admirer of ancient Greece, a staunch Philhellene, and generously supported the Greek War of Independence (1821) with his personal funds.

The **Walhalla**, located near Regensburg, was constructed between 1830 and 1842 to serve as a hall of fame for distinguished ethnic Germans. Perched on a hill overlooking the Danube River, its exterior was inspired by the Parthenon, though it is larger. The interior houses busts of more than 130 notable people of Germanic origin, including Holy Roman Emperors, military leaders, scientists, philosophers, poets, composers, and artists.

Ludwig married Princess Therese on October 12, 1812, and the celebrations marked the first **Oktoberfest** at Theresienwiese (Therese's Meadow). Oktoberfest is the world's largest folk festival, featuring beer, food, and amusement, and is held annually from late September to early October. I visited in September 1992. Ludwig and Therese's son, **Otto**, became the King of Greece (1832–1862).

Ludwig had several mistresses, the most renowned being Jane Digby and Lola Montez. Jane Digby, the daughter of a wealthy English aristocrat, married Edward Law, 2nd Baron Ellenborough, at age 17. After a scandalous affair with Austrian Prince Felix von Schwarzenberg, she was divorced. In Munich, she married Baron Karl von Venningen and later Greek Count Spyridon Theotokis. Following a duel with Venningen that left Theotokis injured, Digby moved to Greece. After their six-year-old son died from a fatal fall from a balcony, she divorced Theotokis. Digby then had an affair with Vlach general Christodoulos Hatzipetros and lived in the Greek mountains. At age 46, she relocated to the Middle East, married Sheik Medjuel el Mezrab, and lived in Syria until her death at age 74.

Lola Montez was the stage name of Irish dancer, actress, and courtesan Eliza Gilbert. Her scandalous affair with Ludwig, who was 60 at the time while she was only 25, led to his forced abdication in favor of his son, Maximilian II, in 1848.

Portraits of Jane Digby and Lola Montez are displayed among those of 38 beautiful women at the **Gallery of Beauties** (Schönheitengalerie) in Ludwig's Nymphenburg Palace. Most of the portraits feature Bavarian nobility, but among the six foreigners is Catharina Botsaris (1820–1872), the beautiful daughter of Greek Independence hero Markos Botsaris.

Ludwig II, Ludwig I's grandson, is more famous than his grandfather. His magnificent Schloss Neuschwanstein, built on a rugged hilltop, exemplifies Oscar Wilde's quote that "Moderation is a fatal thing. Nothing succeeds like excess." The opulent interior of **Neuschwanstein**, adorned with scenes from Wagner's operas, attracts over a million visitors each year. Ludwig II was deposed on grounds of insanity and died under mysterious circumstances in shallow water near the shore of Lake Starnberg. Despite his controversial end, he remains Bavaria's most beloved king due to his extravagant palaces, built with his personal wealth and borrowed funds.

HEIDELBERG and LUDWIGSHAFEN



Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Ludwigshafen, and Heidelberg are some of the German cities I know best. **Frankfurt** is the most convenient airport hub for my travels to Greece, other European cities, and the Far East. In **Stuttgart**, I lived for six months in 1975 during a sabbatical research leave in the university. In **Ludwigshafen**, I was an I.A.E.S.T.E. student trainee at BASF, the world's largest chemical corporation, for two months in the summer of 1964. I was also invited and lectured at BASF in August 1990. Heidelberg is Germany's most charming city, which I have visited several times.

The Zum Roten Ochsen guesthouse, restaurant, and pub has been operating in Heidelberg's old town for 300 years and has been owned by the Spengel family since 1839. Renowned guests have included Mark Twain, John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe, John Foster Dulles, Mamie Eisenhower, and the author and adventurer Patrick Leigh Fermor, about whom I have written in my travelogue *Islands in the Sun: From Cyprus to Skiathos*.

Here I copy-paste from Wikipedia: "US Brigadier General William A. Beiderlinden became the subject of international headlines in March 1945 when he helped save Heidelberg from bombing by persuading Nazi troops to withdraw. When his command was ordered to shell the city, Beiderlinden, who was fluent in German, took the initiative to contact the burgomaster (mayor) and attempt to persuade Nazi soldiers to abandon their positions."

BASF and **Ludwigshafen** were both totally destroyed during World War II. In 1948, an explosion at BASF killed 207 people and injured more than 3,000. The company was refounded in 1952, and by the summer of 1964, approximately 50,000 people were employed at the massive Ludwigshafen site. The **German economic miracle** of the 1950s and 1960s created a tremendous demand for workers. Guest workers (**Gastarbeiter**) arrived from Italy, Greece, Spain, Turkey, and several North African countries. The vast majority of these guest workers had no occupational training and lacked German language skills.

During my summer job at BASF, the human resources office frequently asked me to assist with translations when new groups of Greek guest workers arrived. I was surprised to find that they had no technical training and were expected to work in a technologically complex and potentially dangerous environment. One day, I spent about three hours translating safety instructions from the plant superintendent to three newly arrived Greek workers. Two weeks later, upon arriving in the morning, I was asked to go to the company hospital to provide translation services. One of the new workers was being treated after collapsing due to an ammonia leak. Despite the alarm, he had not followed the instructions for immediate evacuation. After leaving the hospital, he asked me to help him buy a train ticket for his return to Greece.

The bottom photo was taken on a river cruise following a Polymer Processing Society conference in Dresden, with my former PhD students: To my right is Evan Mitsoulis, a professor at NTU Athens (EM Polytechnio), and to my left is Dr. Velichko Hristov, an employee of Borealis AG in Linz, Austria.

BERLIN

Berlin



September 2016



Athens 1964, Heisenberg



Stuttgart 1976

The first time I visited Berlin was in late April 1975, when Germany was still divided into the Bundesrepublik Deutschland (**BRD, West Germany**) and the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (**DDR, East Germany**). Berlin, though located within the DDR, was itself divided into West and East Berlin. I took a train from Stuttgart through East Germany to West Berlin, where the subway was owned and operated by the DDR government. I visited the eastern part of the city several times. After passing through passport control and walking the streets of East Berlin, I was frequently approached by young people asking me to exchange BRD-marks for DDR-marks at advantageous black market rates. However, there was hardly anything worth buying, except for a textbook on polymer processing that I bought.

I watched the May 1st, 1975, parade in East Berlin, which featured soldiers, heavy tanks, vehicles carrying missiles, and, at the end, numerous athletes dressed in their training uniforms. I walked along both sides of "**The Wall**," where it felt as though the Second World War had never ended.

Berlin has been a center of political, cultural, and economic development since at least the reign of Frederick the Great (1740–1786). Napoleon Bonaparte captured Berlin in 1806. The defeat of Germany in the First World War led to the abdication of **Kaiser Wilhelm II** and the proclamation of the Weimar Republic in 1918. During the 'Roaring Twenties,' Berlin experienced a cultural heyday, exemplified by the 1972 musical drama Cabaret starring Liza Minnelli. Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party came to power in 1933, leading to terrifying consequences for the entire world. The **Summer Olympics** were held at the 100,000-seat Olympiastadium in **1936**, where Jesse Owens of the United States won four gold medals, much to the dismay of Hitler and his government, who were promoting racial supremacy.

Berlin was also home to several outstanding scientists working in research centers and universities. Among them were Nobel Prize winner **Werner Heisenberg** and the father of rheology, **Karl Weissenberg**. In addition to his seminal contributions to theoretical physics, Heisenberg was involved in the German nuclear weapons program. He has been accused of coming close to building a German nuclear bomb, but overwhelming evidence suggests he directed his efforts away from that goal. He was captured as part of the Alsos Mission, an American project aimed at capturing German nuclear scientists. Most people believed Alsos was an acronym that couldn't be deciphered, but it was actually named after General Leslie Groves, the director of the Manhattan Project. "Alsos" is the Greek word for "grove."

Weissenberg, who was Jewish, left Germany just before the war and took up residence in Britain, where he worked on flame thrower fuels. In 1976 walked with him from the University of Stuttgart campus to the railway station and waited with him until he caught a train back home to the Netherlands. He shared with me stories from his life and work in Berlin, including his experiences with Einstein and other notable scientists.

WARSAW, POLAND



I was invited as a visiting professor at the Warsaw University of Technology (WUT) in April 2011. During my time there, I lectured at WUT and in Toruń, the birthplace of **Nicolaus Copernicus**, the astronomer who formulated the planetary model originally proposed by Aristarchus of Samos. Warsaw is a beautiful city, and I greatly enjoyed dinner in the old town, as well as a superb performance of Turandot at the stunning Grand Theatre (Teatr Wielki), which was inaugurated in 1833.

Maria Skłodowska was born in Warsaw in 1867 and later moved to France, where she married physicist Pierre Curie. She is better known as **Marie Curie**. The Curies shared the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1903, and Marie received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1911. She was the first woman to win a Nobel Prize and the first person to win a Nobel Prize twice. She is renowned for her pioneering research on radioactivity.

I also visited the historical city of Kraków. At Wawel Castle lie the graves of several notable Poles, including **King Jan III Sobieski** (1629-1696), who changed the course of European history by defeating the Ottoman Turks at the Battle of Vienna on October 12, 1683. A brief description of some dramatic moments from the battle appears in my story about Vienna.

Polish nationhood emerged in the 10th century, around the same time as the transition from paganism to Christianity. In 1569, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was established, which, at its peak, was the largest country in Europe, occupying about 1 million square kilometers. The Commonwealth was partitioned by Prussia, Russia, and Austria, and ceased to exist in 1795. Several insurrections occurred against the occupying powers until Poland regained its independence on November 11, 1918. The Second World War began on **September 1, 1939**, when German troops invaded Poland.

Zygmunt Mineyko was born in 1840 to minor nobility in a village now in Belarus. He studied at a military academy in Saint Petersburg, but upon returning to Poland-Lithuania, he fought against the Russians. Captured and court-martialed, he was sentenced to 12 years of hard labor in Siberia. He managed to escape from prison by switching identities with a friend who had died of typhus. Eventually, he reached France, where he studied Civil Engineering at a military academy. He worked as an engineer in the Ottoman Empire and married Persephone Manari in Ioannina. Mineyko assisted the Greek armed forces during the Battle of Bizani against the Turks in 1913. His daughter Sophia married **George Papandreou**, who later became prime minister of Greece. His grandson Andreas and great-grandson George [junior] also served as prime ministers. Mineyko was honored by both the Greek and Polish governments.

Notable Poles include composer **Frédéric Chopin** (1810-1849), **Józef Piłsudski** (1867-1935), who is considered the architect of Polish independence (1918), **Karol Wojtyła** (1920-2005), who later became **Pope John Paul II**, and **Lech Wałęsa** (born 1943), who led the Solidarity movement that ushered in the end of communist rule in Poland (1989).

VIENNA (Wien), AUSTRIA



St. Stephen's Cathedral, Vienna

September 2015

Vienna is a beautiful city full of palaces, museums, and historical buildings, traversed by the Danube River. It has played a pivotal role in European history. It was in Vienna that the expansion of the Ottoman Empire was stopped—twice—first in 1529 and again in 1683.

In the early 1500s, Charles V was King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, ruling over "an empire on which the sun never sets." Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent ruled the Balkans, Anatolia, and parts of the Middle East and North Africa. After defeating the Hungarians, Suleiman's forces laid siege to Vienna in **1529**. The Ottoman army, numbering around 120,000, was defeated by the Austrian defenders, who numbered just 20,000. The Ottomans' defeat was partly due to overstretched supply lines and bad weather.

However, the Ottomans would try again to conquer Vienna. In **1683**, an Ottoman army of about 200,000, led by Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa, began a second siege on July 14. Among them were 20,000 elite Janissary troops—Christian boys forcibly taken from the Balkans and Anatolia, converted to Islam, and trained as soldiers. There were also 5,000 miners digging tunnels under the city's walls to plant explosives and breach the defenses. The defenders inside the city, numbering about 15,000, had no intention of surrendering. They fought both above ground, against the attacking troops, and below ground, against the miners.

An allied army of 65,000, consisting of Germans, Austrians, and Poles, was marching to the rescue under the command of **Polish King Jan III Sobieski**.

In the early hours of **September 12, 1683** the situation for the defenders became increasingly desperate. Messengers managed to reach Sobieski, who was stationed at Kahlenberg Hill, just outside Vienna. They urged him to launch an immediate attack. Sobieski agreed and ordered bonfires to be lit as a signal to the defenders. On September 12, 18,000 Polish Winged Hussars charged against the Ottoman forces. The sight of the cavalry, with their distinctive wings making them appear even larger, demoralized the enemy. In just three hours, Sobieski's forces completely routed the Ottoman army. His victory saved Vienna—and the rest of Europe—from Ottoman domination.

A cannonball from the 1529 siege is still lodged in the wall of Vienna's oldest restaurant, the **Griechenbeisl** (Greek Bistro). The building dates to 1350 and has been operating as a tavern since 1447. Originally called "Zum Gelben Adler" (To the Yellow Eagle), the tavern was renamed in the early 1800s due to the many Greek traders and merchants who frequented it. The menu has always offered classic Viennese fare. The Griechenbeisl is located at the corner of Griechengasse and Fleischmarkt, less than 500 meters from Vienna's famous St. Stephen's Cathedral. Adjacent to it is the Agia Triada (Holy Trinity) Greek Church, which was funded by the Greek Vlach Simon Sinas and designed by Danish architect Theophil Hansen (inaugurated in 1858). St. George's Greek Church is also on Griechengasse (Greek Alley).

Famous guests at the Griechenbeisl include composers Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner, Johann Strauss, Richard Strauss, and Brahms, writer Mark Twain, airship inventor Ferdinand von Zeppelin, and opera singer Luciano Pavarotti.

VIENNA (Wien) II



Graben, Vienna



Schönbrunn Palace

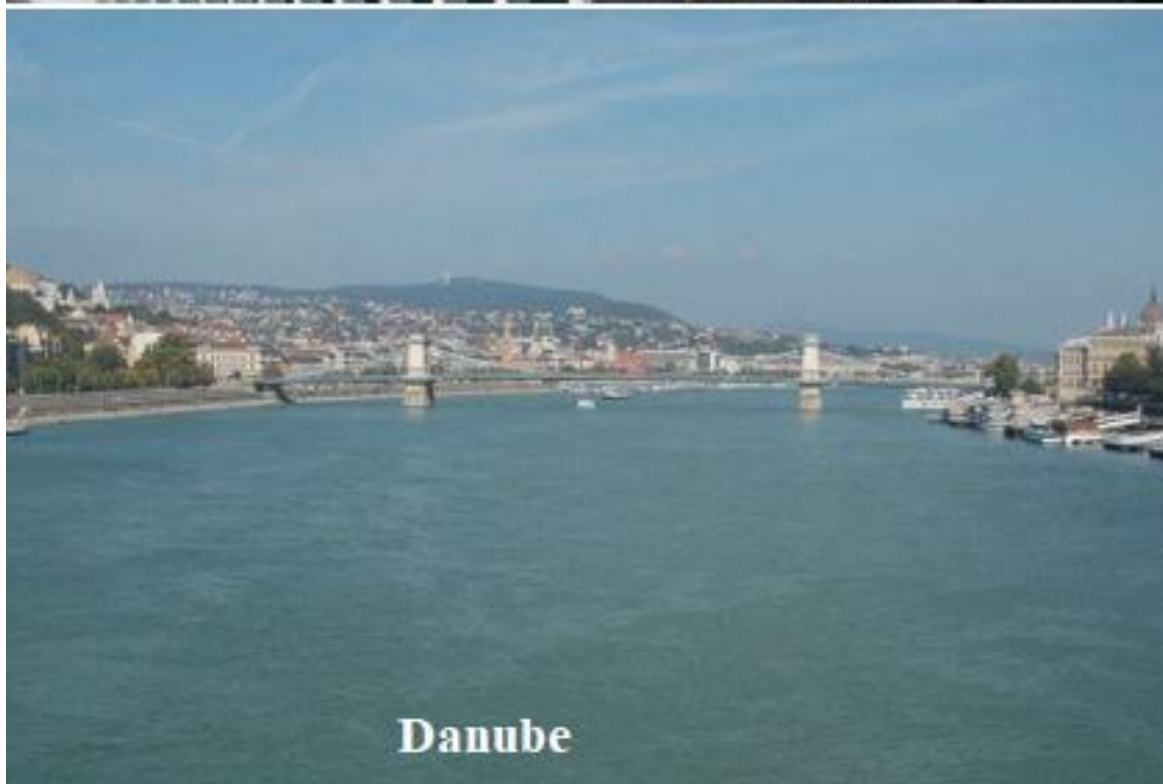
I'm not sure what the French sculptor Julien Berthier had in mind for the rider and his horse taking a break, presumably from war. This sculpture was on public display at Graben Square in Vienna when I visited in September 2015. The Habsburg dynasty was famous for their Latin dictum "**Bella gerant alii, tu felix Austria nube**" (let others wage war, you happy Austria marry). Through this policy, they expanded their empire to the Netherlands, Belgium, and Spain, and from there around the globe (where the sun never sets). However, tragedy also struck. Marie-Antoinette, who married King Louis XVI, was executed by guillotine during the French Revolution. She was the daughter of **Empress Maria Theresa**, who ruled Austria from 1740 to 1780.

The **Congress of Vienna**, which reorganized Europe after the Napoleonic Wars, began in September 1814 and concluded in June 1815. **Franz Joseph** was born in 1830 and crowned Kaiser in 1848. He married the sixteen-year-old **Elizabeth (Sisi)** of the House of Wittelsbach of Bavaria in 1854. Sisi's life and tragedy were immortalized in a film starring Romy Schneider. She was beautiful, intelligent, and eccentric. She had been unhappy ever since she moved as a young bride to the immense **Schönbrunn Palace**. Her son, Rudolf, apparently committed murder-suicide in 1889 with his seventeen-year-old girlfriend, Baroness Mary von Vetsera, at **Mayerling**. Mary was the daughter of Eleni Baltazzi of Chios, Greece. Sisi found solace in travel, often visiting her Achilleion Palace in Corfu. She was assassinated in Geneva by an anarchist in 1898.

After Rudolf's death, **Archduke Franz Ferdinand**, nephew of Kaiser Franz Joseph, became the heir presumptive to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He and his wife, Sophie Chotek, were assassinated in **Sarajevo** by the Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip on June 28, 1914. The Kaiser sent an ultimatum to Serbia, which was deemed unacceptable, and declared war. Russia came to Serbia's aid, while Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany promised support to Austria. France and the UK sided with Russia. They all expected a quick war, but unfortunately, it lasted until November 11, 1918, resulting in the deaths of at least 20 million people. Kaiser Franz Joseph died in 1916 after ruling for 68 years. Czar Nicholas II of Russia was assassinated in 1918, and Kaiser Wilhelm II was forced to abdicate that same year. The **First World War** also led to the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Austria emerged as a republic from the ashes of the empire. It was annexed by Germany in 1938, occupied by Allied troops after the Second World War, and gained full independence in 1955. Austria has regained much of its past imperial grandeur. Vienna is one of the world's most beautiful cities and the capital of classical music, with several major music venues, including the Wiener Staatsoper and the Musikverein. The street in front of the Musikverein is named after its major donor Nikolaus Dumba (Dumbastrasse), whose father was a Vlach from the village of Vlasti, Kozani, Greece. Nikolaus's son Konstantin was the last Ambassador of Austria-Hungary to the USA.

BUDAPEST, HUNGARY



The pre-modern history of Hungary began in 1541, when it was occupied by the Ottoman Empire for more than 150 years. Two thermal baths, with naturally heated mineral-rich water, still in use today, date from the **Ottoman occupation**. After the defeat of the Ottomans at the Siege of Vienna in 1683, allied European troops continued the war, and most of Hungary was liberated. Following the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699, Hungary came under the domination of the Habsburgs, the emperors of Austria, who ruled as kings of Hungary. Although there were several rebellions, the 1867 "Compromise" led to the formation of Austria-Hungary, a dual monarchy with two capitals: Vienna and Budapest. The dual monarchy is often referred to as *kaiserlich und königlich* (imperial and royal), usually abbreviated as *k. und k.*

I took my selfie on **Erzsébet Bridge** over the River Danube. The bridge was named in honor of Elizabeth, Empress of Austria and Queen of Hungary (Sisi). In the bottom picture, the Széchenyi **Chain Bridge** can be seen in the distance. This was the first permanent bridge across the Danube, linking Buda on the left (west) to Pest on the right (east). It was designed by English civil engineer William Tierney Clark, with construction (in 1848) supervised locally by Scottish engineer Adam Clark (no relation). The bridge was funded by the Vienna-based Greek Vlach merchant and banker Georgios Sinas, whose name is inscribed on the base of the bridge on the Buda side.

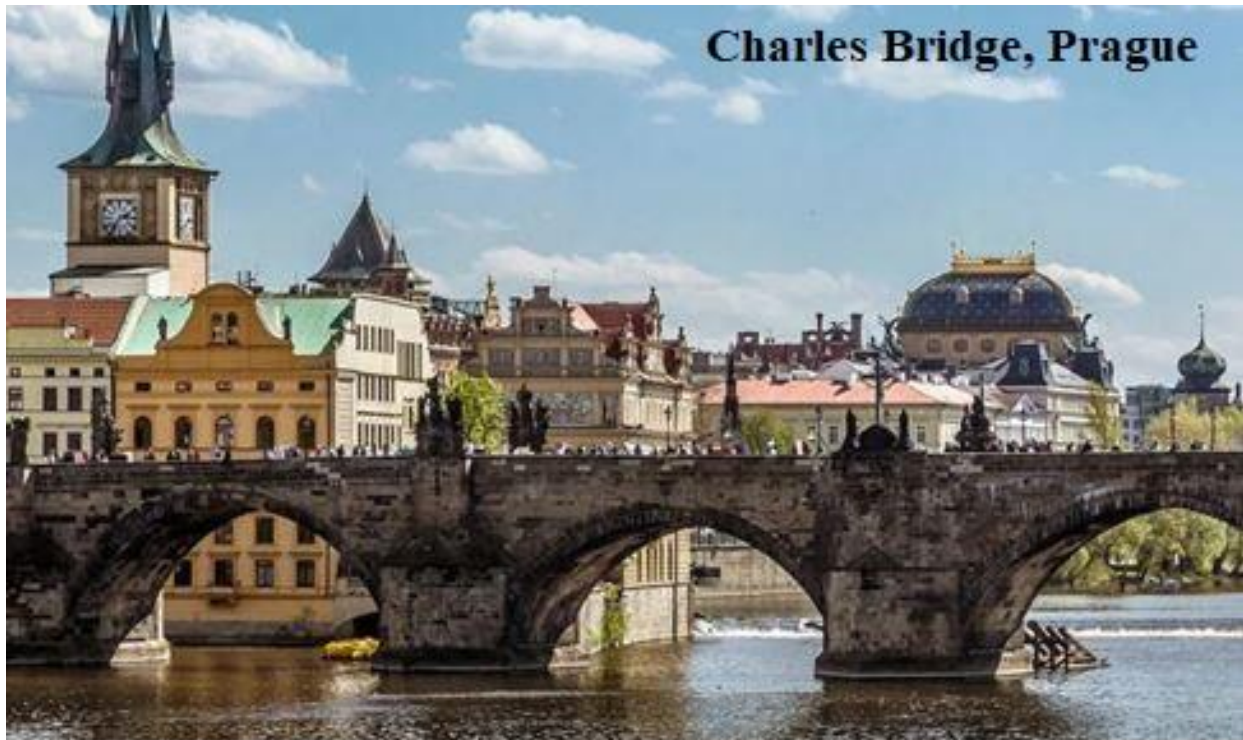
Under the Habsburgs, Budapest experienced significant economic prosperity and cultural development in a multiethnic environment composed of Hungarians, Germans, and Jews. Education and learning were highly respected and admired. At the start of the twentieth century, at least two Budapest high schools had several talented students who went on to become renowned for their global impact.

The famous students of **Fasori Evangélikus** (Lutheran) Gimnázium include: Eugene Wigner (Nobel Prize in Physics, 1963), John Harsanyi (Nobel Prize in Economics, 1994), John von Neumann (mathematician and one of the most brilliant minds of the 20th century), and Antal Doráti (conductor and composer). László Rátz was a legendary teacher of mathematics.

Famous students of the **Minta** (Lutheran) Gymnasium include: Theodore von Kármán (considered the "father" of aerodynamics), Peter Lax (mathematician, recipient of the Abel Prize), Michael Polanyi (distinguished chemist and philosopher, father of Canadian Nobel Prize winner John Polanyi), Edward Teller (theoretical physicist considered the "father" of the hydrogen bomb), and Leo Szilard (physicist who conceived the nuclear chain reaction).

After World War I, in 1918, Austria-Hungary collapsed and Hungary declared itself an independent republic. During World War II, Hungary was occupied by Nazi Germany and later by Soviet Russia. On October 23, **1956**, the Hungarians revolted, but Soviet tanks and troops suppressed the uprising. The confrontations, which lasted until November 11, resulted in an estimated 2,500 Hungarian and 700 Soviet deaths. After the fall of Communism in 1989, Hungary embarked on rapid economic development, and Budapest is now a very beautiful city where modernity coexists with a rich history.

PRAGUE, CZECHIA



Prague has straddled the banks of the Vltava River for over a thousand years. It became the capital of the Holy Roman Empire during the reign of **Charles IV** (1346-1378). Landmarks such as Charles University, Charles Bridge, and Charles Square bear his name. However, **Wenceslas Square**, named after Saint Wenceslas (907-935), is the most important square in Prague today. King Charles is often regarded as the father of the modern Czech Republic (Czechia), which was known in the Middle Ages as **Bohemia**. Today, history and modernity coexist in Prague's architecture, with one travel writer noting that "Baroque rubs shoulders with bold avant-garde."

Czechoslovakia was created in 1918 by declaring independence after the collapse of Austria-Hungary. Between the First and Second World Wars, Prague was a prosperous multi-ethnic city, home to Czech, German, and Jewish populations. After Nazi Germany annexed Austria (the Anschluss) on March 13, 1938, Adolf Hitler began planning the occupation of Czechoslovakia. On September 30, 1938, Hitler, Mussolini, **Neville Chamberlain** (Prime Minister of the UK), and Édouard Daladier (Prime Minister of France) signed the Munich Agreement, which ceded the Sudetenland to Germany. The Sudetenland, a region of Czechoslovakia bordering Germany and Austria, had a predominantly German-speaking population.

Upon returning to Britain, Chamberlain delivered his infamous speech after disembarking from his plane, saying: "This morning I had another talk with the German Chancellor, Herr Hitler, and here is the paper which bears his name upon it as well as mine [showing the paper to the crowd]... symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another." It didn't take long for Hitler to violate the Munich Agreement, and on March 15, 1939, German troops entered the remaining Czech territory, encountering little resistance.

After the end of World War II in May 1945, Prague and the rest of Czechoslovakia fell under Soviet domination. In **1968**, Czechoslovak Communist Party leader **Alexander Dubček** attempted to introduce democratic reforms. However, on August 20, 1968, troops from the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact countries invaded Prague and suppressed any further attempts at reform. A non-violent transition from communist rule to a parliamentary republic occurred between November 17-28, 1989, known as the Velvet Revolution. On December 31, 1992, Czechoslovakia was peacefully dissolved into two independent countries: **Czechia** and **Slovakia**. This separation is sometimes referred to as the Velvet Divorce.

My first visit to Prague and Gottwaldov (now **Zlín**) was in June 1986. During my second visit in August 1989, I saw a large group of well-armed military personnel overseeing a small group of young protesters in Wenceslas Square, though no violent confrontations occurred. Zlín is an industrial city, where the Bata Shoes company was founded in 1894. The Tomas Bata University was established in 2001, thanks to the efforts of my friend Professor Petr Sába (shown in the photo), who became its first rector. Zlín is also the birthplace of Ivana Trump, President Donald J. Trump's first wife and the mother of his three older children.

ZÜRICH and GENEVA, SWITZERLAND



If you ask a European to tell you three words about Switzerland, they will probably say: banks, mountains, and watches. Of course, there is much more to this country, which has one of the highest Gross Domestic Products in the world. Not a Member of EU, but it participates in the **Schengen Area**. The Swiss Confederation dates back to 1291, receiving official recognition from the Holy Roman Empire in 1648. It has four official languages—German, French, Italian, and Romansh—and is composed of 26 cantons. The car plates code "**CH**" comes from the Latin **Confoederatio Helvetica**. Swiss federalism includes "direct democracy," which grants citizens the right to call for a federal referendum and decide by a simple majority whether to accept or reject a law passed by parliament.

The **Red Cross** was established in Geneva in 1864 thanks to the tireless efforts of Swiss businessman Jean-Henri Dunant, who was shocked after witnessing the carnage of the Battle of Solferino in 1859. Over 40,000 soldiers from both sides (French and Austrians) were dead or left wounded on the field. Switzerland also hosts the headquarters of several international organizations, including the World Health Organization (**WHO**), World Trade Organization (**WTO**), and Fédération Internationale de Football Association (**FIFA**).

In 1962, I traveled by train through Switzerland with a group of 15 Greek university students on our way to the Netherlands. In 1975, I went skiing for a couple of days at Les Diablerets, located between Lake Geneva and Gstaad. I visited Zurich a few times after that. The slender statue in my 2018 picture is a memorial to Empress Elizabeth (**Sisi**) of Austria at the Lake Geneva waterfront promenade, the location of her assassination in 1898. She was walking with her lady-in-waiting from the Beau Rivage hotel to board a sailboat just ahead. An Italian anarchist stabbed her with a thin metal file. The empress collapsed but did not immediately appreciate the severity of her injury. With some help, she boarded the sailboat. As they sailed for a few minutes, she lost consciousness, and the sailboat returned. She was taken on an improvised stretcher to the Beau Rivage hotel, where her death was confirmed.

Switzerland was not invaded during either of the World Wars. However, Germany had plans to invade, and the Swiss were aware of them. Instead of focusing on protecting their borders, the Swiss prepared their defense by stationing well-armed and well-protected military forces high in the **Alps**. Additionally, Switzerland established controversial financial connections with Nazi Germany. Many refugees and escapees traveled to or through Switzerland. During World War I, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (Lenin) lived in Switzerland until 1917. In World War II, John H. Argyris, born in Volos, escaped through Switzerland to the UK. He had been working as an engineer in northern Germany when he was granted a visa by Admiral Wilhelm Canaris. Argyris later became a professor of aerodynamics at both the University of Stuttgart and Imperial College London, simultaneously. I also wrote a seven-page biography about him.

MILAN, ITALY



My first trip to Milan was in July 1962 when I traveled by train from Brindisi in Southern Italy to Utrecht in the Netherlands with a group of 15 Greek university students, at the invitation of the Dutch government. We arrived in the morning and had plenty of time to visit the spectacular Duomo Cathedral, whose construction began in 1386 and took nearly 600 years to complete, finishing in 1965. I visited Milan at least five other times between 1996 and 2008 for lecturing on rheology and polymer processing.

Milan is closely associated with the birth of a unified Italy. For centuries, Milan and its surrounding region of Lombardy were ruled first by the Habsburgs of Spain and later by the Habsburgs of Austria. In 1848, Milan rebelled, but after a few months of freedom, it was re-occupied by Austria. However, in the **Battle of Solferino** in 1859 (about 100 kilometers east of Milan), French and Italian troops prevailed against the Austrians. As a result, several city-states united and proclaimed the Kingdom of Italy in 1861. Victor Emmanuel II (King of Sardinia), revolutionary general Giuseppe Garibaldi, politician Count Cavour, and journalist Giuseppe Mazzini are remembered as Italy's Four Fathers of the Fatherland (Padri della Patria). It was in Milan that Benito Mussolini launched his journalistic, political, and fascist careers. After his execution, along with his young mistress Clara Petacci in 1945, their bodies were brought to a public square in Milan.

Leonardo da Vinci lived in Milan for several years, and his famous Last Supper mural is housed in the dining room of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie.

The famous **La Scala** opera house was commissioned by Empress Maria Theresa of Austria and was inaugurated in 1778. Several of the Italy's greatest composers, conductors and operatic artists have been associated with La Scala. Famous names include **Giuseppe Verdi**, Giacomo Puccini, **Arturo Toscanini**, Riccardo Muti, Daniel Barenboim, **Luciano Pavarotti**, Renata Tebaldi, and **Maria Callas**. Callas, born to Greek immigrant parents in Manhattan in 1923, returned with her mother to Greece, where she lived in poverty during World War II. La Scala became her artistic home in the 1950s. A film about Maria Callas, starring Angelina Jolie, premiered at the Venice International Film Festival in September 2024.

Fashion sociologists claim that the world has four fashion capitals: New York, Paris, Milan, and London, ranked in terms of impact and influence. Occasionally, Tokyo is added as the fifth. However, when it comes to **luxury fashion**, Milan is number one. It is in Milan where the headquarters of Armani, Prada, Versace, Valentino, Dolce & Gabbana, Canali, Moschino, and Ermenegildo Zegna are located. Via Monte Napoleone, Via Della Spiga, Via Manzoni and Corso Venezia are the streets devoted to luxury shopping.

VENICE



Venice is built on more than 100 islands connected by approximately 500 bridges. It was known as “la Serenissima,” and travel writers have described it as “romantic,” “the most beautiful city ever built by man,” or “the city of bridges.” The Republic of Venice began with the election of its first leader, Doge Orso, in 726. He was confirmed by the Byzantines with the title Hypatus. Orso was the first of an unbroken line of 117 Doges who ruled Venice until its occupation by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1797.

The Venetians prospered from trade with the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium), which granted them special privileges and concessions. Venice eventually became a formidable maritime power. When the Pope decided to organize the Fourth Crusade, Venice was commissioned to transport the troops to liberate the Holy Land from Muslim control. However, the crusaders did not have enough silver marks to pay for the services. **Doge Enrico Dandolo** persuaded them to pay by capturing and looting the city of Zara (modern-day Zadar, Croatia) in 1202. Instead of going to fight the Muslims in Jerusalem, the crusaders laid siege to, captured, and plundered Constantinople in April **1204**.

The sacking of Constantinople resulted in the greatest loss of art in the history of the world. Even precious objects from the sarcophagi of buried emperors, such as Constantine and Justinian, were taken. The golden altar in Hagia Sophia was cut into pieces and carted off on mules. Numerous giant bronze statues were destroyed, and their fragments were thrown into smelters to produce cheap coins. The quadriga of four life-size horses was transported to Venice and placed on the façade of St. Mark’s Basilica, as shown in the top photo above my head. Although the Byzantines regained control of Constantinople in 1261, the empire was terminally weakened and ultimately fell to the Ottomans in 1453.

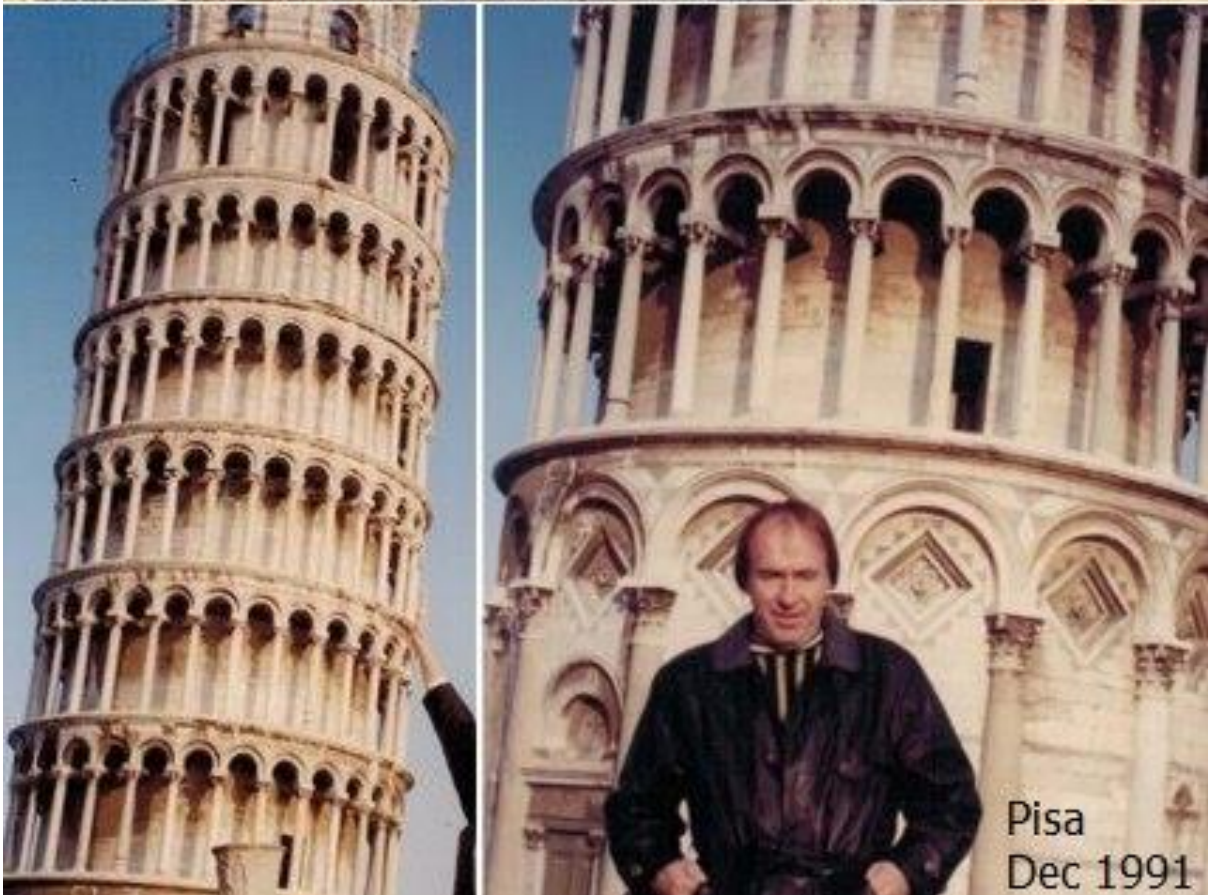
During one of my trips to Venice (in 1982 and 2003), I remember passing by an old Palazzo on a small boat. The travel guide pointed out that it was the residence of Marco Polo during the last two decades of his life. **Marco Polo** (1254-1324) is perhaps the most famous Venetian, known for his book about his travels to China. After his return, he was captured by the Genoese, and while imprisoned, he dictated his stories to his cellmate, Rustichello da Pisa, a fiction writer. Several scholars have questioned the veracity of Polo’s fascinating stories. Skeptics have pointed out the omission of key details such as the Great Wall of China, tea, Chinese characters, and chopsticks from his book. Maghrebi explorer Ibn Battuta, who visited China around 1346, was the first foreigner to mention the Great Wall, although he did not see it himself.

The Bridge of Sighs (Ponte dei Sospiri) spans the narrow canal between the prison and the Doge’s Palace. It was named for the sighs of the prisoners who would see Venice for the last time before being taken to prison.

Venice is slowly but steadily sinking, and the infrastructure measures taken so far have not been enough to prevent serious flooding

FLORENCE and PISA

Florence



Academics and historians define the **Renaissance** as the 15th and 16th-century cultural movement that involved the rediscovery of the achievements of ancient Greece and Rome, leading to the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity. It was in Florence (Firenze) that these changes were most visible in art, architecture, literature, and science. The catalyst for this transition was the migration of scholars and their texts following the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453. Michelangelo's David (over 5 meters tall) was the first naked statue created after more than a thousand years of medieval suppression, completed between 1501 and 1508.

Michelangelo (1475–1564) was born in Caprese, a small village 100 kilometers east of Florence, but his family returned to the city when he was just a few months old. Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) was born illegitimately in Vinci (near Florence) to a notary father and a slave mother. **Galileo Galilei** (1564–1642) was born in Pisa (then part of the Duchy of Florence). **Dante Alighieri** (1265–1321), **Sandro Botticelli** (1445–1510), and **Niccolò Machiavelli** (1469–1527) were born in Florence. The powerful **Medici** family ruled Florence for 300 years.

Galileo initially studied medicine but switched to mathematics. In 1589, he was appointed a professor at the University of Pisa and later moved to Padua in 1592, where he taught mathematics, physics, and astronomy until 1610. During this period, Galileo made numerous significant contributions that had a profound impact on modern science. One famous experiment involved dropping two unequal weights from the Leaning Tower of Pisa to demonstrate that they reached the ground at the same time, disproving Aristotle's theory that heavier objects fall faster than lighter ones. One of his students wrote, in a biography of Galileo, that this demonstration was witnessed by both students and professors. However, some scholars argue that Galileo conducted a "thought experiment" without actually performing the physical demonstration.

Galileo was a strong proponent of the heliocentric model of the solar system, which postulated that the Earth revolves around the Sun, in contrast to the Catholic Church's doctrine that the Earth is immovable and the center of the universe. This idea was first proposed by Aristarchus of Samos in the 3rd century BC, and a mathematical model was published by Nicolaus Copernicus in 1543, the year of his death. Galileo was warned by the Pope to cease defending the Copernican theory. Eventually, he was tried by the Roman Inquisition, found guilty of heresy, and forced to recant. He spent the remaining years of his life under house arrest, from 1633 until his death in 1642 at the age of 77. According to a popular legend, Galileo muttered "**E pur si muove**" (and yet it moves) after being forced to renounce his views. In 1992, Pope John Paul II acknowledged that Galileo had been wrongfully condemned.

Construction of the Florence Cathedral began in 1296, and its dome was completed without scaffolding by Filippo Brunelleschi in 1436. The dome has an internal diameter of 45.5 meters and rises to a height of 116 meters.

ROME



Fontana di Trevi August 1980



They say, “Rome wasn’t built in a day.” **Rome** has over three thousand years of history, and at least two legends are associated with its founding. According to one, Romulus and Remus, twin sons of a princess, were abandoned on the banks of the River Tiber to die. However, they were saved by a she-wolf, who suckled them. When they came of age, Romulus killed his brother and went on to found Rome in 753 BC. Another legend, told by the Roman poet Virgil in his epic poem **Aeneid**, recounts the story of Aeneas, who fled the fall of Troy (circa 1180 BC) and traveled to Italy. **Romulus** is said to be one of his descendants.

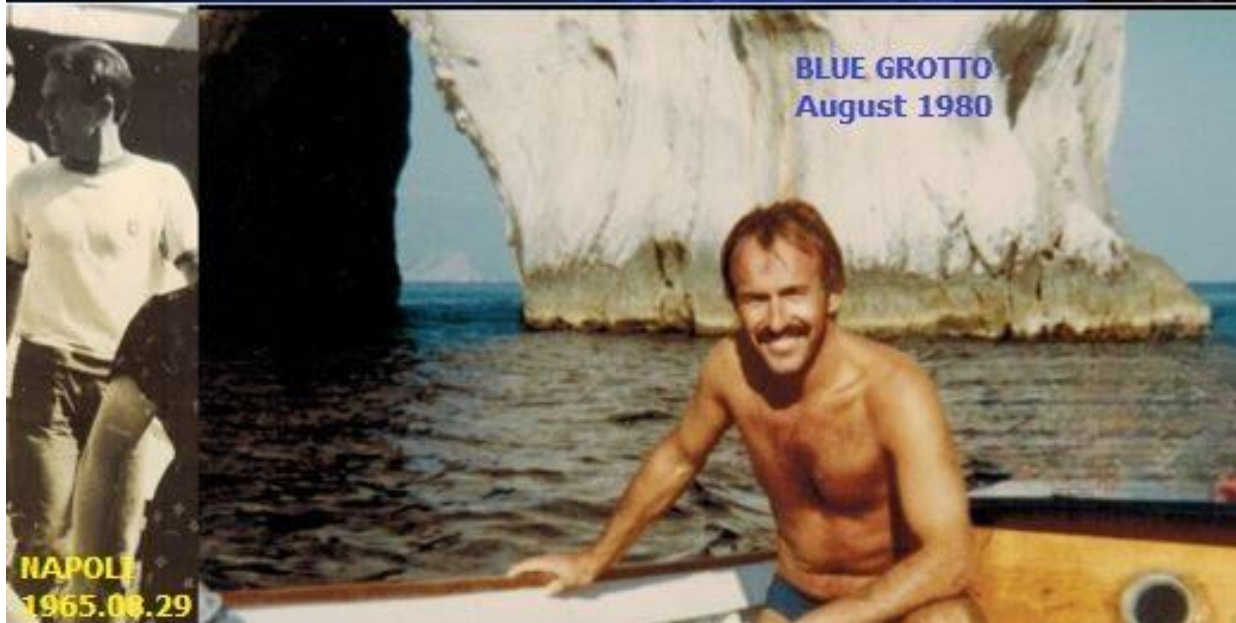
The early city of Rome was populated with many young, single men and few women. To resolve this, Romulus invited people from neighboring areas to a religious festival, during which the Romans kidnapped the marriageable women of their guests.

The Romans defeated the Etruscans in the north and the Greeks in the south, becoming the rulers of the Italian peninsula. In the 3rd century BC, they fought the Carthaginians in Sicily, with hostilities lasting for many years. Hannibal led his troops through Spain (218 BC) and southern France, famously crossing the Alps to invade Italy. His army included about 46,000 men and 38 elephants, though most of the elephants did not survive the harsh winter conditions. **Hannibal** won several battles, but was eventually defeated in 202 BC. Carthage was annihilated by the Romans in 146 BC. After the Battle of Cynoscephalae (near my hometown of Volos) and the sacking of Corinth in 146 BC, mainland Greece came under direct Roman control. At the same time, Rome was ‘conquered’ by Greek culture, and its cities began to fill with marble columns, elegant statues, and fine objets d’art.

Julius Caesar, after defeating the Gallic tribes (in present-day France, Belgium, and Switzerland), crossed the Rubicon River and marched toward Rome at the head of his army in 49 BC. He pursued his rival, General Pompey, and defeated him at the Battle of Pharsalus, Thessaly, Greece. Caesar then traveled to Alexandria, Egypt, where he began an affair with **Cleopatra**. He declared himself dictator for life in early 44 BC. He was assassinated on the Ides of March (March 15) of the same year at the age of 55.

The construction of the **Colosseum** began under Emperor Vespasian in 72 AD and was completed in less than ten years. Initially, it could hold about 50,000 spectators, but with subsequent modifications, its capacity reached approximately 80,000. The Colosseum was constructed using concrete, limestone, volcanic rock, and brick, and its thick walls still stand after two thousand years. Concrete is a remarkable material with a history spanning thousands of years. The Romans improved it by using volcanic sand called pozzolana, which made the mortar stronger and more durable. Although concrete is an ancient material, significant scientific research is still being conducted today. I am proud to say that I coauthored two recent articles on the rheology of concrete, published in 2023 and 2024.

NAPLES, CAPRI, POMPEII



The Gulf of Naples (Golfo di Napoli) is located about 200 kilometers south of Rome. Along its coast are some interesting places I have visited: the city of Naples, the islands of Capri and Ischia, the ruins of Pompeii, and Sorrento. The name of Napoli is of Greek origin, Neapolis (New City).

From the second half of the 19th century, **Capri** became popular with artists, writers, and celebrities. Swedish-born physician and author Axel Munthe built the **Villa San Michele** on a ledge at the top of a steep rock, 327 meters above sea level. Munthe's book *The Story of San Michele* became a bestseller and was translated into several languages soon after its publication in 1929.

The **Blue Grotto** is a sea cave where sunlight shining through the entrance and an underwater opening is reflected upward, giving the water a blue glow. There is only one entry, which is about 2 meters wide and 1 meter high. The sea was calm when I visited, but I had to lie flat on the bottom of the small boat to enter the cave. In rough seas, it is extremely dangerous, or impossible, to enter the cave.

Pompeii was built on land formed by lava from previous eruptions of Mount **Vesuvius**. The people of Pompeii in the first century AD were accustomed to minor earthquakes over the years, but they were not concerned about an eruption, as the last one had probably occurred in 217 BC. In late October 79 AD, Mount Vesuvius erupted for two days. The first phase was pumice rain, and most of the 20,000 inhabitants managed to escape. However, about 1,200 people remained and died instantly due to a fast-moving current of very hot gas and volcanic material.

Pompeii was buried under about 6 meters of volcanic ash and pumice and was largely forgotten, especially after further eruptions in 472 and 512 buried the remains even deeper. Pompeii was rediscovered in the 1600s, but excavations began in earnest in the 1800s. The Italian archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli was in charge of the excavations from 1863 until his death in 1896. He realized that occasional voids discovered beneath the layers of ash were the decomposed bodies of the victims of Vesuvius. He devised a technique of injecting plaster into the voids and allowing it to harden, recreating the forms of humans and animals. This same technique is still used today, though plaster has been replaced with transparent epoxy polymer resins.

I have visited several other cities in Italy, mostly for lecturing but also for personal travel. **Ancona** and **Brindisi** are port cities on the Adriatic Sea, from which ferries depart for Greece. I spent three weeks in Sperlonga in June 2008, located halfway between Rome and Naples, to brush up on my Italian in preparation for lecturing in Milan that October. In Lecce, I noticed several people named 'Greco,' including my host at the university and former coworker, Professor Antonio Greco. My picture, of 1965.08.29, was taken as I was disembarking in Naples for a half-day tour from the Queen Frederica ocean liner on my way to New York.

OLYMPIA, GREECE



The first stop in Greece was Corfu, followed by Igoumenitsa, and finally I disembarked in Patras, located in northwestern Peloponnese. I have written about Corfu and the other Ionian Islands in my travelogue *In the Footsteps of Lafcadio Hearn*, which is available through my university's website, macsphere.mcmaster.ca. This page is about ancient Olympia, located approximately 70 kilometers south of Patras.

It is widely accepted that the first ancient **Olympic Games** took place in Olympia in **776 BC** and were celebrated every four years until they were banned by the Roman Emperor Theodosius I in 393 AD. The Games were held in honor of Zeus, the king of the Greek gods. The statue of Zeus at Olympia, crafted around 435 BC by the famous sculptor Phidias, was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was a giant seated figure, approximately 13 meters tall, made of ivory and gold plates over a wooden frame. While the exact circumstances of its destruction are unclear, it is believed the statue was moved to Constantinople and destroyed in a fire in 475 AD.

During the ancient Olympic Games, a **truce** known as **Ekecheiria** was observed by the often-warring Greek city-states, allowing athletes and spectators to travel to Olympia safely. They were coming from all parts of Greece, as well as distant locations such as Odessa and Trebizond on the Black Sea, the coast of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), Sicily, southern Italy, and Massalia (modern-day Marseille, France). Historical accounts suggest that as many as 100,000 people were gathering at Olympia every four years.

Only Greek men were allowed to participate as athletes, competing in the nude, or to watch the games as spectators. While married women were prohibited from attending, there is evidence that some powerful women were owners of chariots taking part in the competitions. There is a story involving the daughter of the famous Olympic champion Diagoras of Rhodes, who disguised herself as a man to sneak in. When she was caught and brought before the judges, she faced severe penalties for sacrilege but was acquitted after claiming that her father, three of her brothers, her son, and a nephew were all Olympic champions.

It is unclear whether young unmarried women were allowed to watch the Olympics, but young maidens did participate in the Heraean Games, held in honor of Hera, the wife of Zeus and queen of the Greek gods. These footraces, held at the Olympic Stadium every four years, were shorter than the men's races. The maidens wore short outfits, above the knee, that left their right shoulder and breast bare.

During the ancient Olympics, a fire was kept burning at a sanctuary throughout the celebrations. In the modern Olympics, a fire was first lit at the Amsterdam Games in 1928. The **Olympic flame** lighting ceremony and torch relay, which transports the flame from Olympia, were introduced at the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, Germany. Despite its association with the Nazi regime, the ritual has continued to this day. A parabolic mirror is used to concentrate the sun's rays and light the first torch. If the skies are cloudy on the day of the ceremony, as they were in 2024, a flame lit during a rehearsal is used instead.

MYCENAE and EPIDAUROS



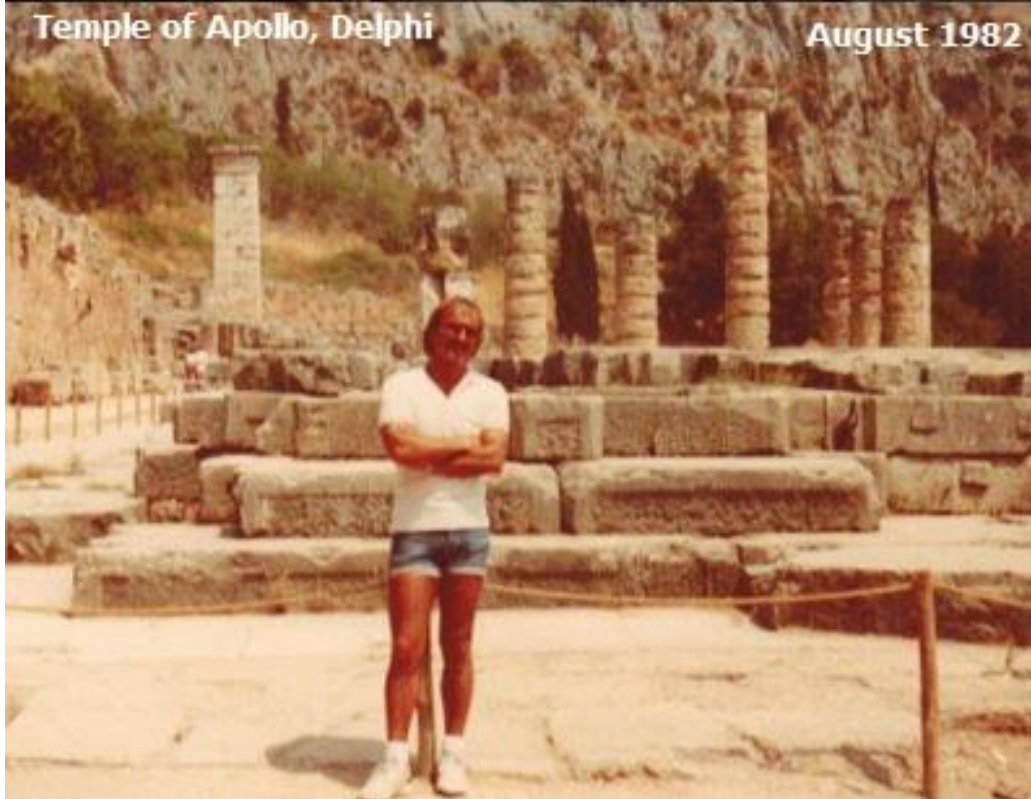
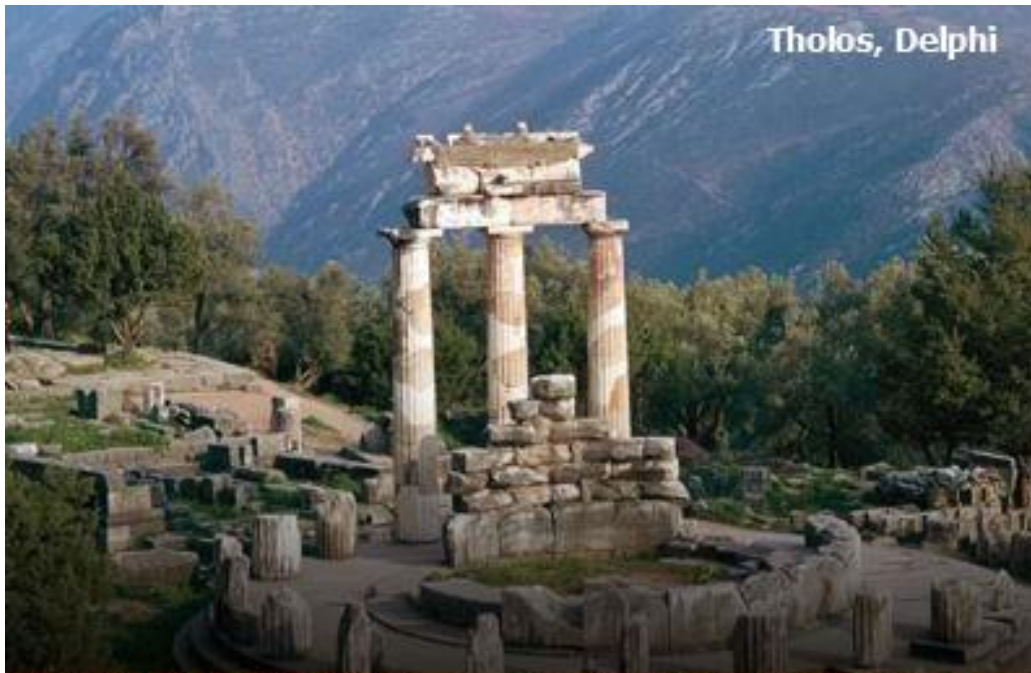
Ancient Mycenae is located in the northeastern Peloponnese, about 100 kilometers southwest of Athens. The Mycenaeans are surrounded by rich mythology and legends. According to Homer's epic poem *Iliad*, **Agamemnon** was the king of Mycenae and the leader of the Greeks who sailed from the port of Aulis (near modern-day Chalcis) to Troy. His brother, Menelaus, the king of Sparta, was married to the stunningly beautiful **Helen**, who eloped with Paris. However, since Homer was writing poetry, it has been questioned whether his stories are based on historical events. Was there really a Trojan War?

The excavations of **Heinrich Schliemann**, a German businessman and amateur archaeologist, proved the existence of both Troy in northwest Asia Minor (near the modern Turkish site of Hisarlik) and Mycenae in the Peloponnese. Schliemann's critics argued that the ruins of Troy were of a relatively insignificant city, unworthy of the ten-year war described by Homer. Professor **Manfred Korfmann** of the University of Tübingen, Germany, was granted special permission by the Turkish government to carry out excavations from 1988 to 2004. Employing hundreds of workers, Korfmann concluded that "The most recent excavations have determined that Troy, now covering about seventy-five acres [300,000 square meters], is about fifteen times larger than previously thought" (JSTOR, Vol. 57, pp. 36-41, 2004). The destruction of Troy between Troy VI and Troy VII is believed to have been caused by a massive fire, which occurred around 1180 BC. However, there are discrepancies: The Hittite tablets mention that King Alaksandu (**Paris** in the *Iliad*) lived about 90 years earlier than the destruction of 1180 BC. It is likely that Homer combined the oral traditions of several decades of armed conflict into the ten years of the Trojan War.

The Mycenaeans dominated much of southern Greece from around 1600 BC to 1100 BC. Mycenae had a population of about 30,000 in the 1300s. The massive walls, known as Cyclopean walls, were built with huge stone blocks, which were thought to be the work of the one-eyed giants, the Cyclopes. The Mycenaeans spoke an archaic form of Greek, as evidenced by **LINEAR B** tablets deciphered by **Michael Ventris**, which were announced on the BBC in 1952. Their civilization declined in the 1100s, and like much of the eastern Mediterranean, it eventually collapsed. This collapse is often attributed to the so-called "Sea Peoples," migrants who arrived in large numbers from other parts of Europe. Some historians believe they were from Sardinia, while others argue they were Dorian Greeks. The collapse was a gradual process, lasting many years, during which cities and towns were abandoned in favor of remote mountain villages. The ensuing Dark Ages lasted until the start of the Archaic Age around 750 BC.

The Ancient Theater of Epidauros, located about 40 kilometers east of Mycenae, was constructed in the late 4th century BC. It is renowned for its excellent acoustics and beautiful architecture. Today, the theater hosts ancient drama performances during the summer months and occasionally major musical events. I had the pleasure of watching a performance there several years ago.

DELPHI



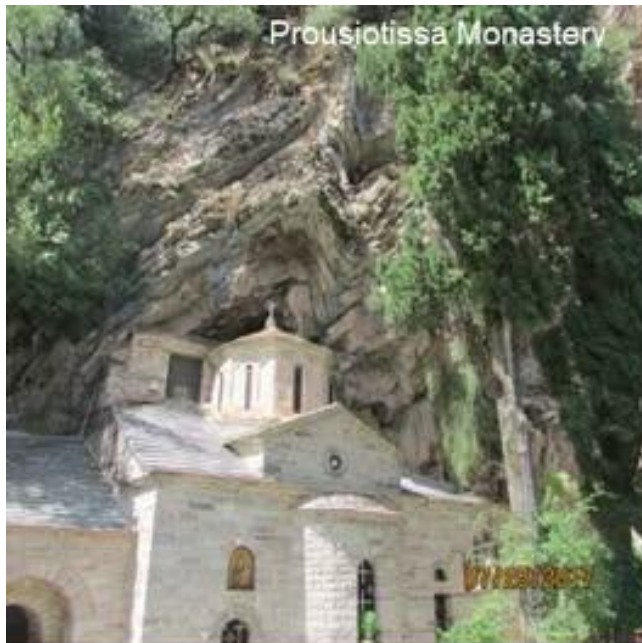
According to Greek mythology, Delphi was believed to be the center of the universe. Zeus, the king of the gods on Mount Olympus, launched two eagles—one from the easternmost point of the world and the other from the westernmost point. They met above Delphi, and the site was declared the omphalos, the navel of the world. Delphi is located on the southwestern slope of Mount **Parnassus** in central Greece and is now a large archaeological site that hosts the ruins of monuments built by various Greek city-states.

It was a sacred site dedicated to **Apollo**, where the priestess Pythia was consulted to foretell future events. The oracles of Delphi were trusted even by some of the most uncompromising historical figures, such as the philosopher Plato and the historian Thucydides. Pythia worked only nine days a year, once a month from February to October. The priestess would inhale gases (probably ethylene) emanating from a tectonic fissure in the ground, leading her to hallucinate while making her incomprehensible prophecies. Her pronouncements were then deciphered by priests. People came to Delphi seeking certainty but left with ambiguity, having to rely on their own judgment to determine their future actions. One important inscription on the Temple of Apollo read, Γνῶθι σαυτόν ("Know thyself"), implying that the god was advising people to understand themselves and trust their own innate abilities when making decisions about the future.

More than 500 **prophecies** attributed to Delphi have survived today. One of the most famous was given to King Croesus of Lydia around 550 BC, in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), as described by Herodotus. When Croesus asked whether he should attack the Persians, the oracle told him, "The king will destroy an empire." Croesus attacked and destroyed his own empire. According to one legend, after Croesus was captured by the Persians, he sent his manacles to Delphi, complaining about the false prophecy. Delphi responded, "The king should have asked whose empire would be destroyed, but he never did." Another famous oracle was given to the Athenians when their emissaries consulted Pythia on how to defend themselves against a huge Persian army. Pythia replied, "Only the wooden walls shall not fall." After intense public debate over the meaning of "wooden walls," most Athenians decided to retreat to their ships, and despite all odds, they were victorious in the naval Battle of Salamis in 480 BC.

Delphi was much more than a sacred sanctuary of temples and pavilions housing offerings to the god Apollo. There was also a theater, a stadium, and a hippodrome. Every four years, the Pythian Games were held there, second in popularity only to the Olympic Games. The competitions were open not only to athletes but also to poets, singers, and musicians. Delphi was busy year-round with religious activities, celebrations, and contests. During the months of November, December, and January, the god Dionysus, associated with wine, festivity, fertility, and ecstasy, was worshiped. Today, a vibrant array of cultural events unfolds at the prestigious **European Cultural Centre of Delphi**, founded in 1977. The center boasts exceptional conference facilities, making it a hub for artistic and intellectual exchange.

From MOUNT PARNASSUS to AGRAFA



In Greek mythology, Mount Parnassus was the home of the Muses and became known for poetry and music. Next to Parnassus is Mount Giona, and further north are Velouchi and Agrafa. A significant part of modern Greek history unfolded in these mountains.

Mussolini declared war on Greece on **October 28, 1940**, and Italian troops began invading from Albania. The Greeks counterattacked and pushed the invaders back into Albanian territory. On April 6, 1941, Germany opened a second front from Bulgaria, sending 680,000 troops. The Germans reached Athens on April 27 and captured Crete by the end of May 1941. Hitler later blamed the failure of his invasion of the Soviet Union on Mussolini's unsuccessful conquest of Greece.

Soon after the German invasion, many young Greeks fled to the mountains and began forming armed resistance groups. By the summer of 1942, an organization known by the Greek acronym **EAM-ELAS** was formed near **Karpenisi** by Thanasis Klaras, a communist known by his nom de guerre Aris Velouchiotis. The second and third most significant resistance movements were formed by two army officers: Napoleon Zervas (**EDES**) and Dimitrios Psarros (EKKA), who had nationalist and liberal orientations respectively.

The British sought to disrupt the supply of arms and ammunition to Rommel's troops fighting the Allies in North Africa by sabotaging the rail line from Thessaloniki to Piraeus. Twelve members of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) parachuted onto Mount Giona. The group, under the command of Brigadier E.C.W. (Eddie) Myers, included Christopher Woodhouse (who was fluent in Greek) and Greek volunteer Themis Marinis. They had been promised help from Zervas, and Woodhouse took the long mountain path to meet him near Arta. Upon realizing that Zervas did not have enough men for the mission, Woodhouse requested help from Aris Velouchiotis on his return.

The **Gorgopotamos** viaduct was defended by about 80 Italians. Around 60 fighters from EDES and about 150 from ELAS attacked the garrison, while the SOE saboteurs placed explosives on the pylons and blew up the bridge on November 25, 1942. This was the only time that ELAS and EDES cooperated.

ELAS grew significantly in numbers and controlled the mountain range from Parnassus to **Agrafa** and further northeast. With British SOE support, they constructed an airport runway near Nevropoli, Agrafa, about 6 kilometers from where my photo was taken. The runway is now submerged at the bottom of Lake Plastiras, which was created after the construction of a hydroelectric dam. On the evening of August 9, 1943, Eddie Myers, Komninos Pyromaglou (representing EDES), Georgios Kartalis (representing EKKA, later Mayor of my hometown, Volos), and four members of ELAS flew on a Dakota aircraft to Cairo, Egypt, for consultations with the Greek government in exile.

Eddie Myers was not allowed to return to Greece due to his friendly relations with ELAS. Some of the information above has been drawn from Myers's book 'Greek Entanglement'. Christopher M. Woodhouse, after leaving Greece (1946), served as an intelligence officer. He was instrumental in the CIA and MI6 staged overthrow of Iran's democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, in 1953. He was a philhellene and wrote several books about Greece.

LAKE PLASTIRAS and METEORA



The plain of **Thessaly** can be roughly defined by Mount **Agrafa** in the southwest, the **Meteora** in the northwest, Mount **Olympus** in the northeast, and Mount **Pelion** in the southeast. "Agrafa" means "unwritten" in Greek. A Byzantine emperor once decided to erase this mountainous region from the empire's maps because the locals refused to obey his orders to remove the icons from the churches. "Meteora" means "suspended in the air," referring to the monasteries built atop giant rocks that rise up to 550 meters. Mount Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece (2,918 meters), is the home of the ancient gods. Mount Pelion took its name from the mythical King Peleus, the father of Achilles. Lake Plastiras, located in Agrafa, sits at an elevation of 792 meters. It was named after **General Nikolaos Plastiras**, who first conceived the idea of constructing a reservoir there.

A lot of history has unfolded on the plains of Thessaly. In the **Battle of Pharsalus**, near modern-day Farsala, Julius Caesar defeated Pompey's army in 48 BC. During World War II, western Macedonia, Thessaly, central Greece, the Peloponnese, and a few islands were occupied by about 245,000 Italian troops in 10 divisions. Soon after the armistice was signed on September 3, 1943, between Italy and the Allies, nearly all Italian divisions surrendered to the Germans. Only the Pinerolo Division, stationed in Thessaly, agreed to cooperate with the Greek resistance. In Kefalonia, the Acqui Division surrendered after a 10-day battle, and the Germans massacred nearly 10,000 Italians. The plot of the book and film "Captain Corelli's Mandolin" takes place during that time.

An agreement was signed by General Infante of Pinerolo, Christopher Woodhouse, head of the British mission, three communist leaders from ELAS and a nationalist leader from EDES. It was agreed that those Italians who wanted to fight against the Germans could keep their weapons, while those who did not would surrender their arms and move to military camps. The British agreed to parachute food and other supplies to the camps.

However, the agreement did not last long. The ELAS leadership decided to seize the weapons and equipment of all Italian battalions. All units surrendered without a fight, except for the cavalry of Aosta. They fought a two-hour battle, resulting in 19 Italian deaths, before surrendering their 800 horses, weapons, and equipment. The unarmed Italians were sent to mountain camps in Agrafa to avoid capture by the Germans.

In Neraida, about 10 kilometers from the dam shown in the picture, 6,000 Italians were housed in overcrowded, abandoned homes. On November 27, 1943, two German divisions attacked Neraida, burning down the houses and killing 50 hospitalized soldiers, while most of the Italians fled into the surrounding mountains. Several hundred died due to hunger. After the Germans left, the surviving Italians returned to Neraida, and ELAS dispersed them to nearby villages to be housed by locals in exchange for help with farm work. In Katafygi, Agrafa, my uncle Vasilis Anagnostopoulos told me that an Italian soldier from Campobasso lived in his home for several months before he left for repatriation.

THESSALONIKI



Thessaloniki was founded in 315 BC by King Cassander, who named the city after his wife, a half-sister of Alexander the Great. After the establishment of the Eastern Roman Empire

(Byzantine Empire) by Constantine the Great (272–337), Thessaloniki became the second most important city after Constantinople. Sultan Murad II captured and sacked Thessaloniki in 1430.

Until **1912**, Thessaloniki and the rest of Macedonia were part of the Ottoman Empire. In October 1912, Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Greece declared war against the Ottomans. As Greek troops advanced from the southwest and Bulgarian troops from the northeast, the commander of the garrison, General Hasan **Tashin Pasha**, realized that further resistance was futile and surrendered to the Greeks on October 26, the feast day of St. Demetrios, the patron saint of Thessaloniki.

Around 1,000 Ottoman officers and 25,000 soldiers were transported to Türkiye on Greek ships. Tashin Pasha, who was Albanian and had studied at Zosimaia School in Ioannina, was sentenced to death in absentia by the Ottomans. However, Prime Minister **Eleftherios Venizelos** arranged for his safety and sent him to Switzerland, where he died in 1918. His son, the talented painter Kenan Mesare, became a Greek citizen and lived in Ioannina.

According to a 1913 census, Thessaloniki's population was 157,889, including 40,000 Greeks, 45,867 Ottomans, and 61,439 Jews. The Jewish population was of Sephardic origin, having been welcomed into the Ottoman Empire after their expulsion from Spain in 1492.

During the **First Balkan War**, Serbia and Greece gained significant new territories from the Ottomans and were pleased with the outcome. However, in June 1913, Bulgaria initiated the **Second Balkan War** against its former Greek and Serbian allies. In the Battle of Kilkis-Lachanas, the Greeks emerged victorious, but at the cost of nearly 9,000 casualties. My paternal grandfather's brother, Georgios, was among those killed. Bulgaria lost more territory to Greece, Serbia, and Romania.

Thessaloniki became thoroughly Hellenized with the influx and settlement of thousands of refugees after the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-1922, known as the "Asia Minor Catastrophe," which involved savage ethnic cleansing, euphemistically called a "population exchange."

During World War II, the notorious head of the German military administration of Thessaloniki, Max Merten, organized the deportation of 45,000 Greek Jews to Auschwitz, of whom only about 2,000 survived. Merten returned to Greece in 1957 and had the audacity to visit the office of the prosecutor of war crimes, Andreas Tousis, to support his former interpreter, who was about to have his villa confiscated. Merten was arrested on the spot, kept in prison until 1959, and sentenced to 25 years, but was then released due to an agreement between the Greek and German governments.

In a fascinating interview available on YouTube, Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla discusses the terrifying history of his family: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzzHtvRHkMk>. His mother was saved from execution at the last moment, thanks to the intervention of Max Merten, who had received a substantial payment in gold British pounds from her Greek Orthodox brother-in-law, Kostas Dimadis.

VOLOS



The top photo was taken in August 1943, on my father's horse-powered vehicle in German/Italian-occupied Volos. From right to left: my father Apostolos, cousin Marika, me at one year old, cousin Kaiti, my mother Cleopatra, my aunt Andromache, cousin Barbara, and my uncle Yiannis. We traveled to Sampanaga, Dimini, which is about 4 km west of Volos. In Dimini there is an archaeological site with ruins dating back to the Neolithic period.

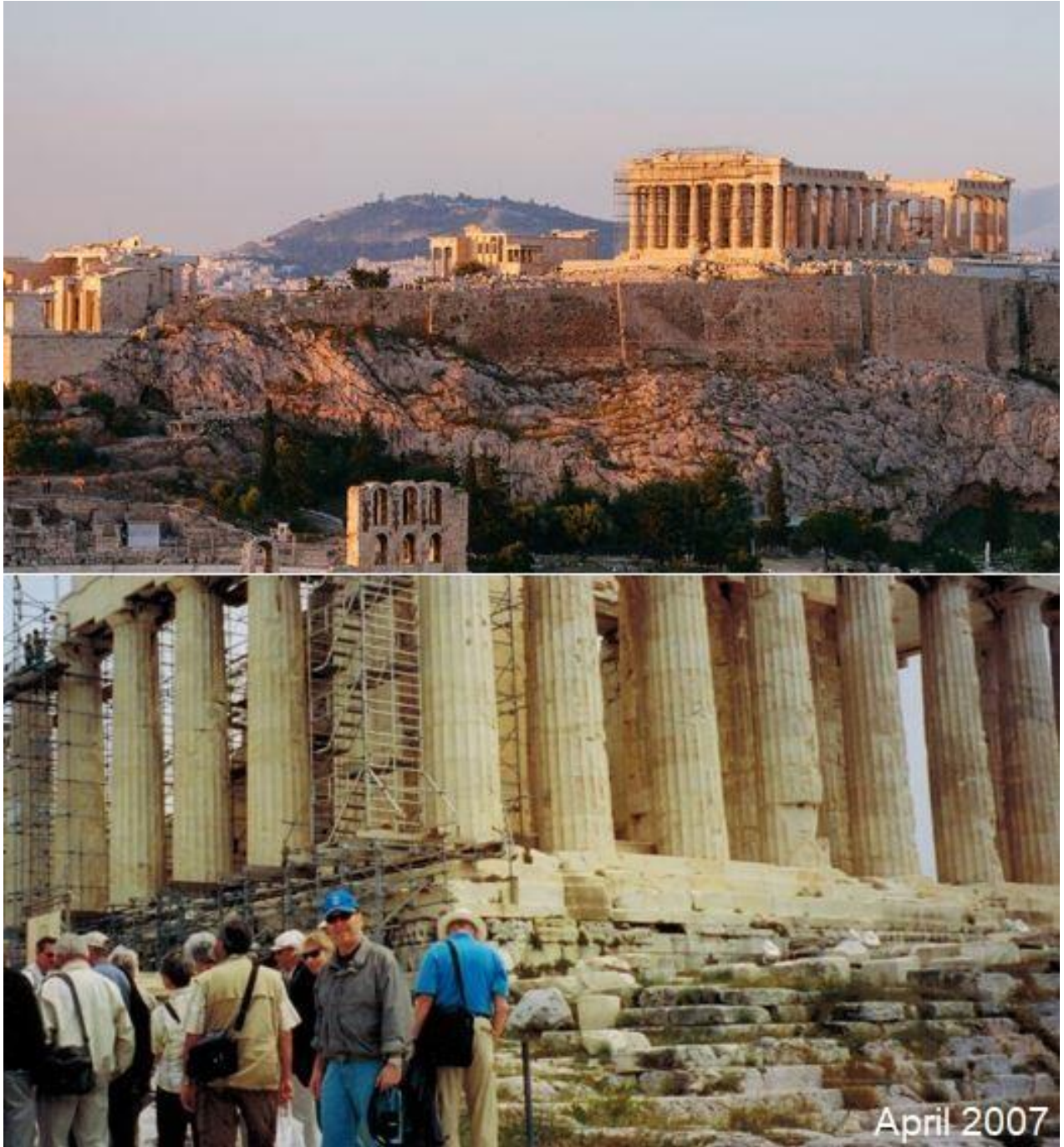
Volos, my hometown, is located about 200 km south of Thessaloniki and 300 km north of Athens, at the foot of Mount Pelion on the coast of the Pagasitic Gulf in the Aegean Sea. When it was first incorporated into the independent Kingdom of Greece in **1881**, following nearly 500 years of Ottoman rule, the municipality had a population of about 5,000. Today, Volos has a population of around 150,000. Modern Volos occupies the areas of ancient Iolkos, Pagasae, and Demetrias.

Mount **Pelion** is the land of the Centaurs, the mythical creatures with the upper body of a man and the lower body of a horse. It was on Mount Pelion that the goddess Eris, uninvited to a wedding, tossed a golden apple (μῆλον τῆς Ἐριδος, the **apple of discord**) inscribed with "τῇ καλλίστῃ" (to the most beautiful) into the wedding feast. This act sparked a vanity-driven dispute between the goddesses Hera (Juno), Athena (Minerva), and Aphrodite (Venus), with Paris, the son of the king of Troy, acting as the judge. His decision to award the apple to Aphrodite led to the Trojan War.

Iolkos is the homeland of the mythological hero **Jason** and the **Argonauts**. They sailed to Colchis, located on the east coast of the Black Sea, in present-day Georgia. Their mission was to take possession of the Golden Fleece and bring it back to Greece. On their journey to Colchis, they stopped at the island of Lemnos, where the women, cursed by the goddess Aphrodite, killed their husbands after they had been abandoned for Thracian women. Jason and the Argonauts stayed there for a few years and fathered children. In his quest for the Golden Fleece, Jason was assisted by Princess Medea. She fled with him, and they eventually settled in Corinth. However, Jason broke his vow of eternal love to Medea and abandoned her for Creusa, the daughter of the king of Corinth. In her wrath, Medea used sorcery to kill Creusa, and fearing her children would be enslaved, she killed them as well.

Is there any truth to the myth of Jason and the Argonauts? According to a Georgian historian, several sailors from Greece traveled to Colchis in search of gold nuggets, not a fleece. Colchis was considered the Eldorado of the ancient world. The **ruins at Dimini** suggest that its inhabitants had the technological knowledge to build ships capable of navigating the high seas. A replica of the legendary Argo was built in Volos. In June 2008, a group of 50 oarsmen set out with the intention of sailing through the Bosphorus to Colchis. However, Türkiye denied them permission, citing safety concerns, so they redirected their journey to the Adriatic Sea, covering a similar distance.

ATHENS I



“Future ages will wonder at us, as the present age wonders at us now.” This famous quote from **Pericles’** Funeral Oration was delivered at the end of the first year of the **Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC)** as part of a public ceremony honoring the war dead. And indeed, there was much for the world to marvel at: the timeless monuments on the Acropolis, such as the Parthenon, the Erechtheion, and the Propylaea; the cultural achievements; and, above all, the invention of **democracy**.

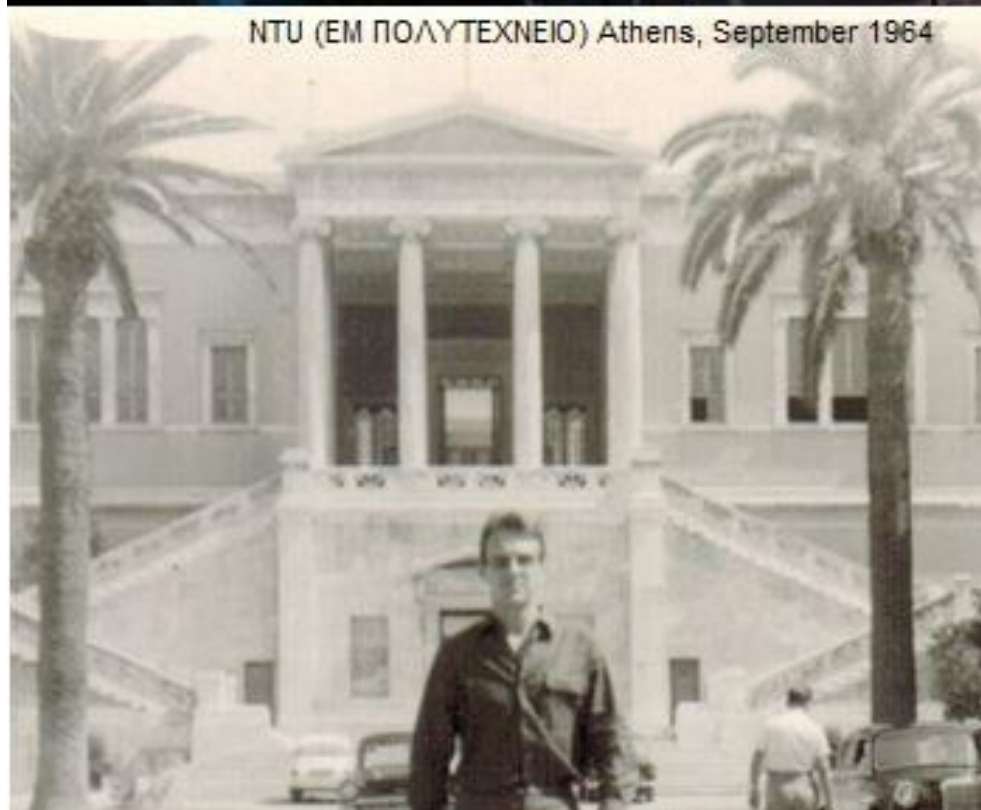
The foundations of democracy were laid by Solon (c. 630-570 BC), the legal framework was established by Cleisthenes (c. 570-508 BC), and Pericles refined it during the **Golden Age** of Athens (479-429 BC). Citizens of Athens enjoyed freedom of speech and freedom of action within the bounds of the law. As Cambridge Professor A. H. M. Jones wrote, “All citizens had not only equal rights before the law, but an equal voice in deciding public issues, and an equal share in the actual government of the state.”

Some modern historians criticize Athens for limiting the principles of freedom and equality to citizens only. In antiquity, a community was seen as an extended family, and citizenship was determined by descent. There was a significant population of foreigners who enjoyed the full protection of the law, though their main disadvantage was that they could not own land or houses; renting was their only option. Another marginalized group were women, who were not allowed to vote or participate in government or public roles. It is important to note that the first country in the world to grant women the right to vote was New Zealand in 1893—nearly 2,400 years after the Golden Age of Athens. A third excluded group were slaves. However, they did have certain rights, as one Athenian aristocrat wrote, with some resentment: “You are not allowed to beat them, and a slave will not make way for you... [and] citizens are no better dressed than slaves.”

Athens was admired during the Roman era but began to decline in importance with the rise of Christianity, as it became seen as the center of paganism. The ancient monuments on the Acropolis were converted into churches. In 529 AD, Emperor Justinian banned the teaching of philosophy by pagans. Athens was captured by the Ottomans in 1458, and the population declined significantly. Gunpowder was stored in the Parthenon, and during a bombardment by the Venetians under Francesco Morosini, a gunpowder explosion caused significant damage in 1687.

Most of the sculptures on the Parthenon were created by Phidias during the Golden Age, and despite the ravages of time and multiple invasions, they survived. In 1799, Lord Elgin was appointed British Ambassador to Constantinople. He bribed local Ottoman officials, acquired many sculptures, and shipped them to England in the early 1800s. The **Elgin Marbles** are now exhibited in the British Museum in London. Several unsuccessful requests for their return have been made by Greece, starting in 1836 by King Otto for some of the sculptures, and most recently by several Greek governments for all of them.

ATHENS II



As the Germans were evacuating Greece in October 1944, the leaders of EAM-ELAS believed they would establish control over the entire country, possibly with the help of Soviet troops

that had advanced into Bulgaria. However, they were unaware of the agreements made between **Churchill** and **Stalin** in the Kremlin on October 9. Winston Churchill describes his discussions with Stalin in his book 'Triumph and Tragedy' (Rosettabooks, 1953, 2002). He writes:

"Your armies are in Romania and Bulgaria. We have interests, missions, and agents there. So far as Britain and Russia are concerned, how would it do for you to have ninety percent predominance in Romania, for us to have ninety percent of the say in Greece, and for us to divide Yugoslavia fifty-fifty?"

While this was being translated, I wrote out on a half-sheet of paper:

- ROMANIA: Russia 90%, The Others 10%
- GREECE: Great Britain (in accord with the U.S.A.) 90%, Russia 10%
- YUGOSLAVIA: 50-50%
- HUNGARY: 50-50%
- BULGARIA: Russia 75%, The Others 25%

I pushed this across to Stalin, who had by then heard the translation. There was a slight pause, and then he took his blue pencil, made a large check mark on it, and passed it back to us. The penciled paper lay in the center of the table. At length, I said, "Might it not seem rather cynical if it appeared that we had disposed of these issues, so fateful to millions of people, in such an offhand manner? Let us burn the paper." "No, you keep it," said Stalin.

On **October 13, 1944**, British troops arrived in Athens and were warmly welcomed as liberators. On Sunday, December 3, EAM organized a demonstration involving at least 200,000 people at Syntagma Square. The Hellenic Gendarmerie fired on the crowd, killing at least 28 and injuring more than 100 (Dekemvriana). Fights broke out in the following days between ELAS on one side and British troops, commanded by General Scobie, as well as Greek troops, including collaborationists from the hated security battalions, on the other. More British troops arrived from Italy, bringing their numbers to perhaps 90,000, and overwhelmed the 20,000 ELAS fighters. The total death toll was approximately 5,000. A ceasefire was agreed upon on January 15. The **Treaty of Varkiza**, near Athens, was signed on February 12, 1945, and the ELAS fighters surrendered most of their weapons.

After the signing of the treaty, there was widespread persecution of communists and former EAM members and supporters. A **civil war** broke out in March 1946, lasting until August 1949. The communist guerillas were defeated by the nationalist forces, with help from the USA (Truman Doctrine), which included American advisers under the command of General James Van Fleet. The final battles took place in the Grammos and Vitsi mountains, where large quantities of napalm bombs were dropped. The total death toll on both sides likely exceeded 100,000. The title of Takis Lazaridis's book, ΕΥΤΥΧΩΣ ΗΤΤΗΘΗΚΑΜΕ ΣΥΝΤΡΟΦΟΙ (Fortunately, We Were Defeated, Comrades), aligns with irrefutable evidence.



To my left are my sister Maria, my mother Cleopatra, my cousin Galateia, and my father Apostolos. Greece, the cradle of democracy, was ruled by a right-wing military junta from April 1967 to July 1974. During that time, I avoided visiting the country of my birth, so we met instead at the southern port of **Brindisi, in Italy**.

YALTA, CRIMEA



I have visited Livadia in Greece, but not Livadia Palace in Yalta, Crimea. The palace was named after the birthplace of **Lambros Katsonis** (1752–1805), a Greek naval hero, and multifaceted adventurer who served in the Russian Imperial Navy. In recognition of his service, Catherine the Great granted him the estate. Beginning in 1861, it became the summer residence of the Russian Tsars. The Yalta Conference was held at Livadia Palace in February 1945.

The first conference of the “**Big Three**” was held in Tehran in November 1943, and the second took place in **Yalta, Crimea**. President Franklin D. Roosevelt traveled by ship to Malta, where he boarded a plane for the journey to Yalta. Prime Minister Winston Churchill flew from London. They both arrived at the airport on February 3, 1945, where they were welcomed by Vyacheslav Molotov. From there, they endured a five-hour drive through winding roads to reach their destination.

Roosevelt, who was paralyzed from the waist down, was likely exhausted from the journey. He and the American delegation stayed at **LIVADIA PALACE**, where the daily meetings were held until February 14. Churchill stayed at the Vorontsov Palace, while Stalin, who had arrived earlier by train, was staying at the nearby Yusupov Palace.

Although fighting was continuing in some parts of Europe, Germany's complete surrender was inevitable. Four key issues were on the table for discussion: Poland, Germany, the United Nations, and Japan. The Germans unconditionally surrendered to the Americans on May 8, and to the Russians on May 9 .

Roosevelt died on April 12, and Vice President Harry S. Truman succeeded him as President. During the third conference, held at Cecilienhof Palace in Potsdam near Berlin, in July 1945, Churchill was informed that he had lost the general election. He was subsequently replaced by Clement Attlee. The Potsdam Conference is widely considered the beginning of the Cold War.



Livadia Palace, Yalta, February 1945

