

CHAPTER 10

How I met rebetiko in 1968

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After the families went home from Café Minerva, after supper hours were all over, there were mostly men left in the café. In those days, a lot of sailors found their way to the Minerva. Vasilios sat me down for a long discussion about them. He said they might invite me to a table for a drink. I could go and have a drink with them, only if I wanted to, he emphasized. “They spend all their time on the ships and there is nothing for them to do but dance. They are very good dancers and you can learn a lot from them. But be careful!” Vasilios then took great pains to teach me the filthiest words that Greek men used to talk about women. He told me never to repeat them, but to make certain that I understood the sounds and meanings of them. If anyone at a table should use any of those words, I was to get up immediately, with my head very high and with an elegant frown on my face leave the table and go to the safety of the bar. I had my own special seat at the end of the bar in the shadows so it wasn’t easy to see me. Whenever I was in my seat, the bartenders were instructed to glare menacingly at anyone who approached the area.

He treated me with so much respect that the people who worked there and the café’s “regulars” began gradually to act towards me in the same manner. He told me I was: “the Queen of the Minerva. Don’t ever forget that and always act like the queen, no matter what happens here at night.”

I spoke no Greek yet, only the words which Vasilios was patiently drilling into my head but which I was not to repeat. No one in the kitchen could speak English and so, yes, I was learning how to ask for my supper and the names of the dishes I liked the best. I learned how to be polite and I learned how to be thankful for the olives and the bread and the endless variety of unknown delights I consumed each weekend.

Few of the musicians who came through the doors of the Café Minerva could speak any English. They were all from Greece and would come and go back and forth to their own country. So with time on our hands occasionally, they would take it upon themselves to teach me words for their instruments, the names of dances and songs. The better English speakers would patiently explain the lyrics of songs that I grew particularly fond of and for many years, what I learned from those first musicians at the Café Minerva were shared with other Greek musicians who played for me as I spent so much of my dancing career working in Greek restaurants all across the United States and for a while, in the early seventies, in Vienna, Austria.

It was impossible for me to leave the Cafe after my dancing was over. Some of the band members lived together in the East Bay near my home in Berkeley, and they drove me home after work. There was actually no way for me to leave safely until they were ready to go. And there were many, many nights when the music went on until very early in the morning.

The laughter of the children and the women had floated away into the night. By now, even the women in the kitchen had gone, but they had kindly left something for me to eat after my performances. So I would sit back in the shadows of the dark, cavernous café, finishing my *pastitsio*, or bowl of *avgholemono soupa*. I sat there in my elegant gown, watching the eerie transformation of the ambience of the place. The shadows seemed to grow longer; the candles furthest from the stage guttered and died. The only light was around the stage and it too seemed different, somehow.

In those hours, now that the men were alone, the atmosphere began to shift dramatically. Some of the men got up from their seats at the tables where they had eaten with their families and slowly moved closer to the dance floor. Some chose to stay in the darker areas, others moved nearer to the emotionally changing energy of the area around the stage. There was no one at the long, darkened, bar now.

I sat completely still in my place, feeling the intensity with all of my senses on high alert. I waited anxiously for something to happen.

The band was quietly tuning. The amplification had been turned off now and you could hear the sounds of beads moving through men's fingers in the silence. There was a shift on-stage among the musicians. A few had left and others were moving forward with instruments which seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. Vasilios moved towards the door and turned off the electric blue "Café Minerva" sign. He locked the door but continued to stand there as if he were waiting for something.

There was a knock at the door and my attention was instantly turned towards the scene taking place.

An old man had entered with a small group of others. He embraced Vasilios warmly and with the help of the men beside him, moved slowly into the café and towards the stage. A chair had been placed in the middle and someone came up with a large, black case and set it down. The man greeted everyone around him cheerfully and warmly and the other musicians responded with welcoming respect. He was helped to the chair and finally, seated, the case was opened for him and a large, flat instrument was placed on his lap. I was entranced. Who WAS this man that everyone was treating so reverently, and what was that instrument being placed on his lap? There was, if possible, an even deeper silence now as the old man got out some tools and began hitting the strings across the top of the instrument with some sort of sticks. Slowly, the other musicians began tuning with him. Another moment of quiet conversation, and suddenly it was as if there were fireworks going off! A shimmer of notes poured out of the flat box on his lap with the aid of the sticks he held in both of his hands. His smile lit up the entire room and everyone relaxed as if we had all been a collective bow, tensing for release and finally the arrow had shot forth into the night! I heard sounds I could not possibly imagine and tears came to my eyes. Some of the musicians began to sing and then the sounds grew larger and more glorious.

The old man played for hours, but not only with his *santouri*, as I discovered it was called, but with our emotions as well. After the happy sounds came others that seemed to rip the hearts out of the men on and around the stage.

One by one, men would get up to dance alone, twirling and spinning and leaping into the air and then falling to their knees. Other men sitting nearby, perhaps waiting their turn to dance as well, threw many, many bills at the dancers, at the band, sometimes just up into the air! Some brought ouzo for the musicians by hand, or sent many glasses on trays for the musicians with the waiters. It was brought for the dancers, too, and would be set very solemnly before them. The man who was dancing would drop to his knees and very seriously and dramatically, pick up the glass as though it held the elixir of life, gaze for a moment at it, and then toss it down all in one gulp. Then the glass would go skittering away across the floor as the man seemed to dive even deeper into himself and the dance would take on new worlds of meaning.

Men sang from the tables, they sang with light glowing from their eyes, or they sang with tears in their throats. Sometimes the beads would tap the sides of the glasses in rhythm to the songs that everyone knew by heart. The café would fill with song and laughter and then, like waves, would dip downwards again and there would be only one voice as the *santouri* swept onwards relentlessly.

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But even though, in those early days, I couldn't understand the lyrics of the songs, I could feel them and they headed straight into my soul on the glittering wings of the notes from the *santouri*.

The lyrics may have been a mystery to me, but looks on the faces of everyone were not. They were covered with different emotions: sometimes very confident and masculine, often bordering or baiting or bullying one another; other times, they were stained with pathos, a soul-deep sort of sorrow.

Thankfully and totally forgotten, I hung back in the shadows, watching with awe the energy the men released among themselves in this powerful, all-male atmosphere. It would go on, unrestrained and uninterrupted until finally the *santouri* player would stop and then the silence of drained energy filled the café.

A few lights came up, but it was still very dim in the café. The *santouri* player was helped off the stage and brought closer to the bar to sit for a while and relax. Vasilios came up to me and invited me to come and meet the man who had brought the night of beauty and pain to all of us. He was old but I couldn't have guessed just how old. He was still very handsome, flirtatious and roguish, and as kind as you could imagine anyone could be. He seemed happy have been there and to play, and he spoke of me to everyone around us and the men laughed, but I heard none of the words I was to listen for from the sailors. No, it was clear the old *santouri* player was a gentleman. Vasilios translated very sparingly but I caught "Queen of the Minerva" from his conversation with the musician and he reached out towards me, squeezed my hand and smiled right into my heart.

I wanted so much to tell him that this was the first time I had heard *santouri* music. I wanted to tell him it was hard to believe the quality of sound from so many strings! I wanted to say that it seemed to fill every particle of the atmosphere like the beating of wings or the crying of women, or the laughter of children.

He visited sometimes, not regularly, but when he did it was always a night to remember. The men threw lots more money when he came, danced more intensely and sang so much more when he was there.

I wondered what his story was; he had a very difficult time moving around and was always escorted to and from the stage. He seemed to have been injured and crippled and judging by his age, I imagined that he had probably fought and survived World War II, just as my own father had, broken and full of stories to tell.

It was during one of these late nights when I asked the musicians during one of their breaks about the special music they played at this time of night. Someone in the band drew me aside and said quietly and urgently: "Don't *ever* tell *anyone* about this. This music is illegal in Greece."

NOTES:

<https://upfromthedeep.wordpress.com/tag/adult-theater/>