



# Sailing from Byzantium

From Piraeus and the glory of the Greek Orthodox liturgy to a personal walk with God and a religion of the new world.

by *Demetra Lougani Andreasen*

I GREW UP IN PIRAEUS, THE GREEK PORT AT ATHENS. World War II and the civil war, which threatened the country with Communism, left devastating effects on the land and its people. My father, an officer of the Royal Navy, was injured during a bomb raid and died from a lack of prompt medical care. My mother had to make a home for my two sisters and me (I was the middle child).

As a child, I felt a terrible sense of helplessness. Although I often felt sad and intimidated by the absence of my father and our constant economic hardships, I had a strong sense of pride, a sense of direction, and a will that could not be defeated by the misfortunes of war. I even felt defiance toward the winds of adversity blowing in my face.

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My mother, a woman with a limited formal education, had a tremendous influence on me. She taught us the importance of self-respect, integrity, honesty, and openness. Those values were reinforced by the Christian principles taught in church.

In my community there was strong loyalty to the three most important institutions of Greek society: religion, country, and family. Ours was a homogeneous society, and one could not betray any of the institutions and be considered worthy of respect. Our lack of money did not destroy our sense of self-worth, our pride, or our integrity. Rather, it inspired us to strive for spiritual qualities, inner strength, and commitment to tasks well performed.

I was more religious and had a stronger drive for higher education than my other family members. I attended church regularly and took communion. I was drawn to Christ because of his life of discipline, service, and compassion toward the afflicted. I was impressed with his strength and steadfastness despite rejection by his peers and his community. I liked to think of him cooking breakfast

for his disciples that morning on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, knowing how physically tired and spiritually weak they were. They had decided to return to their old professions, defeated and discouraged by his death. They had turned their faces away from the strong wind of disappointment. Christ understood and was compassionate.

How I enjoyed the Easter services, listening to the deep male voices singing *a cappella* Byzantine hymns. I could imagine Christ going through the terrible test of full obedience to his Father. The Greek Orthodox Church had a tremendous reverence for the Creator of heaven and earth, and a sense of awe for his holiness and power. Sometimes I miss this type of worship, when the human soul, assisted by solemn music and beautiful art, finds itself in awe in God's holy presence.

There were other significant influences in my life. While my father was alive, he used to arrange for my mother and us three children to spend summers out in the country or on a nearby Greek island. After my father's death, my mother maintained this tradition, and we would go to the island of Salamis to stay for two or three months in a lighthouse. There we enjoyed swimming, hiking, exploring, and staying up late watching the stars, the boats passing by, and the moonlight shining on the calm surface of the Mediterranean Sea. The memories of our family togetherness are still a source of strength and energy as I face tests in my life's journey.

One summer on the island my family became acquainted with another vacationing family. My older sister in particular became a lifelong friend of their only daughter, Anna. I

often trace the beginning of my journey to the Adventist Church to their acquaintance. A couple of years after we met, just after my high school graduation, I received a phone call from Anna, offering me her job in a law office in Athens. She was soon to leave for a better position. I accepted eagerly, because it was usually impossible to find employment straight out of high school.

Oh, the innocence of youth! I had no secretarial skills or professional training; only enthusiasm, energy, and a strong sense of commitment to tasks

well performed. How did I really dare become a secretary for four prestigious lawyers and a judge in the center of the most sophisticated section of Athens? I taught myself how to type, to answer the phone, take longhand dictation, and make sure my Greek spelling was correct. In one month I tried to

learn as much as Anna could teach me. Once I worked until I passed out from exhaustion and lack of food; I had been so busy that I forgot to eat.

I kept that job for five years. I learned to speak like a lawyer. I won discussions with my friends and family, using legal terms and rhetorical arguments. As I worked for the lawyers, I knew that one day I would look for a job with shorter working hours and medical benefits. I began to study English at a private school, during siesta time, from one to five o'clock. At the same time I started to pray that God would lead me to a better understanding of his will. I wanted to find a way to serve him. While in high school I had visited sick people in hospitals and participated in street demonstrations organized by a priest, protesting certain ills of our society. Now that I was working full time

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and studying English, I missed these religious activities, although I continued to attend church.

The English we learned in those days was not conversational. We learned grammar rules and wrote compositions, but we could not converse freely. I wanted to improve my English speaking ability.

I met a young woman at the National Gardens in Athens one afternoon, and we started talking. I mentioned my wish to practice conversational English. "Oh," she said, "I know someone. She works for a Protestant church and she uses her English all the time." She eventually introduced me to a young secretary named Aliko, who worked for the Adventist Greek Mission in Athens.

Aliko Grivas Snow was a bright young woman who translated the Sabbath school lessons and some of Ellen White's writings into Greek. Aliko was not an Adventist at the time, and she would argue with the Greek-American missionary leader about theological differences between the Greek and Adventist churches.

Aliko decided to go to Newbold College, in England. "Newbold," she wrote, "would be an excellent school to study and practice speaking English." She invited me to join her. She did not mention that by that time she had become an Adventist.

I started to save every cent that I could. In the fall of 1960, I sailed to Venice and from

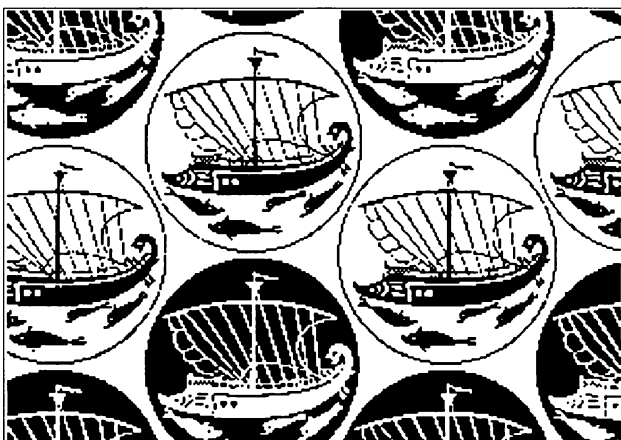
there traveled by train through Calais to London. Doctor Viggo Norskov Olsen had just become the principal of Newbold, and he accepted my application with half of the required tuition. The rest I would have to pay by praying and working.

The decision to leave home and attend a Protestant college in another country was an extraordinary one. None of my friends, neighbors, or acquaintances had done such a thing. It had to be the Lord's leading, since my family, after my father's death, had neither the financial means nor the social exposure to take advantage of such an opportunity.

Going to a Protestant school made me uneasy. I thought seriously of asking permission from my priest, whom I greatly admired. I tried twice to visit him in his office, but something kept me from entering. I thought he would not allow me to attend a Protestant school. So instead of visiting the priest, I promised God that I would not let "those Protestant apostates" interfere with my faith.

Two years later, I, like Aliko, joined the Adventist Church. I had not known anyone before who could explain clearly and with a personal testimony how to walk with God daily in life's journey. To learn that God was interested in my physical and emotional needs, just as he was in my spiritual needs, was completely new.

I knew that I could not possibly turn my back on this new religious knowledge, but I was also painfully aware that in my family's eyes, I had betrayed them. I had sacrificed the bond that made us strong and loyal to each other, and I had shown disrespect to the memory of my father. My family was less angry than hurt—disappointed, embarrassed, abandoned. My sisters needed my support to cope with mother's illness and advancing age. They felt alienated by my strange new eating habits, Sabbathkeeping, and association with a handful of Seventh-day Adventist Greeks who sang foreign hymns and worshiped in churches that looked like public lecture halls. To them the



Greek Orthodox Church was the strong mother church for almost all Greeks. They even invited a theologian friend to speak with me, hoping that he could persuade me to give up my new faith. But my convictions became even stronger as he failed to give me satisfactory explanations for religious practices of my former church that had no biblical basis.

My mother tried to encourage me to think of marriage. When I told her that I had met a fine Dane at Newbold, she said, "My poor child, of all the Greek young men, could you not find one here and stay in your country?" I tried to explain that I could not marry a Greek Orthodox. Two years later I left Greece for Andrews

University, to be with my fiancé. Again my family felt betrayed and rejected. I had broken the link that kept us together.

My spiritual journey has been long since those days. I learned to rebuild my relationship with my Greek family, based on the things that united us: memories of childhood, of our parents, and of our heritage. My sisters have come to look upon my family with respect and admiration, and wish that they could finance their children's education in Adventist schools. One of my nieces has attended summer school at Newbold, and another is thinking of coming to Walla Walla College. The next generation is continuing the pilgrimage.