

# Η ΖΩΗ ΜΑΣ (Our Life)



*Memories of a Young Village Boy from Kefalonia, Greece*

LOUIS GARBIS

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## CHAPTER 1

# The Gerasimos and Arsinoi Garbis Family

**M**y baptismal name is Ilias G. Garbis. The *G*, *gamma* in Greek, is the initial of my father's first name, Gerasimos. The *G* here is for Gerasimou. The *mou* states that I am a descendant of Gerasimos. For Greeks, it is customary for a descendant to indicate his or her father's first name as a middle initial. I was advised by the late Father Triantafilis, a prior protopresbyter of the Saint Nectarios Greek Orthodox Church, Palatine, Illinois, that the name *Gerasimos* means "strong-willed." This makes sense, since *geros* is defined as "strong" in Greek.

Father Triantafilis was the priest who helped me find my way back to a more comfortable acceptance of religion. I do not believe he was popular with some of the churchgoers, as his approach was "old school." On rare occasions, those who, in his opinion, did not follow church etiquette could expect a "gentle" reprimand. To be fair, he had just as many parishioners who respected and adhered to his church decorum. I was one of them. Whether strict, conservative, or liberal, I look for sincerity and intent. In both categories, Father Triantafilis easily met the threshold. He was genuine.

I had the pleasure of being a member of the Saint Nectarios Parish Council in the late 1980s for a four-year stint. In that time, he, I, and other members of the council made constructive contributions that benefited the parish and its parishioners. I also gained several lifelong friends. One of them was Father Triantafilis.

Our father was born on January 20, 1916, to Nikolaos and Ekaterini Garbis. He was the fourth of nine children: Eleni, Antelini, Dionisios, Gerasimos, Athanasios, Spiros, Gerasimoula, Georgeos, and Angeliki. A copy of our family tree is included in this book's appendix. It is a

beginning, not an ending. It still requires additional work to make it more substantive, more complete. It will also require our descendant's input to continue to update and refine our family's history.

Their youngest offspring, Angeliki, I am told was not only a natural beauty but had a beautiful heart. She had a caring disposition and a willingness to sacrifice herself for a loved one. The one example I am aware of is when my brother Andoni (Tony) was a baby and thought to be stricken with a serious and highly contagious disease, likely tuberculosis.

Our mother warned Angeliki to not hold Andoni, as she might catch this virulent disease and die. She replied, "Better me than my Andoni." Sadly, she got her wish. She passed away on May 6, 1945, at the age of twenty, roughly three years after she had made that comment. I do not know the cause of death. Based on historical context, the likely candidate was tuberculosis. A potential cure for this disease was identified in 1943 by Selman Walksman. After refinements and clinical trials, it was successfully administered to patients in November 1949.

Our mother, Arsinoe, was born on December 6, 1906, to Panagiotis and Anastasia Kourouklis. She had two brothers: Christopher and Vasilios. Christopher was the oldest, and my mother was the youngest. I met Christopher and his family for the first time when I visited Greece in 1972. I found him kind and hospitable, as was his family. In fact, I was so sufficiently impressed with his kind demeanor that I named my second child Christopher Jeramiah, in his and my father's honor. When my father passed, I missed him and felt regret for not naming him just Gerasimos, which was customary for Greeks. As a result, I always call him Gerasimos or J. J likes and uses both names but uses Christopher as his first name in most of his communications.

I was born on November 18, 1950, in Vlahata, in the municipality of Omalon, Kefalonia, Greece. I was the seventh and last child of our mother, Arsinoe, and the fifth child of our father. I was born with curly red hair. Because I would cry when my mother combed my hair, she finally had enough of my complaints and shaved my head. Head shavings were common in that era for Greek boys. Our mother and grandmother Anastasia were also born with red hair, which in time turned brown. We have this in common. No one else in our family has that distinction.

Our father was from the same village as our mother—Frangata. He was ten years younger. Based on her wedding picture, she was very beautiful

and thin. Regrettably, that photograph has been lost and to date has not been found. Our father was smart, quick-witted, and a good judge of character. He was also a fast runner, which earned him the nickname “Koukayiaki,” after a fast runner who preceded him who was also a resident of Frangata. As the pages that follow suggest, he was also a tough guy and adapted well to the difficult times of the 1940s.

Our mother married my father roughly two years after her first husband’s sudden death in Panama. He was probably twenty-one, and she was thirty-one. Our father moved to Vlahata, where our mother lived in her deceased husband’s house. This was a two-story building with four bedrooms and stairs on both sides that were located outside. The house had front and back balconies and a decent-sized veranda. The main structure was for sleeping. A dining room existed for special occasions and guests. A second smaller structure existed nearby, which was the kitchen. It was used for cooking and day-to-day eating. The third and final structure was the outhouse. Based on what I have gathered from my siblings, it was one of the better homes in the village.

Vlahata is where we were all born and lived until we departed for America. Although I was about three months short of three years of age, I recall that after the earthquake of 1953, only the foundations were visible, clearly identifying the location of the razed house. Much later in life, I learned the main house was still standing after the earthquake. But due to the resulting significant structural damage, it was too dangerous to continue to live in the house. Hence the decision was made to have it torn down. After it was dismantled, materials were given to our brother-in-law, Toto (Erotokritos), and Dina when they were married as part of her dowry. I’m not clear on the total dowry arrangement. The remaining materials from the house were used to erect a shack so the family would have a “roof” over its head.

My two eldest siblings’ (Dina and Denny) father, Panagiotis Markadonatos, was killed in Panama in the mid-1930s. It is my understanding that Dina was about two, and Denny was only few months old. His demise and the circumstances surrounding his death are discussed in the section titled “Vasilios Kourouklis.” Out of respect for the deceased, our father did not legally adopt Denny or Dina. He thought Dina and Denny should carry the last name of their blood father (Markadonatos). From all



that I have heard, he was a good person, a family man, and a good provider for his family.

I'm not certain if our father's decision caused Denny issues growing up since the rest of us carried the surname Garbis, and Denny's and Dina's surname was Markadonatos. Sometimes there is just no good solution—damned if you do, and damned if you don't. Irrespective, there was, is, and will always be unconditional love for all. In fact, I did not comprehend that Dina and Denny were half-blood siblings until my teens. Even then, I never thought much about it. It was completely irrelevant!

When our father also became Dina's and Denny's father, from all I saw and recall, he treated both like all his children—equally, if not better. But an incident occurred when Denny was about fourteen years of age that is worth mentioning. He was asked to pick up thirty drachmas from someone who owed our father this amount for work performed. In the mid-1940s, from an exchange rate standpoint, thirty drachmas was much less than thirty dollars. But so was the cost of goods in a shattered Greek economy, ruined by World War II and the Greek Civil War, which produced huge unemployment and starvation.

These funds were essential to the family. It was Christmas, one of the holiest days of the year. The funds would allow us to obtain meat and other holiday-related consumables to properly celebrate this holy time of the year. Unlike most of the world, in our little town of Vlahata and most of Greece, Christmas was a small and private celebration to commemorate the birth of our Savior, Jesus of Nazareth. No Christmas parties, no gift-giving, no bright lights. It was strictly about celebrating this holy event and survival. But to us, with all our family together, for one evening it felt like heaven.

Denny went on his bike and picked up the funds. On his return trip, he stopped at a nearby coffee shop, about a mile away from the house, played cards, probably with seasoned gamblers, and lost all the money. Without these funds, if another source was not identified, the family would go hungry, and that was not an option.

When Denny finally came home, he took a knife, gave it to our father, and asked him to kill him. Our father, of course, would have none of that talk. But he did, I hope, discipline Denny for his irresponsible behavior. Starvation and death by emaciation were not rare. In fact, history tells us that starvation in that era was a bit too common, especially on a national scale. Clearly, Denny's behavior in our time of need was inexcusable. It

could have placed the family in a precarious position. A potential solution was identified. It will be discussed in the “Vasilios Kourouklis” section.

As a matter of record, when Greece finally fell to the Germans during World War II, German leadership directed the local generals to make certain that most of the food produced was taken from the conquered peoples—by force, if necessary—so the German soldiers would be well fed. Any excess would be sent to their forces in North Africa or where food supplies were needed to help their war effort. The fate and plight of the locals was not a serious concern of the occupier.

With this draconian directive, history suggests over one hundred thousand citizens died of starvation in just the first year alone. Many were city dwellers or poor folk in the villages who had little or no farming or livestock to help them survive. We fell into the latter category. A couple of important variables allowed us to survive. One was that steady local work was available for the eldest two brothers and our father. All took jobs when and where they could. Another key contributor was Grandmother Anastasia, who is discussed in more detail later in this book. This directive was surprising, since the Germans were mostly amicable and respected the Greeks due to their history and contributions to the Western civilization. But as the adage suggests, “In love and war, anything goes.”

Denny’s love of cards was an ominous precursor of things to come. On the plus side, Denny worked hard to help the family get by during those hard and difficult times. Despite his gambling habit, it was almost impossible not to like our eldest brother. Denny was smart, mentally quick, good-hearted, personable, and generous to a fault. He also had an excellent singing voice.

## **Family Origins**

I know very little of our family’s origins. Below is a brief summary of what I have learned on the Garbis side:

- Our father’s origins appear to be from Italy. If so, I surmise the Garbises migrated to Kefalonia around the 1700s, plus or minus one hundred years. That time frame is liberally deduced and is based on what little information I have been able to gather as to when Venice first occupied Kefalonia. That occurred in the early 1500s and lasted until 1797.

- There were at least three brothers who migrated to Kefalonia. I have not yet ascertained if they came with wives and children. Their names were Yacomo (I assume a derivation of John), Ricardo, and George. I believe these three had the clan name Liguris. At least, that is what my father's clan was called—Liguris, Ligurithes, Liguraieeee. I do not believe this nickname is of Greek origin. Trying to determine where the Garbises came from, I did a Google search that was uneventful. Except for one thing: The municipality where Genoa is located is called Liguria. It does not seem a stretch to deduce that we were called “liguraieeee,” as perhaps that was where the Garbis originally came from. For Example, in America, I have often been called by Americans the “Greek,” by Greeks in America “Kefaloniti,” and when I am in Kefalonia “American.” To make things a bit more interesting, there is a town near Genoa called Garbarino. In pictures, it appears old, with very few occupants, if any. Still, this may be a bit of a stretch. Only by visiting Genoa and looking at birth certificates starting from the fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries will it be possible to provide a more accurate time frame and family tree.
- Yacomo was probably the oldest of the brothers. I say this because as you enter Frangata, the plot of land on the right side, as soon as you reach the town line, is called Jacomata (Jacomo's land). We know that Saint Gerasimos, our patron saint, was near what is called Frangata in or around the late 1580s. I have not identified when exactly Frangata was first settled or when the Garbis migration to Frangata began.
- A very good uncle who liked to dabble in our origins, Athanasios Garbis, once shared with me that he thought our father's family was from the Ricardo tree, and we were nicknamed “Hardaiee.” He suggested this nickname meant that we are known to be loud. I hate to admit this—we can be loud, yours truly included. Still, the foundation of our family is yet to be identified.

There is much I need to find out about the missing years. For example, what motivated the brothers to migrate to Kefalonia? My guess is that when Venice became the dominant power in the Adriatic and the Mediterranean Sea, it is reasonable to assume they invited fellow Italians looking to inhabit this newly acquired territory, with a promise of free land, power, and more. Venice's motivation was obvious. It would allow them better control of

their newly occupied land. Kefalonia became a vassal of Venice from 1500 until 1797. It became a vassal because Byzantium was fighting the Bulgars and wanted Venice to manage its Ionian interests. In or around 1797, Napoleon Bonaparte dissolved Venice, and for a brief period after 1797 Kefalonia was ruled by France, then overseen by Russia, and then subsequently became a protectorate of England from 1815 until 1864.

In 1864 England, France, and Russia signed the Treaty of London, pledging the transfer of sovereignty to Greece. The British intention was to bolster the reign of King George I of Greece. He was of Danish descent, and all three countries benefited via marriages from this move. The biggest gain was by Greece, since the Ionian Islands were once again unified with their motherland.

Frangata can be interpreted as “the village of the Franks,” implying French origins. This is just a conjecture, but it does not seem unreasonable, as I have not been able to identify a better explanation as to how Frangata received its name. Not to complicate matters, I subsequently read in more than one reference that Greeks would call anyone from the west “Frangee.” Probably from the Norman-Frankish Crusades that passed through Greece to fight the Saracens. Perhaps a French knight decided to make that village his home and gave it this name. This is strictly a theory and has yet to be proven.

Irrespective of the above comments, many of the surnames from Frangata have a foreign touch and imply Italian roots. For example, one of our close family friend’s last name was Maraveyias, which in Italian and Spanish is *maravioso*, or “marvelous.” Another name is Fabiotos. I surmise that Fabioano or something similar was the original name, and the “atos” probably added to make it easier to assimilate into Hellenism.

In America, when I became an adult, my father shared that in Frangata and the neighboring town, Valtsamata, men did not die of old age. He implied that they died from vendettas. I suppose with this revelation we can forget about the Franks and welcome the Paisanos! Thankfully, that description of foreigners no longer applies. *Xenos*, which translates to “foreigner,” is now the governing definition for all peoples who are not of Greek origin.

My paternal grandparents were Nikolaos Garbis, and my grandmother was Ekaterini (kakia) who was a Pavlotos prior to her marriage. As previously noted, they had five sons and four daughters who lived to

adulthood. In order of birth: Eleni, Antelini, Dionisis, Gerasimos, Athanasios, Spiro, and Georgos. Regrettably, I know even less about my grandmother's family origins. I do know that my grandmother Anastasias's maiden name was Mesolouras. That is all I know and next to nothing about my maternal grandfather except that he died young.

For the record, the surname *Garbis* suggests Armenian origin. Armenians in America have stopped me more than once who thought I was Armenian and called me brother. When I advised I was Greek, they were shocked by this revelation. That discussion occurred on the Eisenhower (I-290), when I was in my late twenties. Thank God there was no traffic when they flagged me down!

I like my Armenian friends, but when the occasion arises I make it clear to all who are curious of my ethnicity that, although my mind is more American in perception and thought, my soul will always be Greek, with a heavy bias toward the historical and ancient Greeks. Whether in science, theoretics, philosophy, problem-solving, courage, or sacrifice, with their amazing accomplishments, they defined the glory that *was* Greece. Throughout their time on Earth, they sculpted a path vivid and resounding that they made sure, that even the deaf among us would hear them, be empowered by them, and never forget them! In my old age, even if I forget who I am, I do not believe I will ever forget those who came before me and what that means to us of Hellenic origin.

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