

TALES

FROM THE LAST DAYS OF

ANATOLIA



TERRY STAVRIDIS

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Published in the United States
by eBooks2go, Inc.
1827 Walden Office Square, Suite 260, Schaumburg, IL 60173

ISBN: 978-1-5457-5282-1
ePUB ISBN: 978-1-5457-5283-8
Mobi ISBN: 978-1-5457-5284-5

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication

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Mihalis Veziris My Early Years

My name is Mihalis Veziris. I was born to Greek Smyrniotes parents: Manolis and Aphrodite Veziris (nee Papadakis) in 1900. Our father and mother were born in 1860 and 1865 and married in May 1885. My three siblings—George, Maria, and Alexandra—were born in 1890, 1905, and 1906, respectively. Manolis inherited a carpet factory from his father, Iacovos, who died in 1900, which he ran until September 1922.

My grandfather Iacavos was born into a middle-class family in a small village outside of Smyrna in 1830. His father was a respected country doctor who traveled to nearby villages looking after his patients' needs. Many of his patients thought of him as a miracle worker. Iacavos worked as a clerk for Papamihail Brothers, who owned a small carpet factory in Smyrna. Grandfather was an astute, observant individual who quickly learned about the business. He saved his money and eventually bought his carpet factory in 1860. Our family fortune was built upon his initial hard work.

My mother's family originally came from Mytilini to Smyrna around 1840. They were poor but worked hard, saving their money. Eventually, my maternal grandfather, Alexandros Papadakis, opened a small store selling clothes, utensils, and local foodstuffs. His three daughters—Aphrodite, my mother; Persephone; and Maria—were brought up in a very strict household. He used to hit his daughters when they disobeyed him. Alexandros was unhappy when my mother was courting my father. I don't know why he disliked him. Anyway, mom and dad finally got married, which Alexandros could do nothing about except give his "blessing." Our maternal grandmother, Aliki, liked my father but was afraid to stand up to her husband. Alexandros only attended the church service because he had to give the bride away but never came to our parents' wedding reception.

During the first year of my parents' marriage, Alexandros frequently intervened in their lives, but our mother warned him that his continued interference would lead to the severing of family ties. Alexandros thought Mother was joking, but she wasn't. One day he came to our parent's house to say he disapproved of the friends they associated with and also the way Mother dressed. Mother loved wearing the latest Parisienne fashions. My mother could take it no more and finally told Alexandros to leave and never come back. They never saw each other again. It was sad that both never reconciled their differences. I never got to know my relatives on my mother's side of the family.

We lived in Bournabat, a suburb of Smyrna, where wealthy Greek and Levantine families lived in beautiful stately homes with elegant gardens, manicured lawns, and also hosted their famous garden parties. These parties were attended by the prominent Greek, Armenian, Levantine, and Turkish families of Smyrna. I remember our family invited to these lavish functions, where I got the chance to mix and play with the children of these elite families.

I asked myself, why were we invited to these wealthy houses? It all had to do with our grandfather, who sold carpets to these rich people. He had become terrific friends with some of the Levantine families who invited him into their inner circle. It was considered a privilege to be part of this elite group, which also raised the status of our family's carpet business. It opened doors to develop further his business interests.

Our carpet factory had fierce competition from the Oriental Carpet Factory but always managed to do good business in Smyrna and beyond. My father was very proud of the quality of the carpets he produced and exported them to Athens, London, Marseilles, and Constantinople. We were about to fulfill our first order from the United States but couldn't complete it because of the intervention of the Great War.

Our family wasn't as wealthy as the Whittal, Paterson, Woods, Papazoglou, Balatzis, Matirosian, and Edhem families who had lived for generations in Smyrna. Nevertheless, we were very comfortable with servants to do the shopping, cleaning, washing, and gardening. Our mother stayed home, took

care of us, and supervised our household. She made sure that every task was performed promptly and treated the servants with respect and kindness.

We employed two Greeks, two Turks, and one Armenian servant. I remember Mother telling me that one of the servants named Ahmet needed some time off to look after his very sick wife. She gave him as much time off as he needed to allow her to recuperate from her illness. Mother visited Ahmet's wife by taking some soup to her. Ahmet appreciated my mother's kindness, which he never forgot. The other servants received similar treatment with their family illnesses or religious festivities.

Manolis had two excellent close friends named Stefanos Manos and Christos Papadoukas, who were involved in the import/export business. My father grew up and went to school with them, establishing a lifetime friendship curtailed in September 1922. I also became terrific friends with Manos and Papadoukas children. The former had three sons—Nikolaos, Andreas, and Giorgi—whereas the latter had two daughters, Marika and Anna. Our families spent a wonderful summer picnics at Lake Tantalus.

The scenery was simply breathtaking with crystal blue water and surrounded by a wooded forest. Oh! The mountains formed a fantastic backdrop to the lake. We would go rowing and swimming in its crystal blue waters. On other occasions, we would go bike riding and sing songs, which brightened up our day. Many of the affluent families would spend their day of relaxation here. These were wonderful times full of nostalgia and innocence.

My parents enrolled me in the Evangelical School of Smyrna in 1906 and graduated in 1917. This school was open to all children irrespective of race and religion and mainly attended by Greeks. I studied foreign languages—English, French, Turkish, and German—history, geography, writing, and geometry. My favorite subject was learning foreign languages, which would stand me in good stead in the coming years. I remember in 1909, the Young Turks in Constantinople passed a law that made the teaching of Turkish compulsory in all schools across the empire.

The Evangelical school possessed an excellent museum full of archaeological artifacts and a library of some fifty thousand volumes. This

school rivaled some of the best schools in Athens, and also, the Greek Ministry of Education recognized its graduate certificates. This recognition allowed wealthy Greek Smyrniot families to send their sons to study at the University of Athens without having to undertake the compulsory university entrance examination.

My sisters attended Homer School for Girls, which had been established by a wealthy Frenchman businessman, Jacques Manet, in 1882. They wanted to become teachers. Of course, that was a noble profession, but the poor things never graduated due to events beyond their control. If my sisters had graduated, they would have been able to teach in Greece as well.

By the time I graduated from the Evangelical School, my sisters were in the fifth and sixth grades of primary school, respectively. Both were very bright students, with their teachers predicting a great future ahead of them. They were adamant of becoming schoolteachers, and our parents fully supported them. I was very proud of my sisters, and sincerely hoped they would fulfill their dreams.

In 1908 two important events happened in my life. The first was the Young Turk Revolution in the summer of that year, and George migrating to America. I remember my father feeling so happy when the Young Turks seized power in Constantinople, promising to treat all Greeks and Armenians equally. He thought good days were coming at last, but things changed quickly within a year with the slogan "Turkey for the Turks." My father felt he had been deceived and had some apprehension about our family's future in Turkey. However, the Turkish governor, Essad Pasha, reassured the Greeks and Armenians they had nothing to fear so long as he was in charge. That proved reassuring for my father. Our father managed to become good friends with Essad, which also helped our carpet business. Essad was able to get his rich Pasha friends to buy from us. I never found out how our father established his friendship with Essad.

George's decision to go to America caught my family by complete surprise. He had been planning this for some time. A Smyrniot friend who had migrated to America in 1902 convinced George this was the land of golden opportunity.

George got itchy feet to leave us. George was a restless soul who found it challenging to work in our carpet business. He was the adventurous type who wanted to prove he could make his luck far away from Smyrna.

On the other hand, I don't know if other reasons may have caused him to go to another country. I can't recall whether his relations with our father were right or not. I knew that he loved and was close to our mother. My mother adored George.

I remember when I saw him leave Smyrna. I was devastated that I had lost my best friend. We got on well, but like brothers, we had our fights sometimes over silly things. I knew that someday that I would see him again. Our sisters were too young to remember him; they only knew him from family photographs. My mother was heartbroken when he left, but our father's position was ambivalent. I shall continue my story with war clouds building up in the Balkans in 1912.

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