

CHAPTER 27

The profile of a famous Greek criminal through the eye of a camera, the lyrics of a song, and his autobiography

by Fotios Spyropoulos

“Nikos, what have you done?”

[Dionysis Savvopoulos, “To makry zeibekiko gia ton Niko”]

Outside the “Evelpidon” Criminal and Civil Court of Athens, during the week, and at the flea market in Monastiraki on weekends, an old man, dressed always in brown or black, and wearing a Russian hat, sells his biography...

He is Nikos Koemtzis. He has killed three people and stabbed seven more, all because he wanted to dance to a song he had “ordered” from the musicians. He killed for a *parangelia* [a request for a song].

He transferred the story of his life to a book – *To makry zeibekiko* [The Long Zeibekiko].¹ Dionysis Savvopoulos (a famous Greek singer-songwriter)² read the book and turned it into a song. Pavlos Tassios (a well known Greek film director) heard the song and made a film. Today Nikos Koemtzis, his past behind him, sells his story to make a living.³

But let us take start at the beginning...



Nikos was a petty, small-time criminal, born in a poverty-stricken part of Pieria,⁴ and persecuted from a young age for his left-wing political beliefs. His wanderings in a time of poverty and political persecution in Greece lead him to Thessaloniki,⁵ where he held various jobs, before moving on to Athens. He flirts with the underworld and illegality and goes to prison for the first time in 1967-68.

In February 1973, during the dictatorship in Greece- and having just been released – he goes to a live-music nightclub (the “Neraida” bouzouki hall), with his younger brother Demosthenes and some friends. Demosthenes puts in a request to the band for a song; he requests a zeibekiko, a dance meant to be performed by one person, and gets up to dance. An “unwritten rule” of the times was that only the customer who made the order could dance. Three police officers, however – who were at the nightclub, and knew very well whose brother was dancing – interfere during his performance by dancing simultaneously. There is an altercation, and the police officers start beating Demosthenes. “It is a request (*parangelia*)!” shouted an incensed Nikos; who drew his stiletto: 3 policemen killed and 7 others wounded... He was sentenced to death and spent years awaiting execution (he was on death row for 3 years). Eventually Koemtzis will be sentenced for life, and in 1996 he was granted a grace. He remained in prison for 23 years.

To makry zeibekiko – The book

In prison he starts to read and learns to write. Nikos Koemtzis started, using his limited vocabulary to record his life-story in order to give material to his lawyer for his defence in court. His prose has a genuine “popular” flavour, without exaggeration, and his narration brings to mind the famous Greek general Makriyannis.⁶

He describes his life as a child. A story of great poverty, possibly the worst that could be experienced in an already damaged post-War provincial economy of Greece at the time. Nikos Koemtzis presents himself as a contemporary “Oliver Twist” – although he almost certainly had never read the book by Charles Dickens! His father was declared a communist because he had taken to the mountains with the (Communist) EAM-ELAS brigades. In 1945 the “gendarmes” savagely beat Nikos’ father in front of the children, as well as their grandfather, who had been wounded in the war of 1913. Since then, Nikos Koemtzis detested anyone in a uniform, as he says himself. His father enters prison as a political prisoner during the Civil War and after his release the large family lives constantly on the move; persecuted “from village to village”, doing agricultural work to earn their livelihood.

Poverty leads him to Thessaloniki where he spends his adolescence doing various jobs (he writes that because he was “sharp” and a “hustler”, he managed to become the best “grocer” in the market). Later, in 1958, he descends to the capital. He is engaged but the engagement is dissolved because police harassment troubles his fiancée’s respectable family, and because he won’t accept becoming a police “snitch”.



Fig.1: Poster for the film *Parangelia* by Pavlos Tassios ⁷

His employer does not pay his wages; Koemtzis “sues” him (he probably meant a law suit), yet the court case is constantly deferred. Koemtzis faces a lot of problems; he is forced to rob the man and is sent to prison. There he is subjected to physical and psychological torture (let us not forget this occurred during the period of dictatorship), and just a few years later his case will serve the most apt confirmation of the motto that “violence breeds violence”.

In the second part of the book Nikos Koemtzis first describes his pre-trial incarceration in the Korydallos Prison Complex in Athens, and his meeting with his brother and a friend,

who had also fallen “victim” to the fatal stabbing. Koemtzis’ health is very poor; he has difficulty walking from the bullets shot into his legs by the police during his arrest; it was thought that he would remain disabled for life. He asks his companions to recall the events of that evening, because he himself does not remember anything. In this way he reconstructs the “accident” (as he calls it) of that night:

“A thousand thoughts were spinning through my mind. I was looking for a solution to restore the wrong thing I had done ... I suffered terribly and tried desperately to pick out a picture of the massacre, and I could not. And even now I cannot, even though I still struggle to... It seems that whilst I was sowing death, mindlessly, like a robot, I was occupied by the demon or the beast that nests inside me...”

And here begins his description of prison and the penal system in general (in a time not so long ago): “In prison you meet all types of characters, the sensitive ones and the numbed ones. Most of the sensitive ones search to find a lifeline. The numbed ones have resigned themselves to a hopeless existence, spending their days engaged with sinister intent. They are like animals, and most of them look to turning any youngster dropped into prison for the first time, like them: immoral and depraved, with no respect for human dignity. In a word, they are pimps, snitches, paedophiles; they carry all the evil of the world upon them. That is why the Ministry of Justice should not keep recidivist offenders and first-timers together...”

In his book *To makry zeibekiko* (the title of the autobiography. a zeibekiko that he never danced, yet one that lasted for so many years), Nick Koemtzis continues with his account of the trial. The media portray him as a bloodthirsty beast, and thereafter take to baptising any dangerous criminals as “Koemtzides”. We, once again (personal experiences in the courts aside), discern the distance between the real facts and what was claimed during the hearing. His plea, where he assumes full responsibility for the crimes, makes an impression on the court...

Perhaps the most shocking part of the book is his description of life as a condemned man in the “house of pain” (the prison) at Halicarnassus in Crete.⁸ Koemtzis is kept in solitary confinement; a filthy, living grave. His only contact is with his jailers and occasional prisoner-snitches, put into adjacent cells by the police to “check his behaviour”. He waits day after day for his execution. (One day an abbot came to visit – as he saw the priests he thought his time had come.) In Greece’s dictatorship at the time, there was no recognition or importance assigned to “death row phenomenon / syndrome”: the intense anxiety and fear experienced by the subject; the laborious, time consuming procedure that comprises (according to the subsequent ruling of the ECHR – see *Soering vs UK*), inhumane and degrading treatment that contravenes directive 3 of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). In any case, the political resolve had already been made: whereas the ECHR had been ratified by Greece under Law 2329 of 1953, during the 1967–74 dictatorship (when the trial and conviction of Nikos Koemtzis took place) the country withdrew from the Council of Europe in order to forestall its impending dismissal, and in doing so ceased to be a member of the ECHR. After the restoration of democracy, Greece re-ratified the ECHR under legislative decree 53/1974 and rejoined the Council of Europe.⁹

In his cell, he writes poems, the only way to ward off insanity. He tries to imprint on paper his countless thoughts ... The most dramatic is the scene where he removed alone a bullet from his leg that had been left there since his arrest (the prison doctor did not pay him any attention!).

The book closes with a spare epilogue:

In March 1977 three wardens announced to me that I had been spared death, saying: “The state has been compassionate. Now it is up to you to become better.” I replied that I could only become worse, not better. Finally, the Ministry of Justice ordered my transfer from prison in Herakleion, Crete, to a worst prison (a hell prison) in Corfu. I was in hell from 21 July 1976 to 1982... I was released on 29 March 1996.”

The approach for reviewing this work lies somewhere between artistic and criminological criticism. The criminological value of the book is indisputable. The study of a criminal autobiography – a practice adopted by the ecological Chicago School – can lead us to valuable conclusions about the reasoning and importance given in the perpetrator’s own words when describing his actions, and in observing the moral code he follows. The analysis of criminological phenomena through the eyes of the offender may help practitioners to analyse and propose improved prevention policies. In addition, through the study of this autobiography we uncover – page by page – a materialising of the theories of social reaction based on the “self-fulfilling prophecy” of the label or stereotype,¹⁰ and the importance of social responsibility involved in the creation of the offender, through the process of *passage à l’acte*.

* Edited from <https://theartofcrime.gr>

NOTES

1. Νίκος Κοεμπζης [1938-2011] *Το μακρύ ζειμπέκικο*, (Αυτοβιογραφία), self-published.

2. Dionysis Savvopoulos is a Greek music composer, lyricist and singer. He was born in Thessaloniki. In 1963 he moved to Athens, terminating his law studies in favour of his career in music. He met great success from his early days as a musician and soon became very popular, both in Greece and abroad. Savvopoulos has been noted for being politically active throughout his career in music. In 1967, Savvopoulos was imprisoned for his political convictions by the Greek military junta of 1967–1974, led by the dictator George Papadopoulos. Most of his songs are written by himself (both lyrics and music).

Sound clip – From the album *I rezzerva*, 1979: <https://youtu.be/I8IGeNmlpaA>

3. Zeibekiko is considered a folk improvisational dance from Greece with a rhythmic pattern of 9/8 or else 9/4. Zeibekiko is common in Greece and areas around the world with large Greek populations. Throughout history it has been known as an intensely personal dance where people can express their individuality. Only one man at a time may dance it. If another got up, it would be a cause for conflict and possible violence. Traditionally, applause was not sought nor commonly given, out of respect.

4. Pieria is a prefecture of Southern Macedonia in Greece. Its capital is the town of Katerini. Pieria is the smallest prefecture within Macedonia.

5. Thessaloniki, Thessalonica, or Salonica is the second-largest city in Greece and the capital of the Macedonia region.

6. General Yannis Makriyannis (1797–1864) was a Greek merchant, military officer, politician and writer. Starting from humble origins, he joined the Greek struggle for independence, achieving the rank of general and leading his men to notable victories. Following Greek independence, he had a tumultuous public career, playing a prominent part in the granting of the first Constitution of the Kingdom of Greece and later being sentenced to death and pardoned. Despite his important contributions to the political life of the early Greek state, General Makriyannis is mostly remembered for his *Memoirs*. It should be noted that Makriyannis had received only the most basic and fragmentary education, and, according to his own testimony, mastered writing shortly before he started writing his *Memoirs*, while stationed in Argos.

7. *Parangelia*: see www.imdb.com/title/tt0081304/

8. The prison of Nea Alikarnassos (New Halicarnassus) is located on the Greek island of Crete, in the municipality of the same name in the Herakleion Prefecture. Nea Alikarnassos was founded in 1925 as a public housing development to accommodate the refugees who were displaced following the Asia Minor Disaster. The prison is quite old and the facilities have been neglected over years. This prison carried out the last judicial execution on 25/8/1972.

9. See St. Matthias, C. Ktistakis, L. Stavritis, K. Stefanakis; *The Protection of Human Rights in Europe*; Athens Bar Association, Athens; 2006, p. 26, in Greek.
10. See K. D. Spinellis; *Criminology, Contemporary and Past Directions*; 2nd edition; Sakkoulas Publications, Athens-Komotini; 2005, pp. 275-8, in Greek.